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**Citation:** Saito, A.P. 2017. *Moe and Internet Memes: The Resistance and Accommodation of Japanese Popular Culture in China*. *Cultural Studies Review*, 23:1, 136-150. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/csr.v23i1.5499>

ISSN 1837-8692 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <http://csrj.epress.lib.uts.edu.au>

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## *Moe* and Internet Memes: The Resistance and Accommodation of Japanese Popular Culture in China

**Asako P. Saito**

University of Melbourne

**Corresponding author:** Asako P. Saito, Asia Institute, University of Melbourne VIC 3010, Australia. [asako.saito@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:asako.saito@unimelb.edu.au)

**DOI:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/csr.v23i1.5499>

**Article History:** Received 21/07/2016; Revised 23/11/2017; Accepted 27/02/2017; Published 15/05/2017

### Abstract

The cultural exports of Japanese anime and manga have faced both praise and scorn in the Chinese market. Although the Chinese state generally regards these cultural artefacts as a negative influence, the adoption of visual techniques and concepts associated with Japanese popular culture has become common in China, particularly on the internet. This article seeks to understand the implications of the 'glocalisation' of Japanese anime and manga in China. It discusses how Japanese popular culture is perceived by the Chinese Communist Party and by the general public, and how the Chinese state has invested in its own domestic comics and animation industries in an attempt to curb the cultural flow from Japan. Through examining a satirical Chinese virtual character who is heavily influenced by Japanese graphic techniques and concepts, this article demonstrates that governments are not the final arbiters in matters of cultural influence and illuminates the complex nature of transnational cultural flows between China and Japan.

### Keywords

**Popular culture; memes; *moe*; Japan; China**

**DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST** The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **FUNDING** The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Introduction

Popular culture is arguably one of Japan's most successful and influential exports. Japanese comics and animations—known as manga and anime, respectively—attract many consumers worldwide. Manga and anime are often celebrated for the diversity and complexity of their themes which 'represent every interest and aspect of Japanese society', as well as for their striking visual elements.<sup>1</sup> These strengths have propelled Japanese popular cultural exports to challenge the existing global cultural market on a large scale. From 1993 to 2003, the value of Japanese cultural exports tripled to USD\$12.5 billion.<sup>2</sup> In 2012, 60 per cent of the world's animated cartoon series were Japanese anime.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, there are regular festivals, conventions and events that celebrate manga and anime all over the world.<sup>4</sup> To many observers, this global popularity of Japanese popular culture came as a surprise. According to Gloria Goodale, manga and anime have 'achieved what no other indigenous cultural expression has managed to do: become widespread enough to challenge America's stranglehold on entertainment'.<sup>5</sup> Japanese popular culture is thus defying the US-dominated global cultural market and challenging the existing hierarchy.

The consumption of Japanese popular culture, however, may be significantly larger than official market records suggest. This is largely because of the prevalence of illegal websites that provide manga and anime to viewers at little or no cost. To illustrate, a 2013 report by the Japanese Cultural Affairs Agency, which examined copyright infringement of Japanese cultural exports, estimated its annual losses caused by online piracy at 3.8 trillion yen (approximately USD\$33.6 billion) in China *alone*.<sup>6</sup> This brings attention not only to the high consumption of Japanese popular culture in China, but also to the considerable role the internet plays in its consumption.

Given the politicised nature of the Sino-Japanese relationship, questions are being asked about how the people and government of China respond to this dissemination of Japanese popular culture. This article suggests that in the current era of globalisation, the state has limited influence over matters of cultural dissemination. It argues that despite intentions to curb the flow of Japanese popular culture in China, the Chinese government has inadvertently helped foster and promote the very thing it was attempting to dispel. Although the state implemented policies that encouraged the production and consumption of Chinese domestic

1 John A. Lent, 'Far Out and Mundane: The Mammoth World of Manga', *Phi Kappa Phi Forum*, vol. 84, no. 3, 2004, p. 40.

2 Jim Frederick, 'What's Right with Japan', *Time Asia*, 11 August 2003, [http://web.archive.org/web/20100403090055/http://www.time.com/time/asia/2003/cool\\_japan/story.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20100403090055/http://www.time.com/time/asia/2003/cool_japan/story.html).

3 Anne Cooper-Chen, 'Cartoon Planet: The Cross-Cultural Acceptance of Japanese Animation', *Asian Journal of Communication*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2012, p. 44.

4 For example, there is the Comic Market in Tokyo, Animaga Expo in Melbourne, Anime Expo in Los Angeles, and Anime Festival Asia held in Indonesia, Thailand and Singapore.

5 Gloria Goodale, 'Anime-ted Japan', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 24 June 2005, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0624/p12s01-alar.html>.

6 'Bunkachō: Gurōbaru na chosakuken shingai he no taiō no kyōka jigyō: Kaigai ni okeru chosakuken shingai tō ni kansuru jittai chōs—Chūgoku. Kekka gaiyō' [Cultural Affairs Agency of Japan: Strengthening Industries against Global Copyright Infringement: An Investigation of Matters Relating to Overseas Copyright Infringement—China. An Overview of Results], *Mitsubishi UFJ Research and Consulting Co.*, 2013, p. 11.

comics and animation, public demand and preference for Japanese anime and manga have persisted. This has ensured styles and concepts from Japanese popular culture have been developed and cultivated within the state-driven Chinese comics and animation industries.

Although Japanese influence is evident in Chinese comics and animation industries, this article is interested in the impact of anime and manga at a grassroots, or amateur, level. One way of illustrating this phenomenon is to examine the Japanese concept of *moe* (pronounced 'moh-eh') in China, using the Chinese grassroots-created Green Dam Girl character as an example. Through analysis of this character and an associated derivative work, this article challenges 'top-down' understandings of cultural dissemination that overemphasise the role of the state. While it is undeniable that states have a certain degree of influence over cultural production and consumption within their borders, the extent of this influence may easily be overstated. In the current age where information gateways are no longer under the sole control of a narrow elite, the extent to which the state has any say over cultural dissemination is limited in ways that were inconceivable a generation ago. At least in some situations, individuals may in fact be the final arbiters in matters of cultural influence. Through expanding upon the works of Nissim Otmazgin and Eyal Ben-Ari, who see popular culture existing outside politics, this article aims to contribute to understanding the processes through which the state, internet technologies and fandom affect cultural globalisation.<sup>7</sup> As it is not within the scope of this article to provide a comprehensive historical development of Japanese popular culture, the subject matter will instead be contextualised within the dissemination of Japanese anime and manga in China.

## Moe: Popularity and controversy

Observers of Sino-Japanese history and politics may be puzzled by the popularity of Japanese manga and anime in China. Aside from their thematic and visual strengths, one explanation may be the affective response referred to as *moe*. While its exact origins are unclear, this concept is thought to have developed within Japanese popular culture in the 1980s or 1990s. According to Patrick Galbraith, *moe* may be defined as 'an affectionate response to fictional characters'.<sup>8</sup> This means that *moe* is triggered by fictional characters; it does not exist in the character itself, but is found within the person who is responding to a character. Thus, certain characters may elicit strong emotions in people, depending on their preferences and past experiences. For example, someone who grew up watching the Japanese animation *Pokémon* may, years later, find themselves still drawn to and comforted by their favourite characters. In this situation, the *Pokémon* characters trigger *moe* in their fans. As this example suggests, the concept of *moe* is often referenced in association with manga and anime. It could be argued that there is some attractive quality within these fictional characters that elicits powerful emotions, thus leading to the rise in manga and anime around the world.

Nevertheless, *moe* remains an oft misunderstood and misrepresented concept. While popular English-language media has portrayed it as a bizarre and overly erotic phenomenon,

<sup>7</sup> Nissim Otmazgin and Eyal Ben-Ari, 'Cultural Industries and the State in East and Southeast Asia', in *Popular Culture and the State in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Eyal Ben-Ari and Nissim Otmazgin, Routledge, London, 2013, p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Patrick W. Galbraith, *The Moe Manifesto: An Insider's Look at the World of Manga, Anime, and Gaming*, Tuttle Publishing, North Clarendon, 2014, p.17.

*moe* is not necessarily sexual.<sup>9</sup> Instead, it may be considered ‘a desire for the fantastical, not the physical’.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, *moe* is associated with ‘pure fantasy’, rather than with reality. Galbraith believes that this may be the reason some anime and manga have violent and pornographic content: ‘it [is] precisely because it is pure that it can give birth to such perverse and polymorphous possibilities’.<sup>11</sup> A well-known example of such a phenomenon is *Sailor Moon*, a Japanese manga and anime series that achieved international popularity in the 1990s and early 2000s. Though directed at a young female audience, this series contained violent themes and depictions of near-naked teenage girls. In this way, there is a contradictory juxtaposition of child-like innocence and adult desire in *moe* culture.

It is partly because of this tendency to touch upon mature themes that *moe* and Japanese popular culture have drawn criticism from both domestic and international observers. Notably, some of the most severe criticisms come from the People’s Republic of China. The Chinese official mainstream discourse—touted by the Chinese government, media and academics—often frames these critiques in terms of their potential to harm children. Complaints have been made that manga and anime may distort definitions of beauty, encourage viewers to engage in aggressive and anti-social behaviour, and display offensive portrayals of non-Japanese Asian characters.<sup>12</sup> While there is some validity to these claims, it would be incorrect to assume that all manga and anime are harmful to young viewers. Nevertheless, the government focused on such negative perceptions and used them as justification for its restriction of both online and offline access to Japanese popular culture in China. Following this, it implemented protectionist policies and promoted the production and consumption of its own domestic comics and animation products. Ironically, through this process the Chinese government played an instrumental role in the ‘glocalisation’ of Japanese popular culture within Chinese comics and animations; that is, a complex localising of globalised culture, which Robertson describes as ‘the simultaneity—the co-presence—of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies’.<sup>13</sup>

## Japanese popular culture in China

To understand how this cultural glocalisation has been achieved, it is necessary to give a brief outline of the impact and reception of Japanese popular culture in China. The following paragraphs describe the popularity, influence and state control of manga and anime since the 1990s. Particular attention is paid to the roles of the state, internet technologies and fandom.

9 In a 2010 episode of the US television show *30 Rock* / titled ‘Klaus and Greta’, James Franco’s character describes his sexual relationship with a Japanese body pillow as *moe*.

10 Patrick W. Galbraith, ‘Moe: Exploring Virtual Potential in Post-Millennial Japan’, *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*, 2009, no. 5, para. 30, <http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/articles/2009/Galbraith.html>.

11 Galbraith, ‘Moe: Exploring Virtual Potential’, para. 30.

12 Jinhui Meng, ‘Qiantan riben donghua’ [Brief Analysis on Japanese Animation], *Qingnian wenxuejia*, no. 18, 2012, p. 203; Yingshuang Zhu, ‘Qiantan riben dongman dui zhongguo daxuesheng jiazhiguan de yingxiang’ [Brief Analysis of the Impact of Japanese Manga and Anime on the values of Chinese University Students], *Xue lilun*, no. 33, 2011, p. 204; Pinyuan Zeng, ‘Lun riben dongman waijiao de zhexue pinkun’ [The Philosophy of Poverty on Japanese Manga and Anime Diplomacy], *Riben yanjiu*, no. 4, 2011, p. 122.

13 Roland Robertson, ‘Comments on the “Global Triad” and “Glocalization”’, in *Globalization and Indigenous Culture*, ed. Nobutaka Inoue, Institute for Japanese Culture and Classics, Kokugakuin University, 1997, para. 16, <http://www2.kokugakuin.ac.jp/ijcc/wp/global/15robertson.html>.

The 1990s saw a rapid rise in the proliferation of Japanese manga in China. During this period, there were several Chinese publishers offering cheap, low-quality, illegal versions of Japanese manga. These pirated publications were affordable to young readers with little spending power, and there were even cheaper options which allowed readers to pay a minimal fee to access manga at specialised stores.<sup>14</sup> A notable and highly successful comic magazine at this time was *Huashu Dawang*, or *Comic King*. Recognising the demand for Japanese comics, the editors of this magazine chose to publish pirated content of the latest manga. They also recruited local Chinese artists to create their own manga-style work. These Japanese-influenced comics came to be known as *xinmanhua*, which means ‘new manga’ in Chinese. Most of these works were drawn by young, amateur artists who were fans of manga. Unlike traditional Chinese comics, *xinmanhua* utilised styles and techniques borrowed from manga, such as filmic angles, symbolic expressions and character design.<sup>15</sup> John Lent believes that these artists favoured the manga style because ‘it appeared to be modern, was more action oriented, captured the changing cultural trends in China, and sometimes provided opportunities for international recognition through manga competitions’.<sup>16</sup>

The publication of *Comic King* was forcefully terminated in 1994. Yongsheng Wang, its editor, describes the incident that appears to have served as a catalyst for the closure of the company, suggesting that a government official unfairly labelled a particular manga series as inappropriate reading material for children.<sup>17</sup> It could be that this episode created a precedent that was extended to the perception of all Japanese manga. Once this view had been established in the official mainstream discourse, severe restrictions on imported manga were introduced to counteract this ‘Japanese invasion’ and manga publishing businesses closed rapidly as a result.<sup>18</sup> It is unclear whether the negative perception of Japanese popular culture in China had developed of its own accord or was instigated by the state, but there is little doubt the Chinese government perpetuated it through restrictive policies. In this way, Japanese manga became increasingly difficult for the Chinese public to access.

The Chinese government began to invest in its own comic industry to fill the cultural void left by the absence of Japanese manga, and using the supposed moral deterioration of youth that led to social disobedience such as the Tiananmen Square incident as justification.<sup>19</sup> In 1995, President Jiang Zemin commented on the importance of producing domestic youth

14 Matthew M. Chew and Lu Chen, ‘Media Institutional Contexts of the Emergence and Development of Xinmanhua in China’, *International Journal of Comic Art*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2010, p. 173.

15 Chew and Chen, p. 174.

16 John A. Lent, *Asian Comics*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2015, pp. 36–7.

17 Yongsheng Wang, ‘Huashu dawang’ [Comic King], 28 August 2013, <http://comic.qq.com/a/20130828/010245.htm>.

18 Chwen Chwen Chen, ‘The Growth of *Manhua* in China: An Overview’, *China Media Observatory*, no. 6, 2010, p. 9; Qi Wang, ‘The Dilemma of Japan’s Cultural Diplomacy in China: A Case Study of Japanese Manga and Anime’, Master’s thesis, Lunds University, 2007, p. 25.

19 Yoshiko Nakano, ‘Shared Memories: Japanese Pop Culture in China’, in *Soft Power Superpowers*, ed. Yasushi Watanabe, Taylor and Francis, New York, 2015, p. 122.

entertainment that reflected the ideals of the ruling Communist Party.<sup>20</sup> The 5155 project was the major initiative of this campaign. It established several state-sponsored comics publishers, series and magazines, many of which recruited *xinmanhua* artists who had worked on publications such as *Comic King*. The 5155 project allowed the government to police the content of Chinese comics and ensure that they adhered to Chinese morals and social norms. Non-Japanese styles and nationalistic content were encouraged and, at least in part, the project aimed to minimise the impact of manga on its impressionable viewers.<sup>21</sup> While these ventures were initially quite successful, many comic artists left the industry due to poor pay. The 5155 project collapsed in 2005 when its last remaining comics company accrued a deficit of over RMB1 million (AUD\$160,000 at the time) in just half a year.<sup>22</sup> The state could no longer afford to continue the project.

One of the contributors to the demise of the 5155 project may have been the internet. Since Japanese manga was no longer accessible through official means, many Chinese fans opted to consume pirated manga online.<sup>23</sup> This suggests that many of the domestically produced comics were not well-received by the Chinese public, and the demand for Japanese manga was still strong. Further, talented local comic artists chose to share their works online. Indeed, the anonymity of the internet attracted *xinmanhua* artists who increasingly felt the pressure of strict publishing standards, and wished to create comics that challenged the status quo.<sup>24</sup> According to Lent, the shift to online production and dissemination of comics was pivotal for *xinmanhua*'s survival.<sup>25</sup> In this way, the internet helped producers and consumers of manga and *xinmanhua* find each other.

Similarly to manga, Japanese anime has been labelled as harmful and unsuitable for Chinese consumption. Some of the notable movements against anime in recent years include an incident in 2014 when a Chengdu newspaper called for the boycott of the popular Japanese character *Doraemon*.<sup>26</sup> A year later, the Chinese government released a blacklist of thirty-eight forbidden animation series, all of which were of Japanese origin. According to the relevant official notice, these animations 'induce juvenile delinquency [and contain] violence, pornography, terrorism, and content that endanger public morality'.<sup>27</sup> Since this notice, Chinese video streaming websites have required a licence to show foreign television programs

20 Zemin Jiang, 'Wei shaoer tigong gengduo genghao de jingshen shiliang' [Providing Children with More and Better Spiritual Sustenance], *News of the Communist Party of China*, 28 August 1995, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/124333/124356/125504/7429386.html>.

21 Chew and Chen, pp. 177–8.

22 Ibid., p. 182.

23 Ibid., p. 180.

24 Ibid., p. 186.

25 John A. Lent, 'Lianhuanhua', *Nona Arte*, vol.1, no. 2, 2012, p. 15.

26 Jinpeng Cheng, 'Jingti DuolaAmeng mengbi women de shuangyan' [Do Not Be Blinded by Doraemon], *Chengdu ribao*, 25 September 2014, [http://www.cdrb.com.cn/html/2014-09/25/content\\_2121344.htm](http://www.cdrb.com.cn/html/2014-09/25/content_2121344.htm).

27 Shuo Yi, 'Wenhua bu gongbu wangluo dongman chanpin "hei mingdan"' [Ministry of Culture Publishes 'Blacklist' of Online Anime], 10 June 2015, *Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China*, [http://www.mcprc.gov.cn/whzx/ggtz/201506/t20150610\\_441609.html](http://www.mcprc.gov.cn/whzx/ggtz/201506/t20150610_441609.html).

and films.<sup>28</sup> The Chinese government appeared to create a moral panic to inhibit further dissemination of Japanese anime.

To combat the influence of Japanese anime, the Chinese government has promoted the production of its own domestically produced animations. It gave preferential tax treatment to many animation companies in 2010, established a national animation award in 2011 and offered studio space to animators free of charge.<sup>29</sup> Television stations were encouraged to broadcast these animations, and so the airtime dedicated to domestic animation increased from none in 1994 to 4,534 hours in 2011.<sup>30</sup> Thanks to these policies, the Chinese animation industry has experienced an unprecedented growth in the last decade. In January 2016 alone, Chinese animation companies produced thirty-eight animated series comprising 15,582 minutes (approximately 260 hours) of material.<sup>31</sup> Thus, government policies have led to China becoming the biggest producer of animated content in the world.

The Chinese animation industry, however, is fraught with problems. One of the more problematic issues is that many Chinese animations have been accused of plagiarism by observers from within and outside China. There are a number of animated series and films that closely resemble foreign works—especially Japanese ones. For example, an article in the Chinese newspaper *People's Daily* claims the plot and character designs of the 2006 Chinese animation *Chess King* are facsimiles of those in the Japanese anime *Yu-Gi-Oh!* The 2007 series named *Big Mouth DoDo* appear to have borrowed the voice acting styles and character designs of Japan's *Crayon Shinchan*, and the 2008 series *Golden Hero* bears a striking resemblance to the Japanese *Ultraman*.<sup>32</sup> These and many similar cases have prompted an official from the Association of Japanese Animation to comment that a large number of Chinese animations are simply imitations of Japanese works.<sup>33</sup> This could partly be because of the outsourcing of Japanese anime production in China, which has led to the training of local artists in Japanese styles.<sup>34</sup> Also, what Western observers consider copyright infringement may be seen as a tribute or homage from a Chinese perspective. It could also simply be an attempt by Chinese producers to emulate the success of Japanese anime around the world, which is, ultimately, a recognition and acceptance of the Chinese audience's preference for Japanese visual styles and stories.

28 Kerry Allen, 'Japanese Comics that are Too Racy for Chinese Censors ... But Still Popular Online', *BBC*, 27 July 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-33652502>.

29 John A. Lent and Ying Xu, 'Chinese Animation: An Historical and Contemporary Analysis', *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2013, pp. 32–3.

30 Ken-chi Yamada, 'Market Competition in the Animation Industry Between Japan and China: How to Face China's Rising Interest in Promoting Domestically-Produced Animation', *NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute*, 2013, p. 5, [http://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/english/reports/pdf/report\\_13020101.pdf](http://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/english/reports/pdf/report_13020101.pdf).

31 'Guojia xinwen chuban guangdian zongju guanyu 2016 nian 1 yue quanguo guochan dianshi donghuapian zhizuo beian gongshi de tonggao' [SARFT Announcements Regarding National Television Animation Production for January 2016], *State Administration of Radio, Film and Television*, 1 March 2016, [http://www.sarft.gov.cn/art/2016/3/1/art\\_34\\_29882.html](http://www.sarft.gov.cn/art/2016/3/1/art_34_29882.html).

32 Xiao Yang, 'Guochan donghua "lanpian" beizhi daoqu zhengfu butie' ['Bad' Domestic Animated Film Accused of Stealing Government Subsidies], *People's Daily*, 16 July 2015, <http://culture.people.com.cn/n/2015/0716/c22219-27311809.html>.

33 Yamada, p. 11.

34 Vincenzo De Masi, 'Animation "Made in China": Has the Invasion of Chinese Animation Products Begun?', *China Media Observatory*, vol. 3, 2010, p. 7.

## Green Dam Girl

Since the official restrictions on Japanese popular culture were put in place, the internet has played a key, if not vital, role in the dissemination of manga and anime in China. Therefore, although there are presumably numerous reasons the Chinese government promotes internet censorship, it could be argued that the restriction of public access to Japanese popular culture is one of its objectives. Based on this understanding, it is amusing that the Japanese-inspired Green Dam Girl (in Chinese: 绿坝娘/*lǜ bà niáng*) meme emerged within an online counter-narrative in June 2009, a response to the Chinese government's plans to pre-install the Green Dam Youth Escort (绿坝·花季护航/*Lǜbà Huājì Hùháng*) internet filtering software on all computers in China. In Chinese culture, the colour green is associated with health and morality. 'Dam' refers to the flood of information the software is attempting to hold back, while 'Youth Escort' suggests that it is intended to guide children while they are surfing the internet. The name of the Green Dam Youth Escort software clearly reveals the concerns the Chinese government at the time held for youth and the internet.

Apart from its many technical and security problems, this software was most heavily criticised for its potential to act as government spyware.<sup>35</sup> Frustrated by these developments, Chinese internet users created the subversive Green Dam Girl character: a *moe* anthropomorphism, or a personification with *moe*-inducing features, of the Green Dam Youth Escort software.<sup>36</sup> *Moe* anthropomorphisms are commonly seen in Japanese popular culture; anything from currency to nations may be depicted as cute and sexualised girls.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, the Green Dam Girl is another example of the glocalisation—this time user-driven—of Japanese popular culture in China.

It is helpful to understand the Green Dam Girl as an internet meme. Richard Dawkins, who first conceptualised the meme, describes it as 'a unit of cultural transmission'.<sup>38</sup> Building on his ideas, Díaz defines an internet meme as a humorous 'phrase, image or video ... that spreads through the internet causing people to replicate it'.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the physical appearance and personality of the Green Dam Girl are encapsulated in a series of satirical images, stories, songs and games created by a diaspora of anonymous Chinese internet users. Like most internet memes, she does not have clear authorship or a standardised form, but is the result of successive transformations as this meme was spread.

This virtual character has some unusual qualities. First, although the Green Dam Girl is a creation of Chinese internet users, her image and personality have been inspired by techniques and concepts most associated with Japanese manga and anime. Visually, the Green Dam Girl is drawn in a typical manga or anime style. She is also one of many other *moe*

35 Loretta Chao, 'China Squeezes PC Makers: Beijing is Set to Require Web Filter That Would Censor "Harmful" Internet Sites', *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 June 2009, <http://www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB124440211524192081?mg=reno64->>; Andrew Jacobs, 'China Requires Censorship Software on New PCs', *The New York Times*, 8 June 2009, <[http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/09/world/asia/09china.html?\\_r=2&](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/09/world/asia/09china.html?_r=2&)

36 [https://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/Green\\_Dam\\_Girl](https://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/Green_Dam_Girl).

37 For recent examples of *moe* anthropomorphisms, see Toshio Miyake, 'History as Sexualized Parody: Love and Sex Between Nations in *Axis Powers Hetalia*', in *Rewriting History in Manga*, ed. Nissim Otmazgin and Rebecca Suter, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2016, pp. 151–73.

38 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1976, p. 192.

39 Carlos Mauricio Castaño Díaz, 'Defining and Characterizing the Concept of Internet Meme', *Revista CES Psicología*, vol. 6, no. 1, p. 96.



anthropomorphisms common in Japanese popular culture. In addition, as Chau points out, the terms used to describe this character are commonly heard among Chinese fans of Japanese popular culture; most, if not all, would be unfamiliar to people outside this subculture.<sup>40</sup> For example, the Japanese word *tennen* (Chinese pronunciation: *tianran*), meaning ‘natural airhead’, is used to describe the Green Dam Girl. To Chinese viewers outside manga and anime fandom, this word would be a source of confusion.<sup>41</sup> Because of these connections with Japanese popular culture, the Green Dam Girl may be considered an example of the glocalisation of Japanese manga and anime in China. This adoption of Japanese artistic styles by informal Chinese internet users shows the large and disseminated impact of Japanese popular culture.

Unlike most memes on popular international community websites such as *Reddit*, which are characterised by their appeals to humour, the Green Dam Girl is, or was at least initially, strikingly subversive. As a *moe* anthropomorphism of the Green Dam Youth Escort software, her character captures the essence of the filtering software; everything from her clothes to personality reflects the anger of internet users towards this form of government control. Amusingly, her characteristics even hint at the flaws of the software. For example, the Green Dam Girl is colour blind because the image-filtering feature of the software is not very effective at recognising pornographic images. While it is designed to filter out images showing too much skin, it reportedly even blocks images of the orange-hued cat Garfield, while still allowing access to ostentatiously erotic websites.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, Chinese internet users created the Green Dam Girl to mock the government in a satirical way.

Further, despite her appearance as a young teenager, the Green Dam Girl is often sexualised. She is commonly drawn wearing short skirts, but at times she is pictured in little-to-no clothing at all. In other cases, she may be found striking suggestive poses. Loretta Chau argues this sexualisation enables the Green Dam Girl to become a political tool which ironically attacks ‘the official narrative of protecting youth from pornography, with a sexual and young image of the software’.<sup>43</sup> In this way, Chinese internet users playfully subvert the government’s plans to further restrict their online freedom.

Finally, many internet users created their own works appropriating this character, extending the Green Dam Girl to other genres and forms. According to an informative page about her on *Baidu Baike*, a Chinese online encyclopaedia, the Green Dam Girl has inspired the creation of myriad images, fan clubs, songs, computer games and even novels.<sup>44</sup> These appropriations were created until the middle of 2012, showing that this character persisted long after the software she was based upon had been abandoned.

At first glance this virtual character may seem like any other image created in the style of Japanese anime and manga, but to comprehend the hidden symbolism within requires

40 Chau, p. 78.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

42 ‘China’s Internet Porn Filter—No Garfield Please’, *Independent*, 30 June 2009, <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/news/chinas-internet-porn-filter-no-garfield-please-1725411.html>.

43 Chau, p. 73.

44 See: [http://baike.baidu.com/link?url=L9Rfxoa7jpyiZl\\_RvdG1eLhp\\_G758lFuxJKqEKNEeYQbOzrXuK6Qpaq-I9LzCyELIYWQb-Xv08bIYyPJXjH07a](http://baike.baidu.com/link?url=L9Rfxoa7jpyiZl_RvdG1eLhp_G758lFuxJKqEKNEeYQbOzrXuK6Qpaq-I9LzCyELIYWQb-Xv08bIYyPJXjH07a).

knowledge of both the Chinese language and modern Chinese history. There is no one definitive image of the Green Dam Girl, but there are some characteristics they all share. The images all depict a young girl wearing a hat and armband reminiscent of those of the Red Guards from the Cultural Revolution. Her hat shows an image of a river crab, which is a homonym for 'harmony' as well as internet slang for censorship. Her armband is inscribed with the characters for 'discipline', and she carries a paint bucket and brush with which she can paint over obscene content. In her arms are white rabbits, the software mascot, which may symbolise childhood innocence.

To summarise, the Green Dam Girl is the embodiment of a counter-narrative against Chinese internet censorship that began in 2009. This case is noteworthy not only because of its connections to Japanese popular culture, but also for the use of such foreign cultural imports to criticise and ridicule Chinese government actions. In this way, Chinese internet users were able to mock the government using elements of the very culture it was attempting to contain.

### 'The Religion of Green Dam Girl'

In a further utilisation of *moe* to extend the Green Dam Girl counter-narrative, the video and song 'The Religion of Green Dam Girl' was created by internet users known only by their online pseudonyms. The video shows a compilation of manga and anime-type images of the Green Dam Girl, as could be found freely on the Chinese internet at the time of production, and is set to a Japanese song with its own original Chinese lyrics.<sup>45</sup> The Japanese influence in this video is obvious: it appropriates the technology, music and themes from the original Japanese song. It is cultural borrowing in a microcosm.

The song is told entirely from the perspective of the Green Dam Girl, describing her loneliness in the 'second dimension', which refers to the virtual world in which she exists. She appears to be speaking to the computer user who has installed her software. By 'gently press[ing] [her] power button', the user may turn the computer on and be greeted by her smiling face. The Green Dam Girl yearns for their reunion when her program is not activated. But in fact, the line 'You whisper to me that you never left' suggests that they are never really apart. This may allude to the widespread belief that the Green Dam Youth Escort is a type of malicious software known as spyware, and so, figuratively speaking, the Green Dam Girl is always lurking in the background. Once she is activated, she and the computer user fly together and 'witness the magnificence of distant lands', referring to the act of browsing the internet. The Green Dam Girl holds the computer user's hand with 'fingers unlocked', guiding the way 'into heaven', which suggests that she is guiding the user to safe websites, as she is programmed to do.

These lyrics demonstrate how the creators of Green Dam Girl have adopted the Japanese concept of *moe*. Galbraith's definition of *moe* as 'an affectionate response to fictional characters' aptly describes the longing tenderness with which the lyricist writes about the Green Dam Girl.<sup>46</sup> The lines 'My soft and tired heart calls for you. It struggles and strains as it calls for you', written from the perspective of the Green Dam Girl, expose the need of the protagonist to be

45 For a video of 'The Religion of Green Dam Girl', see: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtE\\_n2CdPpg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtE_n2CdPpg). The original Japanese song *Kokoro* was sung by a Vocaloid, a singing voice synthesiser by the Japanese company Yamaha, with which users may input their own melody and lyrics to create their own songs. *Kokoro* was a popular song which was later novelised and adapted for the stage. See: <http://www.nicovideo.jp/watch/sm2500648>.

46 Galbraith, *The Moe Manifesto*, p. 17.

desired by her. Similarly, the lines ‘If you are with me I am in heaven’ and ‘Let’s smile in our bliss’ reinforce the sense that the two characters are happy together—perhaps even in what we may call a mutual loving relationship. Here, we can see that the lyrics are designed—whether intentionally or not—to evoke pleasant and even romantic feelings for this fictional character. These points affirm the writer’s devotion to and affection for the Green Dam Girl, reiterating the *moe* features in this song.

The sexual innuendos present in this song are also an indication of *moe*. The sexualisation of the young Green Dam Girl reflects Galbraith’s ideas on the boundary between child-like innocence and adult desire which *moe* so comfortably transgresses.<sup>47</sup> For example, in the music video, the line which describes how the computer user may ‘gently press [her] power button’ is accompanied by an image of a blushing Green Dam Girl.<sup>48</sup> This causes her to be ‘full of vitality’, suggesting a sexual metaphor. Echoing this idea, the end of the fifth stanza implies that by turning on the computer (the ‘lighting’-like call in the darkness), the Green Dam Girl figuratively comes back to life. This gives the impression that her existence is defined by the sexual whims of the computer user. Once revived, she is then warmed by the user’s ‘firm chest’ and sighs (‘Aah!’), adding to the impression that her ‘rebirth’ is a sensual experience. Based on this understanding, it is quite possible that the ‘heaven’ which they fly towards at the end of the song is a symbolic orgasm. These points indicate that this song ostentatiously sexualises the Green Dam Girl and her relationship with the computer user. However, as these examples do not explicitly indicate that sexual activities are taking place, and because the song is set in an alternate virtual reality unlike our own, the song retains its ‘pure’, ‘innocent’ and ‘fantastical’ *moe* essence. We therefore have in this video a perfect example of Chinese internet users adopting the visual language, philosophy and pre-occupations of a Japanese subculture to satirise the Chinese state’s policing of the online realm.

## Conclusion

At first glance, the Green Dam Girl may appear to be a typical Japanese manga or anime figure. A comprehensive reading of this character necessitates the combined knowledge of both Chinese and Japanese cultures. As the emblem of this critical counter narrative movement, the Green Dam Girl represents frustration stemming from the restriction of Japanese popular culture as well as the acceleration of Internet censorship. Through their glocalisation of *moe* and other features of Japanese popular culture within this movement, internet users were able to undermine Chinese authorities with the very thing they wished to eliminate. Thus, the Green Dam Girl is simultaneously a symbol of conflicting demands regarding both the accommodation of and resistance to Japanese popular culture in China.

Online spaces and cultures are difficult to police. Despite mechanisms for regulation, savvy internet users are adept at getting around controls, or using *memes* and technology to undermine controls, as this example shows. The Green Dam Girl first appeared seven years ago and technology has since considerably advanced, but this incident reminds us of the continuing struggle between freedom and control on the internet. Governments, technology companies and internet users are yet to find a satisfactory balance regarding this issue. In the

47 Galbraith, ‘Moe: Exploring Virtual Potential’, para. 30.

48 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtE\\_n2CdPpg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtE_n2CdPpg).

meantime, we are likely to witness many more incidents in which internet users wrestle for control over cyberspace.

Equally difficult to control, perhaps, is the penetration of Japanese manga and anime in China. Despite attempts of the Chinese government to discourage the public from consuming Japanese popular culture, devoted Chinese fans are yet to be persuaded. For example, *Pokémon Go*, an augmented reality mobile game and one of the latest additions to the Japanese *Pokémon* franchise, caught the gaming world by storm after its limited release in early July 2016. Observers have noted that for political and technological reasons this game is unlikely to be released in China. To meet the huge demand from Chinese gamers for *Pokémon Go*, a Chinese gaming company has created an imitation of the Japanese original, named *City Spirit Go*.<sup>49</sup> This not only demonstrates that Japanese popular culture is still sought after by Chinese fans, but also provides us with another example of the glocalisation of Japanese cultural artefacts in China.

Evidently, global popular culture may be localised in various ways. The use of Japanese manga and anime techniques by Chinese comics and animation companies shows us that producers are eager to capitalise on the popularity of foreign cultural imports. While there are obvious commercial reasons this is occurring, the Green Dam Girl incident presents us with an exception. As a Japanese anime-style virtual character created by anonymous Chinese internet users, her image was not used for financial gain or to meet government quotas for domestic animation broadcast. Instead, she was used in a politicised grassroots-based campaign against censorship. Therefore, the Green Dam Girl illustrates how cultural arbitrage may be decided at unofficial levels and for unconventional means. Here, we can sense the salience of Otmazgin and Ben-Ari's claim regarding the autonomy of popular culture.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps this case suggests that rather than governments and companies, ardent fans are in fact the final arbiters in matters of cultural influence.

## About the author

Asako P. Saito is a PhD candidate at the Asia Institute, University of Melbourne. Her research interests lie in gender, literature and the role of popular culture in Sino-Japanese relations. A native speaker of English and Japanese, she has also undertaken long-term Mandarin language studies in China and Taiwan. Saito is currently involved in a project that examines the literary migration and transformation of the Chinese classic, *Three Kingdoms*. She has received the Prime Minister's Australia-Asia Endeavour Award, the Australian Postgraduate Award and the Taiwan Fellowship in her academic pursuits.

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50 Otmazgin and Ben-Ari, p. 20.

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