The Comic/anime Fan Culture in Taiwan: With a Focus on Adolescents' Experiences
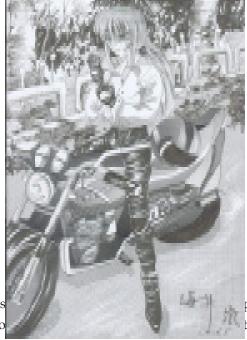
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A striking phenomenon in this technology-laden and media-driven modern Taiwanese society is that fan culture has become overly active and enthusiastic. Adolescents make up the major percentage of the fan population. Whenever a famous singer or movie star launches an event, a mass of youngsters are sure to chase him or her throughout the series of fan parties that go on afterwards. This phenomenon also happens in comic/anime fandom. In August of 1995, an event of *Meeting Anime Stars* given in a department store across the Taipei Train Station attracted more than fifteen thousand adolescents who lined up for hours so that they could meet the artists of those famous anime stars. In recent years, ComicWorld, a two-day event for comic/anime fans to sell their own comic arts, has thousands of youngsters attending daily.

This is absolutely different from the situation two decades ago

when comic fan culture was overly oppressed by the mainstream culture. However, comic books still remained a strong popularity among youths as underground reading materials. To many teenagers, including myself then, comic books were important vehicles for satisfying our emotional needs for fantasy and pleasure in those boring classes, but it was certainly frightening to get caught. Reading then was not allowed in school. Adolescents' comic/anime fan culture in contempoirary Taiwan has been paving its course of fanatic social action into a wide and open flow of venues and expanding its influence through a variety of forms and events like ComicWorld and internet forums.

In this _____ paper, I do not intend to _____ trace back the

history of comic fandom in Taiwan, neither do I explain what caused the change for its popularity. Rather, I focus on discussing the social phenomena and the underlying values of the adolescents' comic/anime fan culture currently active in Taiwan. Adolescents' comic/anime fan culture is a complex, multidimensional site which could not be fully explored in such a short paper. I therefore base my discussion substantially on the events of ComicWorld which I have been observing and studying now for quite some time.

ComicWorld in Taiwan

Since the first introduction to Taiwan in 1997, ComicWorld has been held twenty-three times and the average number of attendees is about five thousand each time. In Taiwan, ComicWorld is also named as Comix World or Doujinshi Sale Convention. It is regularly held four times every year in the greater Taipei metropolitan area. At the beginning, events of ComicWorld were mainly for comic fans to share, exchange or sell their coterie publication or non-commercial printed

material (also called Doujinshi in Japan). The emergence of Cosplay in the late 80s has soon become the spotlight of ComicWorld conventions. It is also the most attractive and entertaining activity for the comic/ anime fans to indulge themselves in "simulated fantasy".

According to Santoso (1998), "Cosplay is a Japanese fan term for Costume Play; it's equivalent to the Western term masquerade." In Taiwan, most participants consider the cosplay section as the soul of ComicWorld. They perceive it to be the most precious opportunity to transform their fantasy into "real" reality by playing and dressing up in the costume of their favorite anime characters. Besides imitating the costume, most adolescents insist that a cosplayer should speak in the anime character's words, act in the character's way, think in the character's thoughts, and play the anime character's soul. In other words, they attempt to bring their favorite anime characters to "life."

Although it was not until the late 90s that anime conventions began to appear in Taiwan, the exchange and sales of doujinshis had been started circulating among the anime fan clubs since the mid-80s. Doujinshis were distributed by mail order, or through stores that specialized in comic books for rent. But the annual sales of doujinshis at that time were so low that doujinshis were little known to the public. ComicWorld conventions paved a new avenue for the doujinshis hobbyists to display, exchange and sell their doujinshis. Moreover, the advent of internet technology catalyzed doujinshi distribution. The doujinshi community has boomed rapidly and became a powerful force that propels the comic market in Taiwan. Comic/anime fans have formed their own specific culture. With an enormous influential power on youngsters, this subcultural phenomenon has propagated quickly among adolescents in Taiwan.

The Comic/anime Fan Community and Social Identity

Outside the ComicWorld conventions, you can't ever notice the existence of the comic/anime fan community in Taiwan, not even a bit of fanatic zeal. However, if you surf into Taiwan's cyberspace along anime fans' footprints, you will realise how large and complex the fandom is. By then, the anime fanatic craziness and enthusiastic frenzy may have infected you. If you want to know more about their communities, idols and activities, you can talk to them online, or link further to Japanese or American anime fandoms. From the eventual, temporary meetings of the ComicWorld conventions to the anime fandom in cyberspace, this subcultural community is no less than a fluid mass, featuring its capricious character, blurry borderlines, and a "geographic dispersement" (Jenkins, 2001, p.3).

Comic / Anime Fandom

The comic / anime "fannish" community is held together as a loose basis of shared interests in circulating texts of comics or animation, as well as its acquired attributes. The community in turn brings them closer to the subject of shared identity and symbols. As Kanemitsu (1998) has emphasised, "The significance in doujinshi subculture does not originate in the medium that they are using, but rather the distinct social identity that [they] are able to assert through participating in this medium." The comic/ anime conventions seemingly function as essential machinery to strengthen the social impulses among the comic/ anime fans and intensify the distinct features of their socio-cultural identity.

A feature in this comic / anime fandom is the popularity of using its own jargon, preferred comic books or animations, popular discourses, criteria, and values. As a result, this unique sub-cultural literacy would make an outsider feel completely like an illiterate. Thus, part of the process of becoming an anime fan is to learn its cultural practices. Fans have defined criteria to judge good doujinshi or a cosplay. Such experiences and knowledge are usually accumulated from practices and the participation in fan activities.

While entering this anime / comic fan community, you must realize that most comic / anime fans have another name when they communicate with one another, but they are easily distinguished as these virtual names tend to be fantasy, exotic, fairy types, and mostly like those found in Japanese comics, animations and fictions. The anime fans often use their virtual names in their social activities such as the ComicWorld conventions, forums in the internet, or fan clubs. Also, they utilize their virtual names when signing their artworks or doujinshis.

In the ComicWorld conventions, cosplayers are usually recognized through the names of their costumed characters. For example, if one plays the character named "Nabaku," people in the convention will recognize him as "Nabaku." Another could be "Uzumaki Naruto" from the comics "Naruto." In the cosplay area, what you could see are anime characters who have all become "alive," which might confuse you, as if you had entered a comic world. However, my niece Kitty Shu, a teenager, a comic fan artist and my tour guide to this society, provides an insight into this comic world, "It was a fabulous experience, everyone came to have fun together and did not care who you were and what you did in the real world. You know, it is so free here. No racial, economical, and gender discrimination."

Certainly, the society is not as Kitty believed, free of "racial, economical, and gender discrimination." They are simply transformed

into different shapes that can be barely recognized. Japanese comics, animations, and video games are dominating the texts, contents, and values of the fantasy world; they shape its social contexts, and direct its marketing flows. Its dominance has been drawing subcultural communities in Taiwan's popular culture closer to the Japanese comic / anime world than the one we live. It is also true that many adolescent fans tend to identify themselves with the comic / anime subculture rather than the mainstream culture. As Jenkins (2001) notes in his book *Textual Poachers*, the traditional notions of "culture" and "community" defined by classic anthropology is problematic and should be reconsidered from accounts of fan culture.

Fantasy Appropriation and Reproduction

In the anime fandom, in particular the doujin world, there is no clear-cut line between artists and consumers. Almost all fans are potential artists who have made significant contributions to the cultural wealth of the community, which is in turn a nurturing place to seek technical help and social needs. Normally, adolescent anime fans use an alias in communication with each other as if the community is equivalent to a fantasy world where everything is made up and completely divorced from mundane society. Although every fan artist in the anime fandom is merely an imaginary character, all together they integrate and form a pseudo-fantasy world. Mostly in such a simulated world, one tends to be recognized by his/her favorite comic book character rather than his/her real status in society. Such phenomenon is most apparent in the cosplay activities in anime conventions.

Everywhere in the anime fandom on can see the regeneration of the imaginary and the operation of its sign system. In the anime conventions, which are the most intensive moments of all in the fan culture, multiply, circulate and also confirm the signs of the imaginary of comics, video games, or animation. Every fan has the right to apropriate, adapt, recreate, rework and actively challenge the original texts in any possible way by virtue of their own preferences and creativity. In a sense, the comics/anime fans are welcome to work through their own efforts to give comic characters a new incarnation, or totally different lives. It is also acceptable for them to incorporate other author's characters to their own works or stories. In the doujin world, the genre of adaptations and parodies are very common, and can be subdivided into many categories. How to make a smart imitation on the costumes and the character of a favored comic/anime figure becomes a major access to the achievement of the success in a cosplay. The fan artists' efforts and creative minds are required to interpret and bring their favorite anime characters into life.

Although there are many genres of doujinshis and devices for

making doujinshis, I found the following seven devices popular among Taiwanese doujinshis appearing in the ComicWorld conventions.

1..Only making a slight adjustment to the ending.

This is the most common device for making a doujinshi. For example, a fan artist may adjust the tragic ending into a happy one.

2. **Making many changes on the plots and the characters' natures**.

Taiwanese adolescent fan artists are fond of making changes on the character's nature and plots of comic stories dramatically and turning them into bizarre, funny and entertaining comics.

3. Adapting from a novel.

This is a very challenging device because the artist has to develop new plots and dialogues based on the characters in the novels. This type of doujinshis is so creative that they can be viewed as equivalent to the original fictions. A doujihshi artist, who is a good friend of my niece Kitty, told me that she is now working on a doujinshi adapted from the novel of *Harry Potter*. Although the characters in her doujinshis were derived from the film *Harry Potter*, she insisted in developing the plots directly from the novel. She believed that it was much more challenging and fun to find her own Harry Potter from the novel, and visualize him through her own comic book.

4. Mixing up characters from different comic books and placing them in newly developed plots.

This device is very tricky and highly favored by young adolescents

as they find it interesting to place those characters from different comic stories in the same settings or plots. For example, Hanamichi Sakuragi and Kaeoe Rukawa from the comics of *Slam Dunk,* Kasumi and Xiangfei from the video game of *The King of Fighter*, and Gon Freecss and Kurapika from the comics of *Hunter X Hunter*, all appear in a new plot where they are fighting to search the valuable sword and treasure.

5. Expanding the story of a comic book into many relevant sub-stories.

Many fan artists imitate the original authors of their favorite comics, and begin to transform some parts of the stories into more entertaining and complicated plots. It seems that the comic book is printed in many versions, and each version characterizes some parts that could not be completed in the original version. For example, if a fan really hopes to see the main character of Slam Dunk, Hanamichi Sakuragi, dating Itaruko Akagi, she or he could just make up one to satisfy her or his own curiosity.

6. Imitating the styles of a comic book including the plotting, the characters and drawing techniques to create an original fiction.

Many adolescents attempt to make their own shonan or shojyo mangas, but their fictions were built upon the styles of certain well known comics. There may be two reasons for this: (1) those adolescents intend to learn from imitating the styles of their favorite comics in order to create their own, and (2) they may have been influenced by their favorite comics so deeply that they are unconsciously creating their works in similar styles and techniques.

7. Focusing on portraying comic characters

A great proportion of doujinshi artists tended to focus on making portraits of anime characters. Many of these portraits were imitative pieces, while some were original works. The fan artists usually started by tracing and copying characters from popular comics, animation, and video games. After they became more skillful, they would create their own charming and fabulous anime characters. These portrait drawings were made into letter paper and envelops, bookmarks, cards and stickers,

As could be concluded from the above discussion, anime fan artists appropriate raw materials from the commercial comic books, animation and video games to create a broader and more diverse world of their fantasies. As stated by Jenkins (1992) " The aesthetic of fan art celebrates creative use of already circulating discourses and images" (p.279). Although the meanings or values of the images and signs have

been changed or distorted, the imaginary characters have grown into life; they continue to live through different times, experiences and environments. Comic/anime fan artists are "active producers and manipulators of meanings" (p.23). They are just like what Jenkins' description about fans as "active engagement with the media" and creative "textual poachers" rather than "cultural dupes, social misfits, and mindless consumers"(p.24). Fans are able to appropriate and inflect mass culture images and meanings to produce their own and to go beyond the mass-produced texts which provide raw materials for their social interpretation.

Conclusions

As far as this paper goes, I could claim that these adolescent anime fans live out double lives: the mundane reality and anime fantasy. Nevertheless, these two worlds do not conflict with each other

as neither doujinshi authors nor cosplayers attempt to challenge the views of society or bring about social attacks through their media or activities. On the contrary, while being an escape from real life, anime fandom could be a temporary mend of frustration in real world, a symbolic outlet of self-expression and a sense of well-being through artistic achievement. Unfortunately, the adolescent anime fandom and its social events such as anime conventions may not be comprehensible to many people, and may be alienated by the mainstream culture. They are frequently mistaken as a zealot, orgiastic, mischievous and gang-like cultural phenomenon.

Extending from the anime world, the realms of doujinshi and cosplay evolve and become even more complex and diverse. On one hand, the images, stories and signs are materialised, and become concrete objects that can be manipulated, reproduced and exchanged. On the other hand, anime fandom is also a regeneration and fermentation of imagination toward real "reality." The creative imaginary is in fact the real substance and essence of the anime fandom. Although one may merely find phantasms, recycling of dreams, fairylike and legendary images everywhere in the anime fandom, to many adolescents it is the secluded moment of free expression and enjoyable imagination in a utopian dimension which is being indulged. While perceived as detouring from our main stream society, this comic subculture of fantasy poses no harm but encouraging the freedom of creativity, strengthening interpersonal bond and helping mend the frustrations of a stressful "real" world.

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