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To Be or Not to Be

The Controversy in Japan over the “Anime” Label

Outside Japan, anime is mainly used as a term referring to animation made in Japan. Inside Japan though, the word “anime,” an abbreviated pronunciation of animation in Japanese has been used widely as an abbreviation for all animation. However, despite the escalating popularity and attention in the worldwide media, the meaning and usage of the term is still ambiguous and is not employed with a uniform meaning. There are a number of people, especially in Japan, who persist in differentiating the meaning of anime and animation, arguing that anime is just a part of the bigger genre of animation. They assert that not all animations produced in Japan are anime, emphasizing the distinctive character and meaning of the works that do not conform to the existing popular anime image. How works are labeled, whether as anime or animation, does seem to matter. This issue within Japan is important, as it reveals the heterogeneous understandings and expectations of contemporary animation in Japan. This paper explores this controversy about labeling through investigation of the varying usage and reception of the anime label among Japanese animators and major animation related associations in Japan.

The origin of the term

In 1910, at the end of the Meiji period, foreign animations, including the French animation *Fantasmagorie* by Emile Cohl were imported by Fukuhōdō and screened in the Teikokukan (Imperial Theatre) in Asakusa, Tokyo. The phrase “dekobō shingachō” (凸坊新画帳 Dekobō’s new sketch book) was written before the titles of these foreign animations.¹ This “dekobō shingachō” series became very popular and the term itself became synonymous with animation (Yamaguchi and Watanabe 1977, p.8). Later, the term “senga eiga” (線画映画 line drawing film) or “senga kigeki” (線画喜劇 line drawing comic film) was used to refer to the locally produced animation. On some occasions, “cartoon comedy” written in katakana (カートン・コメディ) was also used (Yamaguchi and Watanabe 1977, p.10). In the 1920s, the term “manga eiga” (漫画映画 manga film) became dominant, often used to refer to works with a strong narrative element. On the other hand, “senga” (線画 Line drawings) was often used to refer to works with diagrams and educational purposes. Around 1937, the term “dōga” (動画 moving images) was introduced by Masaoka Kenzo, but the term did not spread widely. Much later, around 1965, a similar term, “dōga eiga” (動画映画 moving image film) became popular along with “animation film” (アニメーション・フィルム) written in katakana (Yamaguchi and Watanabe 1977, p.13). In 1962, the word “anime” first appeared in *Eiga hyoron*, a well known film magazine.² In the late 1970s and 1980s, the term “Japanimation” was used briefly due to the sudden popularization of anime in foreign countries, but faded away rather quickly due to its being associated with eroticism and violence overseas. Nowadays, animation and anime, both written in katakana, have become the most established terms.

¹ According to the sixth edition of *Kōjien*, “dekobō” derives from the meaning of children having a big forehead. It is a playful way to address a naughty boy in Meiji and Taisho period. On the other hand, “chame” was used to address a naughty girl.

² According to Tsugata Nobuyuki’s research, the word “anime” first appeared in Mori Takuya’s column: “The genealogy of dōga eiga” in the issue 9 and 10 of the 1962’s *Eiga hyoron*. Tsugata presented this research outcome at the 2001 Japan Society of Animation Studies (JSAS) annual conference.

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Anime which has been conveniently regarded as an abbreviation for all animation within the country are largely represented by drawn animation in TV series, theatrical works or DVDs which have been produced and released by a strong networking of “*seisaku iinkai*,” or joint ventures of several companies, for risk sharing as well as promotional purposes. However, works that are produced independently and art animations are usually addressed as animation rather than anime. At the moment, the strong ties that link the commercial production, distribution and exhibition networks seem to have formed a fluctuating consensus to distinguish what is anime and what not. The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) of Japan has identified the category of anime (referring to the bulk of commercial anime and its related merchandise) as a content-related industry like manga, games and music.

On the other hand, the overseas view point often sees the styles, voices, character design, selective animation (limited animation) and so on as typical of Japanese animation, as these are convenient features to distinguish Japanese works from other national, regional, or company styles. As Miyao Daisuke points out, anime “is now widely used to distinguish Japanese animation from other forms. Around this entity of *anime*, there is a growing sense that we know what *anime* refers to, what kind of object it is. In the United States, this sense of what *anime* is has been shaped by television programming and product marketing” (Miyao 2002, p.192). Miyao’s arguments describe one of the key issues that surround anime: the specific features of anime (i.e. science fiction, giant robot, girls with magical powers, school uniforms, and shrine costumes) which continue to form a children-oriented image that marginalizes the image of anime overseas. This pervasive anime image has attracted scholars from different fields to study them from the perspective of popular culture, globalization and the diffusion of cultural influence, sociological, physiological, consumerism, business and many others. However, this popular anime image also has distanced many creators, film lovers, animation enthusiasts and film scholars from anime, who often consider anime as merely current fashion, not a serious art form.

The ambiguity involved in defining anime, and the varied usage of the term is an ongoing process, within Japan and overseas. My purpose here is to provide a glimpse into the current state of the term inside Japan, through close range of observation of everyday usage together with surveying various materials in Japanese. Setting aside how anime is defined outside Japan, it is important to note that anime does not have a homogenous meaning inside the country, which complicates the task of attempting to establish a consistent meaning of the term.

Anime as abbreviation of animation

Studio Ghibli is one of the major animation studios in Japan famous for its high quality feature-length animated films, popular with children and adults. Ghibli’s audience is not limited to anime or animation lovers but also includes people who are interested in film and contemporary culture in general. Studio Ghibli aims at producing works that maintain a balance between an engaging narrative and attractive motion design. Works from Ghibli are often considered as artistic productions, both entertaining and meaningful.

In the two large collections of Miyazaki’s writings³, *Shuppatsu ten 1979-1996 (Point of Departure, 1996)* and *Orikaeshi ten 1997-2008 (The Turning Point, 2008)*, he often refers to his works as “*eiga*” (films), pointing out they are fundamentally different from what has been called anime (Miyazaki 1996, p.101-115, Miyazaki 2008, p.82).

³ See references for other writings by Miyazaki.

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Miyazaki explained that the rapid development of the anime industry was closely connected to the rich manga culture in the country. However, when many visual conventions from manga were directly transferred into anime, he was dissatisfied with artists who simply relied on these established norms to convey action and meaning. For Miyazaki, artists should observe and digest different experiences, including film and manga, to finally create their own expression (Miyazaki 1996, p.106). Besides that, he emphasized the everyday experience of the presentation of space and time in animation that should break away from simply relying on visual conventions that evolved from manga expressions. However, Miyazaki also made the point that it does not make sense to completely ignore the rich possibility of expressions found in manga. He thinks creators should treat manga as a departure point and learn and be inspired by it (Miyazaki 2008, p.82).

Miyazaki disliked the term “anime” because it represents a narrow world view of animation that is limited to celluloid animation, ignoring other techniques possible in animation expression (Miyazaki 1998, p.103)⁴.^{iv} Miyazaki also criticized the tight production schedule of anime that had encouraged the reduction of details in drawing and relied on deformed images that focus on depicting the impact of the moment instead of choreographing the motion through carefully executed in-between drawings (Miyazaki 1998, p.107).

Another organization close to Studio Ghibli is the Tokuma Memorial Cultural Foundation for Animation. Tokuma is in charge of the Ghibli Museum in Mitaka and provides funding for young scholars to carry research about animation inside and outside of Japan. Even though it is not stated clearly, it is clear that their aim is to promote the understanding of animation through scholarly discussions and debates, encouraging the creation of animation and its culture in a bigger context than anime.

Based on this standpoint, it is natural that Studio Ghibli always addresses Miyazaki’s works as “the works of Miyazaki” or “the films of Miyazaki” in their own publications, related activities and official website. However, some changes occurred recently. In their 2009 exhibition catalog “Studio Ghibli Layout Design,” anime is used as abbreviation in the Japanese text, while it is carefully translated into English as “animation.” This minor example could be a coincidence, yet it hints that Studio Ghibli and Miyazaki’s attitude toward anime has softened, accepting the use of “anime” as abbreviation for animation, following the majority usage in Japanese media.

Suginami Animation Museum, established in 2003, is the first animation museum that aims to promote Japanese animation as a whole. The size of the museum is comparatively small, but it displays panels exhibiting the full history of Japanese animation. It also has a library that contains many TV animated series from the past and present, racks of animation related references publications and some scholarly books on animation. In my interview with the curator of the museum, Suzuki Shinichi⁵, he stated that anime is used as an abbreviation in this museum, which is not intended to indicate any particular visual style. The current display tends to have more things on TV animated series compared to the theatrically released feature-length animation. The celluloid animation that has been dominant in Japan is also well reflected in the museum’s display. In an interesting contrast to the museum’s display, Suzuki emphasized that the museum aims to inspire young people to become artists who can work creatively, independent from the popular industrial style.

⁴ The attitude towards encouraging a wider animation world view is also reflected in Studio Ghibli’s official website. Cf. e.g. “Studio Ghibli’s Library,” a main section of their site.

⁵ Interview with Suzuki Shinichi on May 1, 2009.

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Searching for the Trajectory of Japanese Animation (Nihon anime no hisyōki o sagaru 日本アニメの飛翔期を探る), a major exhibition on Japanese animation held in the year 2000, traced its history from the first theatrically released animation *Hakujyaden* (1958) to other feature-length animated films that Toei Doga produced throughout the 1960s. The show aimed to introduce how Japanese animation developed after the war and looked into the rapid expansion of TV anime in the 1970s. Here, anime was also used as an abbreviation in the exhibition catalog.

There are many popular references which have been using anime as abbreviation for animation such as, the two volumes of the *Toei dogo chōhen anime dai senshū* (東映動画 長編アニメ大全集), *Mangaka animesakka jinmei jiten* (漫画家 アニメ作家 人名事典) and *Nihon no anime zenshi* (日本のアニメ全史). Common animation technical books such as *Dare mo wakaru! anime no kibun baiburu – jinbutsu no ugoki hen* (誰でもわかる！アニメの基本バイブル 人物の動き編), *Anime sakuga no shikumi kiyakuta ni inochi o fukikomō* (アニメ作画のしくみ キャラに命を吹き込もう) also tends to adopt anime as an abbreviation.

Anime no kyōkashō (the official English title is *The Animator's Text*), a four-volume reference recently published by the Committee of the Anime Human Resource Training and Educational Program, is mainly written by bodies that are closely connected to the anime industry⁶. They acknowledge the use of anime as an abbreviation for animation, but also stress that anime is usually represented by TV animated series based on the celluloid animation technique. In the segment titled “Auteurs of Japanese animation,” Kawamoto Kihachiro, Yamamura Koji and Shinkai Makoto are included. They are introduced as artists whom anime fans might not be familiar with, but are all internationally recognized animation creators (Fukui, volume 1, 2008, p.9). This text book foregrounds the concepts and techniques of commercial animated series and is clearly intended for those who aim to be employed in the anime industry as indicated in the book's subtitle. Anime, used here as an abbreviation reveals a sense of dominance of the commercial anime industry and the esteem coupled with segregation accorded “animation people” like Kawamoto or Yamamura who are well recognized, but not commercially significant in the industry.

Listed above are examples of the term anime used as an abbreviation. When examined closely, these individual organizations clearly have distinct attitudes towards their understanding of the ideal form and purpose of animation, despite adopting anime as an abbreviation. Studio Ghibli has been extremely careful when it comes to describing their works. However, other examples seem to be more media driven, not especially aware of or concerned with the varieties of the meanings implied by animation and anime.

Anime as a category not a contraction

There are a number of Japanese creators of animations that have taken care to assert that their works are not “anime.” They appear to feel that the popular usage of the term “anime” to represent the culturally specific type of Japanese animation commonly found in TV series and franchise theme theatrical productions is so strong, that they want to clearly dissociate their own works from this use of the “anime” term. Prominent among those who hold this position is Yamamura Koji, an independent animation artist who has expressed his concern in differentiating the usage of anime and animation. In the introduction to his book *Welcome to the World of Animation*, he stressed his works are animation and not anime. He went on to explain

⁶ The overall supervision of this series is by The Association of Japanese Animations (AJA). Other organizations and companies that involved include Nihon Gakuin College, Toho Gakuen College, Sunrise (*Gundam*, *Keroro gunso*), Toei Animation (*One Piece*, *Dragon Ball*) and Celsys (Graphic Related Software Development & Multimedia Creation).

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that anime is just part of the bigger category of animation, yet anime has nonetheless become the established term referring to all forms of animation in Japan⁷. At the moment, Yamamura also lectures at Tokyo University of the Arts, where he trains students by introducing them to different animations from around the world. Recently, he has also started to organize a series of public lectures which focus on introducing worldwide contemporary animation artists to the audience, to further expand the understanding of animation in Japan⁸.

Japanese Animated Films: A Complete View from Their Birth to “Spirited Away” and Beyond (日本漫画映画の全貌), a 2004 exhibition on Japanese animation, refused to use anime as an abbreviation. Instead, they went back to an older term, *manga eiga*. This interesting exhibition reviewed Japanese animation as *manga eiga* in order to educate a younger generation about another category of animation, as *manga eiga* embodies values and aesthetics different from their familiar anime. In this exhibition, there was a sense of pride and legitimacy of animation that looked back to the golden era of Toei Doga. The short essay in the catalog written by Suzuki Toshio, the producer of Studio Ghibli pointed out that “Japanese manga films have a more director-centered approach while western animated film are more centered on the film’s concept itself” (Suzuki 2004, p.13). Animation researcher Kano Seiji also commented in the same catalog that designing character movement and performances should be the main job of an animator. However, having a low budget, a short production period, subcontracting works to other production companies and relying too much on freeze images (*tome* トメ) to express the emotional state of the character has become a common scene in the industry. Kano quoted Otsuka Yasuo, a famous veteran animator to describe this symptom as “limited anime-ize” (*shōseru anime ka* 省セルアニメ化) (Kano 2004, p.167).

Here, even though it is not clearly stated, TV anime are shown in contrast to be a mere fast food-like commercial product that does not carry much of the author’s signature. Avoiding anime as abbreviation in order to highlight the difference between anime and animation is here intended as a meaningful distinction. However, this exhibition also has its own prejudices, as it just sheds light on the lineage of Toei Doga and its successor, Studio Ghibli, which are presented as carrying on the values of making real animation, and completely ignores the importance of other studios⁹.

A number of independent animators, most represented by Kuri Yoji, Furukawa Taku and Aihara Nobuhiro have also expressed their dislike of the use of anime as an abbreviation. This group of creators tends to have a wider interpretation of animation, emphasizing individuality and originality in their work that does not conform much to the existing anime style. Many of them are creating short animations and actively participate in world wide animation festivals. Setting aside that the works by this group are often art-oriented and have little exposure in the mainstream media, they continue to share their passions through lecturing at universities. Laputa Art Animation School, a small animation organization inspired by Yury Norshtein, is a place where many of them provide lectures and hands-on training for those who are interested in using animation as an expressive medium¹⁰.

⁷ Yamamura reconfirmed this statement in an interview with the author at Yamamura Animation, March 30, 2009.

⁸ <http://animation.geidai.ac.jp/ca2009/>

⁹ Mushi Productions was quite important in the historical development of Japanese animation. However, the fact that it was disliked and blamed for initiating the era of cheaply produced TV animated series is well demonstrated here.

¹⁰ According to the history written in Laputa’s official website, Yury came to Japan as the judge for the Laputa Animation Festival in 2000. He commented that Japan had no school to provide training for artists. Laputa Art Animation School was established to bridge the gap between artists and the heavily commercialized anime world in Japan by providing training to encourage individuality.

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Anime as a culturally distinct form of Japanese animation

The worldwide popular reception of anime and the promotion by the Japanese government of anime are both clearly centered on this category of works that usually includes a mixture of the following characteristics:

- (a) Based on manga
- (b) Specific voice mannerisms
- (c) Extensive use of selective animation
- (d) The use of the camera work to provide motion to still drawings.
- (e) Specific patterns of character design and facial conventions
- (f) Complicated storylines with long episodic narratives

Currently popular series such as *Naruto*, *Bleach*, *Full Metal Alchemist*, *Death Note*, *Mushi-shi* and many others that match dominant images of anime all have the above characteristics. These particular characteristics have separated them from mainstream animation from the West. However, setting aside their popularity and enormous commercial viability, they are still often criticized as second rate due to their limited use of motion, repetitive narrative patterns, and focus on preteen and teenage audiences. In 2008, there were 140 new titles screened on TV and cable. Yet among this large number there were many interesting works with ambitious creators that inserted their signature styles into the works despite the tight working schedules, low budgets and various demands from the production committees and sponsors¹¹. [xi](#)

Yuasa Masaaki, the talented director of the feature-length animated film *Mind Game* (2004), and anime series such as *Kemonozume* (2006) and *Kaiba* (2008), is one of those who is attempting to resist these commercial pressures while working within the mainstream of the industry. Before working as a director, he worked as an animator for the long running popular TV anime series *Chibi Maruko-chan* and *Crayon Shin-chan*. His works often demonstrate highly personalized character designs that at the same time employ many conventional anime characteristics. The movement designs in Yuasa's works are interesting as he tends to play with selective animation, superseding what some see as its limitations. In an interview with Yuasa, he is obviously comfortable to be addressed as an anime director, and like many freelance animators, he is always trying hard to generate works that satisfy the audience while maintaining a unique sense of style. The *Tetsuwan Atomu* series from the 1960s, *Uchusenkan Yamato* from the 1970s, *Gundam* from the 1980s and *Evangelion* from the 1990s all have unique styles that were distinct from much of the mainstream animation of their day.

In reality, there have always been some complications when the Japanese Government has pushed anime as their representative contemporary cultural industry. Despite the huge income derived from anime and related goods each year, the anime scene is not an unproblematic entity as can be seen from the large quantity of sexually explicit "hentai" anime. Another example is the Akihabara district in Tokyo, the so-called dreamland for otaku, which poses another delicate issue that the government struggles to address when promoting anime¹².

¹¹ The information is based on the online data from the Association of Japanese Animations. This number excluded OVA titles and titles that screened at theatres. Eighty-seven titles were screened on TV (including broadcast channel TV) according to the July, 2009 statistic. <http://www.aja.gr.jp/>

¹² Once most famous for cheap electronics, anime, manga, games and figures are now among the most publicized attractions of Akihabara. See Morikawa Kaichiro "Learning from Akihabara: The Birth of a Personapolis" for his lengthy and informative discussion about the history of Akihabara.

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Akiba-kei is the current slang term for people in the Tokyo area who are active in the anime and gaming scene in Akihabara or adopt an anime-related lifestyle. They are often viewed as the extreme example of the people who are into anime, manga, games and idols. It is also common to spot them dressed in varied cosplay costumes walking around or performing in Akihabara.

Not everyone in Japan is pleased about this image of Akihabara, but the trend has certainly attracted attention throughout the nation. Many people see it as a kind of street theater with mixed feelings. The recent hit movie *Densha Otoko* (Train Man) depicted an otaku's inner insecurity and alienation in Japanese society and his search for a love life. It helped to improve some people's negative perception of otaku. The Anime Center located in Akihabara that tries to promote a non-Akiba-kei image for anime, is another interesting effort to create a healthier cultural image of anime for the district. On a national level, Japan International Contents Festival, supported by METI that connected with the contents industry like games, animation, manga, characters, broadcast, music and film can also be viewed as part of the government effort to rationalize or upgrade the cultural image of anime¹³.


Conclusion

It can be seen that there are two basic groups that view anime as a term with entirely different meanings and image, whether the word is used as an abbreviation or not. In conclusion, I would emphasize the importance of two main definitions of anime, each with its own pattern of usage: (A) anime as a simple abbreviation of "animation" and (B) anime as a culturally specific type of Japanese animation that excludes some forms of animation made in Japan. It is not my intention to promote either definition or type of animation, but to simply clarify these several meanings and uses of the term. As mentioned earlier, there are extremely creative and aesthetically sensitive anime (B definition) available in the market. Very often the media talks about anime as though this specific form represented the entirety of animation made in Japan, while in reality anime in the cultural specific mode is only one of many forms of animation in Japan. Specifying whether anime is used as an abbreviation or a culturally specific mode of Japanese animation can help to clarify our perception and analysis of the variety of animations produced in Japan. These distinctions are not only important within the cultural context of Japan, but also have an important role in clarifying the analysis of Japanese animation from an international standpoint.

The current controversy over the Japanese government's promotion of anime (B definition) as a cultural ambassador for contemporary Japan, to the more spontaneous delight taken in Japanese anime (B definition) across Asia, Europe, and elsewhere, can all be investigated more clearly with care taken to identify these several definitions and patterns of usage for the term "anime." Some parts of the meaning of this international meaning of anime refers to Japanese culture in specific forms, such as kimono, samurai, geisha, sword play, archaic style armor, Japanese gothic-Lolita style, fashion, cosplay etc. Even the perception of Miyazaki's work as Japanese, especially *Mononoke hime* (1997) and *Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi* (2001), fit this image of anime as being culturally Japanese. Using a Japanese abbreviation like anime represents this cultural difference outside of the country. Inside the country, the Japanese cultural context is a given- the distinction that some want to achieve between animation and anime as applied to works produced in Japan is more technical and stylistic than cultural. It also involves issues of production, audience, distribution (TV and theatre versus festival); in addition, some creators' desire to be known foremost as quality animators rather than quality Japanese animators.

¹³ The government motives and policies that may be exploiting and controlling a people's art movement for its own unrelated ends have been criticized by Otsuka Eiji.

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The desire of some members of the government and some politicians to use anime and the related forms like manga and cosplay as cultural ambassadors represent an attempt to co-opt their worldwide popularity to form an appealing face for government policies and an international image useful for promoting tourism and international trade. Considering these issues internal and external to Japan, it becomes clear that such terms as “animation” and “anime” are far from being simple or neutral descriptive terms. Instead, multiple viewpoints and usages reveal a contested ground that cannot fairly be reduced to a simple definition. It also exposes differences in use and meaning between the still largely separated worlds of discourse inside Japan and outside of it. A heightened sensitivity to these terminological differences in future studies of animation in Japan will help to clarify the different trends and viewpoints in the scholarly world as well as society at large. 

Gan Sheuo Hui is a postdoctoral fellow of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) at Kyoto University. This paper was initially presented at the Society for Animation Studies conference in Atlanta, 2009. This paper is intended to help prepare the groundwork for a book of essays and interviews on Japanese animation.

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