

RECEPTION AND CONSUMPTION OF CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE  
TELEVISION DRAMAS: MEANINGS AND ATTITUDES AMONG  
UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA

by

GOH Teck Fann

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## ABSTRACT

Young people, especially university students in Malaysia, are consumers of Japanese popular cultures since they were young. Many grew up watching Japanese *anime* (animation), reading *manga* (comic books) that was translated into local language, watching television dramas and films, eating Japanese food and so on. Some also took effort in learning Japanese language in order to get to know more about Japan and its cultures. This thesis examines the audience reception of Malaysian university students who watch Japanese television dramas and aims to discover how these university students work on the engagements of their media consumption.

First, the interpretations of Japanese drama as media text among the students are explored. The primary method used in this research is focus group discussions. This methodology is accomplished with the participation of students from two different universities in Malaysia, in which a total of five focus group discussions and one conversational discussion were conducted. I look at how these students as audiences of Japanese dramas produce meanings out of their consumption and what watching means to them. In relation to the meanings produced out of the media text, audiences are considered active in the sense that they do not passively accept the messages out of their viewing without making identification with the images and constructing their own ideas about the values present in the text.

Second, this research considers the local socio-cultural influences towards the meanings produced out of watching Japanese television dramas and the attitudes resulted from this consumption. According to the respondents, watching Japanese drama is considered as an educational material in which they can learn more about Japanese cultures and values. Watching Japanese dramas is said to help facilitate the images and cultures of Japan. The local effort under the notion of the Look East Policy also contributes to creating an atmosphere that promotes Japanese cultures and values to Malaysian audiences. Malaysian university students as audiences play an important role in generating multiple interpretations of transnational cultures by employing the creative process of identification with the knowledge of Japan that they already hold and this creates a space for new understanding about cultures considered 'foreign'. This thesis will contribute to the appreciation of audience narratives and facilitate the idea of using media to enhance cultural understanding.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Popular cultures such as food, fashion, entertainment, and media products are becoming increasingly integrated into the everyday lives of the people globally. Our experiences in this modern society are influenced by our consumption of popular cultural products. Japanese popular cultures have become particularly favoured within the Asian region and became widely consumed since the 1990s. McGray (2002) has coined the term 'gross national cool' to describe the buzz centred on the popularity and global influence of Japanese popular culture. Similarly, Moeran (2000) used the word 'corollanization' (based on Toyota) to depict the entry of Japanese commodities, advertisements and cultures into Asian markets which enhance the local's experience with Japanese products and values. There are so many reasons and ways for people who are familiar with Japanese popular culture to share and discuss their experiences. East Asia and South East Asia have become Japan's biggest supporters in terms of cultural familiarity and as a model for economic development. The people within the region play bigger role than the Japanese media industries itself in circulating Japanese media products for consumption. Tourists, businessmen, and students who travelled to Japan play a major role in bringing Japanese cultural commodities and media products back to their respective countries. The Internet too, has successfully provided online users the opportunity to create spaces for sharing media consumption and exchanging ideas and information. More local and regional audiences have become avid users of Japanese media products such

as *anime*, films, music, and dramas. In the 1990s, Japanese dramas were favoured significantly by Asian audiences and its popularity became a phenomenon. As a result, this phenomenon generated much debate and discussions to discovering the reasons for such popularity.

## **1.1 Background**

First, I would like to make a brief distinction between two styles of television drama; soap opera and television drama, as the assumption of these two genres as interchangeable may cause confusion in understanding the characteristics of media text this thesis is analyzing. There are many ways to refer to soap operas – melodrama, soaps, serials, or telenovela. Soap operas began to receive attention from viewers in the 1950s, but it was not until 1980s that researches on soap operas were generated (Allen, 2004). One of the earlier works in describing audience reception is ‘*Watching Dallas*’ by Ien Ang (1985), which examines the opinions of letter-writers about Dallas and looks at how these audiences construct meanings in watching Dallas. A soap opera is considered as a long running serial that often highlights the relationships between expanded characters within a community. A soap opera can have hundreds of episodes and is relatively known as woman’s program in the past due to the high participation by housewives. The storyline and plot in soap opera can often be quite dramatic as the narrative structure usually involves tensions, scandals, quarrels, family complications, secrets, and unexpected elements that build up as the peak of the storyline, causing excitement and thrill among the audiences. As such, the peak is

then preceded by the solution to the problems presented in the narrative and resolution to the dominant dilemma that overshadows the theme of the soap opera. However, sometimes, soap opera can go airing for a couple of years and the span of such extensive storyline takes the narrative away to a more advanced plot. As a result, such soap opera may progress to become completely different than how it originally started. Supporting characters, too, tend to be organized in such a way that they appear for a specific period in certain event and never appear again after their roles have been fulfilled. Even so, events in soap operas are less predetermined and more flexible in terms of their narrative structure. Characters that were gone for a certain period of time can return unexpectedly as well (Allen, 2004). Soap opera is aired more frequently than television drama; for instance, in the US, soap operas are aired for an hour five days a week.

On the contrary, the most significant difference between a soap opera and a television drama is the length of episodes. Each television drama takes form in a specific genre and the narratives typically rely on the main theme to generate relationships between the characters and plot events. Audiences in Asia are more familiar to television drama than soap operas. A full length television drama can have up to average of twenty to thirty episodes and is aired according to seasons. As Japanese television drama is the topic of interest in this thesis, I shall highlight some of its format details. The Japanese television networks air different Japanese dramas each season - winter, spring, fall and summer. The length of episodes in Japanese drama is typically up to ten on average basis and each episode is aired once a week for the duration of three months (Jdorama, 2012). An episode usually

lasts for about fifty minutes. Also, the production of Japanese drama takes place usually about two to three weeks before each episode is aired. This gives the production team opportunities for any modification required based on viewership ratings and responses. Japanese drama is known for the variety of themes and topics explored in different dramas. For example, genres can include romance, life and death, friendship, school life, detective, mystery, family, comedy and so on. Most modern Japanese dramas are set in backdrops of major cities like Tokyo. Because Japanese dramas are limited to an average of ten or eleven episodes, the narratives and plots do not involve larger association among characters or complex social connections, focusing only on individuals or groups that are relevant to the genre and overall theme of the drama.

In this study, Malaysian students are defined as the audiences of Japanese drama and for most of the respondents involved in this research, Japanese dramas they refer to are the “trendy” dramas. Trendy drama is also known as a modern styled drama depicting the current reality of Japan and the social issues at present time in the society. Japanese dramas have been analyzed in various researches including matters on globalization, transnational media distribution and consumption, politics, soft power, regionalization, audience reception, comparative cultures and so on. Adaptations of Japanese dramas across different cultures also have been analyzed. For example, Yoshida (2011) analyzes Taiwanese, Japanese and South Korean production of a drama based on the Japanese *manga* titled *Hana Yori Dango* and reveals how the drama has been adapted for local tastes. The *manga* is produced into a television drama in Taiwan

in 2001 as Meteor Garden (CTS, 2001), followed by the Japanese version in 2005, *Hana Yori Dango* (TBS, 2005), and later the Korean version in 2009, Boys Over Flowers (KBS2, 2009). In her research, she examines the circulation and consumption of *Hana Yori Dango* among local audiences as well as the differences and similarities in the content produced in the three versions. According to Yoshida, each of these dramas provides audiences with a ‘tool’ by which they can see themselves as part of ‘global’ consumers. She goes on to claim that the outcome of the drama consumption allows them to feel positive about their own image. The findings of her research also enforces Iwabuchi’s (2002) idea that East Asian communities sense that they inhabit within a ‘temporal modernity’ where audiences feel ‘similar but different’ within the imageries of another modern society.

## **1.2 Purpose of Study**

Many cultural products from various countries have been introduced in Malaysia for local consumption. Besides cultural influence from the West, particularly the US and the UK, Malaysian markets also relied heavily on Asian products from Japan, South Korea, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, India, and so on. Many local consumers have looked favourably towards Asian products and cultural influences as part of the Look East Policy enacted in 1982. This policy became a platform for Malaysians to look favourably towards Japan as guidance for nation development. In Malaysia, the country ‘Japan’ itself has become a growing familiarity for the locals as evidenced by the popularity of Japanese

cultures throughout the country. Young people in Malaysia have been exposed to many Japanese elements since they were young. Children grew up exposed to reading Japanese *manga* that have been translated into national language, Bahasa Malaysia, watching Japanese animations, movies, and films with the help of multiple subtitles, and using everyday Japanese products such as stationery and home appliances. Young Malaysians relate to Japanese cultural products such as *anime*, *manga* or games beginning from their early childhood as part of their pastime activities.

This study looks at Japanese drama as a media product which requires an audience for it to function. This means that media revolves around the active engagement of its audiences. Without audiences, media do not work because its function will cease to operate. In other words, audiences are the active agents of media products and act as individual who interpret meanings and make sense of text and its messages. Different audiences produce different meanings and this allows them to create their own identity based on personal judgments (Puustinen, 2005). One of the basic principles about making meanings out of media is that audiences construct their ideas and opinions based on previous experiences and knowledge in everyday life. People's experiences in daily life are structured by their engagements with social and cultural environment which provides a framework for connecting commonsensical meanings and views of the world (Kim, 2008). The behaviours of audiences after particular media consumption have a rather fascinating pattern for observations. Audiences create some kind of relationship with the storyline and characters which help to produce easier

identification. In addition, they are able to creatively translate elements in the text for use in everyday life. Such characteristics can be observed based on the idea that the influence of media towards an audience depends on the various social relationships the audience has with their surroundings (Grossberg, Wartella, Whitney, and Wise, 2006).

However, most studies previously were concentrated on exploring the relationships between Japanese television dramas and audiences within a single cultural community in East Asia. For example, the audience reception analysis using the examples of Japanese drama focuses mainly on Taiwanese, Chinese, and South Korean audiences. South East Asian audiences were loosely mentioned through the work of Koichi Iwabuchi (2002). His discussion recognizes the “localization strategies” adopted in the production and distribution of Japanese popular culture (including media products) for Singaporean and Malaysian consumers under the subject of globalization. This indicates that South East Asians recognize Japanese popular culture in terms of its attraction and cultural value but the concept of making sense of media content is not further analyzed. On the other hand, his research focuses on Taiwanese and Hong Kong audiences who watch Japanese television drama to discuss on the reception by the audiences, who claim to identify and relate with the media text. However, there is an attempt by Chua (2008a) to identify South East Asians as audiences of Japanese television drama.

In his discussion, Chua (2008a) recognizes Singaporeans as audiences of Japanese television drama who actively employ identification with the narrative,

themes and characters in the text. He goes on to examine how audiences look at the differences between the Japanese and their own Singaporean identity. Chua's discussion sheds light on the idea that South East Asian audiences do identify and relate with Japanese television dramas that are considered relatively "foreign" culturally. Hence, developing this research topic will provide a better insight on the role of Malaysian students as part of active audiences engaging in multifaceted interpretations of modern day Japanese television dramas. This research attempts to investigate the interpretation of television drama audiences under the context of audience reception analysis, assuming that every audience produce different meanings out of images and texts. The meanings generated by audiences will be examined to investigate the audiences' attitudes towards Japan. This research attempts to answer the following questions. Why is watching Japanese TV dramas considered favourable to university students? How are the messages or meanings that are discovered from drama consumption interpreted into their daily lives? What are the attitudes resulted from Japanese television drama consumption?

With the increasing influence of Japan's cultural role in South East Asia, this research is significant in three aspects. First, the research helps to understand the translocal readings produced by audiences living in a multicultural setting. As mentioned previously, Japanese television dramas have reached different audiences of distinctive cultural backgrounds around East Asia and South East Asia regions but multicultural countries have been loosely represented in Japanese popular culture related studies and audience analyses, such as Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and so on. Second, in 2004 and onwards, researches

have shifted the study towards examining the popularity of the Korean Wave and Korean television dramas. There are not many studies conducted recently to discuss on Japanese television drama audiences. The popularity of Japanese television drama is said to have faded by the end of 1990s, while the reception Korean television drama is getting stronger among Asian audiences (Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008). Therefore, this research aims to present the current appeal and characteristics that Japanese drama has towards Malaysian audiences. Third, the result from this research will be able to facilitate the idea of using transnational media to inspire and motivate audiences in appreciating different cultures through the dynamic readings of media text and narratives. For this reason, I find the opportunity to acquire more information and conduct a research in Malaysia to contribute to existing literatures and research about Asian consumers of Japanese television dramas. The existing academic understandings of media audiences will further facilitate my fieldwork and serve as the foundation for creating frameworks involving the influence of Japanese popular culture.

### **1.3 Outline of Study**

This thesis consists of six chapters including this introduction. Chapter Two presents literature reviews of previous studies and works around media and audience reception theories relevant to this study. Chapter Two begins with the argument that audience is no longer seen as a passive receiver of media programs. This chapter presents theoretical understanding on how the use of media is defined by an audience and this establishes a framework to discuss on the active

consumption of Japanese dramas among Malaysian audiences. The chapter then evaluates the influence of Japanese popular culture in Asia and look at the characteristics used to describe audiences who watch Japanese dramas.

Chapter Three describes the methodology used in this research. The research data primarily focus on the use of focus group discussion in which university students in Malaysia have participated. The recruitment processes and characteristics of the focus groups are addressed in this chapter. This chapter also explains the analyzing method for the data collected and how this study attempts to define an audience.

Chapter Four analyzes the elements that students are most receptive to in Japanese dramas and discusses on the types of identification that were produced based on their viewing interpretation. In addition, the students' narratives on the aesthetic elements and on the intangible messages in the text are discussed.

In Chapter Five, the identification characteristics in audience reception is discussed by associating the local socio-cultural settings and the cultural aspects of the audience narratives. This chapter explains the significance of the cultural knowledge that audiences hold about Japan and how Malaysian students position Japan's image as favourable for their own socio-cultural environment. In addition, the idea that local promotion of Japanese cultures and values enhance media reception among its audiences is supported in this chapter.

Lastly, Chapter Six summarizes and concludes the findings on Malaysian students as active audiences and the nature of their Japanese drama interpretations, including the implications discovered out of this research.

This chapter ends by pointing out the limitations present during this research and offers suggestions for potential future works.

## **CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Media Theories**

There is a clear distinction made to the progress of audience reception studies throughout the years. To develop findings on audience interpretation and how they make sense of media texts means that we are making assumption that a media product no longer have a linear effect on audiences. That is, audiences do not respond automatically to media products. In order to react to a specific media text, whether a newspaper, radio, television program, or music, audiences must be engaged in an active process to make sense of various codes that collectively represent a media text. Audiences are continuously active in media engagement process. They look for similarities and differences between themselves and the characters by emotionally relating to the events that happen to the characters as the narrative develops. The process of audience identification with the different personalities among the characters includes empathizing with on-screen activities, actions, and attitudes that support the text. Audiences will have to connect the signs and messages in the media, using their basic understanding of knowledge on how everyday situations function to either accept, reject or find prejudice about the meaning of text itself (Morley, 1992).

#### 2.1.1 Audience Reception Theory

In media studies, many literatures have drawn much attention to the significance of the relationships between media texts and the audiences. The

relationship between text and audience is supported by the increasing recognition of audiences as ‘active’, leading many other researches to seek the meanings of ‘audience activity’ in different cultures (Takahashi, 2010). Audience reception theory primarily focuses on the interpretation and sense-makings among audiences who are constantly in negotiation with the media texts that they have received (Ott & Mack, 2010). The idea here is that even though producers and media industries construct a media text with particular messages intended within a guided framework, it is ultimately the audiences who determine what the messages mean to them or how it is relevant in their lives.

Audiences are capable of translating their use of media for their personal objectives. One of the earlier studies of media reception is the concept of ‘uses and gratifications’ research. Uses and gratifications method is used for an attempt to seek the ways in which audiences actively select and use the media for their own purposes (Hodkinson, 2011). Uses and gratifications aims to research about the things individual do with the media instead of finding out media effects on individual (Jensen & Rosengren, 2009). According to Ott and Matt (2010), this method “assumes that individuals consciously consume media texts” (p.223) and that the individual can find something to rework on their everyday lives and do a variety of things with media. For example, audiences claim that they are able to obtain information or even utilize certain facts that appear in the media. Uses and gratifications may provide a good understanding of how audiences are able to use and interpret media, but they do not generate frameworks to connect the communication process before an audience consumes media with the result of the

interpretation after the consumption. This brings us to the development of audience reception theory towards cultural media readings such as Stuart Hall's (2001) encoding/decoding model.

Hall (2001) presents the idea that there is no necessary association between two processes of communication, encoding and decoding although these two are studied together. During the process of encoding, media text is converted into codes and signs to be interpreted by the audience. During the attempt to decipher the messages, other means of influencing the deciphering process is at work. Decoding takes place when the codes and signs are transformed into meanings understood by the audience. The encoding and decoding process work depending on the individual's sense of logic and inclination. Coding operates under a semiotic process, in which codes are operated as connotation and chains of meanings are created, linking one code to another (Grossberg, Wartella, Whitney, and Wise, 2006). For example, when watching a television program, audiences can easily identify with the 'code of gender marking'. One can easily distinguish whether a character is male or female using different signifiers, say height, body structure, hairstyle, dress codes, and so on. However, whichever meanings that audience apply to in the encoding process will not necessarily equalize the outcome resulted after the decoding process. The level of perception that occurs after the process may not be the same as the one before encoding because "codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical" (Hall, 2001, p.125). According to Ott and Mack (2010), "codes are never neutral in the sense that they are always representations of meaning, not meaning itself,

and they reflect the partiality inherent to any representation” (p.225). Taking a look into other factors that may influence an audience’s process of encoding and decoding is essential. According to Jensen and Rosengren (2009), the analysis on audience reception should include interpreting audience consumption of media text with reference to their socio-cultural surroundings and everyday life practices. Here, the audience’s position in the cultural community is regarded under the context of personal history, experiences, values and beliefs. This means to say that the result of audience reception analysis is dependent upon the relation of diverse elements including cultural practices and societal structures.

The meaning-making activity under the influence of individual consciousness of the surroundings involves the act of cognition. Television audiences are engaging their minds with the images viewed on the screen and will try to process the identifiable images while translating the interpretation in relation to reality largely determined by the presence of everyday life practices (Grossberg, Wartella, Whitney, and Wise, 2006). Audiences’ practice of translating media messages can sometimes becomes subversive of the producer’s intention, bending the intended meanings using the creativity of their engaging minds. Likewise, the process of understanding media messages is an often a contested practice in which people transform and reconstitute their opinions about the state of their personal socio-cultural conditions influenced by the existing conventions within social governance of different resources, capacity and limitations.

### 2.1.2 Hermeneutics

Hermeneutic is a theory which acknowledges that the direct experience of the audience with their surroundings and in their use of the media is significant to analyze their interpretations (Wilson, 1993). The audience's personal experience in the past helps to create fresh interpretation in new experiences or events in their present social surroundings. This process allows audience to bring in previous recollection or memories and cause them to interpret different media in a certain way. In his book, '*Watching television: Hermeneutics, reception and popular culture*' (1993), Wilson attempts to analyze and describe the relationships between television consumption and its audiences. In order to understand the relationship between text and audience under a hermeneutic perspective means we need to look into the chain of codes or semiotics which mediates audience familiarity and differences from experiences previously encountered and regenerates new meanings out of new media consumption. In other words, as Ihde puts it, "hermeneutics in its broadest sense means interpretation, and rules give shape to an interpretation" (Ihde, 1986, p.32).

One of Wilson's analyses involves the concept of 'identification'. Identification refers to ways in which we assume about roles and give existing attitudes towards elements in the program, such as the characters, settings or even the genre itself. According to Livingstone, identification also involves relating with not just what we see on screens or with our favoured character, but with our realm in everyday life practices from emotions to common practices (Livingstone, 1998). Audiences are subjected to identification in many aspects of media

consumption because personal experiences appropriate similarities and differences in reading texts. For example, audience identify favourably with a particular character on screen when he or she finds that they resemble each other in terms of personality or behaviour. On the other hand, when they encounter unfamiliar traits, audience read the text over and over to construct an understanding that brings new existence to the unfamiliarity. Often as a result, identification rapidly mediates what is familiar and common as logical and adaptable.

In a way, 'intertextuality' as discussed by Fiske (2001) also contributes to the concept of hermeneutics. According to Fiske, 'intertextuality' refers to the relationship between reading a text and drawing its meaning out to form cultural ways of identifying another text. His study on television introduces sub-elements in text that help audiences generate meanings for the viewers to be familiar with a specific type of knowledge, such as the categorization of genre and the use of thematic images. These groups of elements essentially organize intertextual readings that are central part of the social and cultural characteristics that needs to be investigated as well.

## **2.2 Japanese Cultural Influence in Asia**

Since the early 1990s, Japanese popular culture products have entered markets in Asian countries, particularly nations situated within East Asia (Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, and China) and South East Asia (Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines). Among these popular cultural products,

media products are especially well received as people are starting to favour Japanese animation, films, music and even television dramas. The reception of Japanese television dramas became a phenomenon when titles such as *Long Vacation* and *Love Generation* grew popular with Asian audiences (Leong, 2002). Thus, different aspects of the popularity have been examined from various theoretical perspectives such as translocal readings of Japanese dramas in different parts of Asia, gender and relationships, the use of digital technologies, and the means of circulation (Iwabuchi, 2004).

According to Iwabuchi (2002), Japanese cultural products can be distinguished by its “cultural odour”. For example, Iwabuchi characterizes the three C’s; consumer technologies, comics and cartoons, computer and video games as “culturally odourless” (p.27) products that do not produce Japanese elements which will cause the consumers to associate with the image of Japan. An example of a consumer technologies “odourless” product is based upon the everyday use of Sony Walkman. Iwabuchi argues that Sony Walkman does not project the image of “Japaneseness” (p.28) or suggests Japanese lifestyle to its consumers because using Walkman has been closely embedded into contemporary everyday life. Walkman has been consumed globally and the idea that Walkman originates from Japan does not appear relevant. Unlike Sony Walkman, Japanese drama as a cultural product produces “cultural odour” to its consumers due to the elements in the text which allow audiences to identify with distinctive Japanese traits. Even though the narratives in Japanese “trendy” dramas are placed in contemporary settings and modern lifestyle, the characters, language, values,

beliefs, and cultures that appear on screen imply Japanese features. Audiences who watch Japanese dramas can easily relate with Japanese cultural influence, by actively interpret text and images drawn from the ‘realistic’ depiction of Japan.

In Taiwan, Japanese cultures have influenced the everyday life of the locals. Japanese presences in Taiwan had become a familiar experience as media products, fashion, food, and languages have been already well received. Taiwan has been under the rule of Japan for fifty years up till 1945 which explains why Japanese cultures can be seen influencing Taiwanese cultures until this day and have played an enormous role in the growing trend among Taiwanese consumptions (Huang, 2011). In South Korea, strict rules were applied to ban Japanese cultures from entering the country since the independence from Japanese colonial rule in 1945. The ban on Japanese popular culture was lifted in 1998 and this granted access to Japanese cultural products and media programs to be consumed by the locals. However, even before the ban was lifted in 1998, other form of illegal methods such as piracy is being carried out to distribute Japanese materials into Korea (Lee, 2004). This applies to other parts around Asia. Asian audiences also gained easy access to sounds, images, animations, media, and information on Japanese popular culture within a few clicks over the Internet. In the case of Malaysia, the introduction of one policy influenced and changed the way people view Japan.

### 2.2.1 Look East Policy in Malaysia

The controversial history that Japan and several countries in East Asia and South East Asia shared often develops political tensions that affect the otherwise smooth bilateral relationships within the region, such as the case of Japan-South Korea and Japan-China relations. Japan and Malaysia on the other hand, is described as ‘friendly and close’ (Furuoka, 2007). Malaya was occupied by Japan from 1941 to 1945 and taken over back by the British after Japan had surrendered. It was not until August 31, 1957 that Malaya reached independence. Throughout Malaysia’s post-war development state, there were no clashes or tensions over the historical controversies which could have affected Japan-Malaysia relations. As such, this paved way for a new policy in Malaysia that could have possibly changed the way how most Malaysians look at Japan over the past thirty years.

East Asians cannot help but look more and more eastward, at Japan, as a model for their countries. Malaysia is perhaps less bashful and announced loudly that it intended to look East, to look at Japan mainly for inspiration and guidance.

Mahathir Mohamad (December 2002)

The quote above is taken from the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2002) when Mahathir Mohamad, former Prime Minister of Malaysia had given a speech to commemorate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Look East Policy. The Look East Policy was announced in 1982 by Prime Minister

Mahathir as part of an initiative for Malaysia to learn from Japan's (South Korea and Taiwan as well) experiences on national developments. According to Mahathir, Malaysia could learn from Japan in terms of its economic and social developments, particularly in the aspects of management skills, work ethics, technological know-hows, moral and discipline. The purpose of this policy is to learn good values from Japan and apply them in the local context. Since the policy was enacted, Malaysia and Japan have shared many cooperative events and projects as partners.

The initial project under this policy was to send and fund several Malaysian students over to educational institutes in Japan such as universities, colleges and training schools. The purpose of this initiative was to allow young Malaysians to learn good values throughout their educational experience in Japan and that their learning experience will be able to guide them in contributing to the nation's development. Up to 2009, Malaysian government had sent a total of 12,534 students for both study and training programs in Japan (Embassy of Japan in Malaysia, 2012). In response, Japanese government also sent Japanese teachers to Malaysia. In addition, to further promote the policy, the Institute of Strategic and International Studies Malaysia (ISIS, 2012) established Centre for Japan Studies (CJS) in January 1991. CJS promotes research, dialogue opportunities and supports the education about Japan. Similarly, The Japan Foundation Kuala Lumpur, a non-profit organization promotes the exchange of arts and cultural studies, while facilitating various cultural exchanges between Japan and Malaysia (The Japan Foundation Kuala Lumpur, 2012).

At present, the policy is still continuing while Malaysia and Japan is commemorating the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Look East Policy (Malaysia, Japan mark 30 years, 2012; Malaysia, Japan commemorate 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary, 2012). Malaysians too, are enjoying various events and activities organized by local organizations to promote Japanese cultures. One of the biggest Japanese events in Malaysia is the annual *Bon Odori* Festival held in July (Tourism Malaysia, 2012). The *Bon Odori* in Selangor was organized by Selangor State Ministry of Tourism with Japan Embassy in Malaysia, The Japan Club of Kuala Lumpur and the Japanese School of Kuala Lumpur. Meanwhile, the Consulate of Japan, Penang State Tourism Development and Culture together with the Bon Odori Committee organized a similar event in the state of Penang. Last year's 35<sup>th</sup> *Bon Odori* held in Selangor attracted approximately 35,000 visitors (Low, 2011). Each year, the *Bon Odori* Festival displayed a variety of Japanese and local cultural performances, dances and food stalls, attracting visitors to come clad in their *yukatas* (summer version of the *kimono*). Besides that, the Japan Foundation Kuala Lumpur (JFKL) and Golden Screen Cinemas (GSC) have organized a Japanese Film Festival that takes place once every year in Malaysia. For the duration of one week, an average of ten Japanese films are introduced and screened in GSC cinemas across Klang Valley (areas in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor) and Penang. All the films have subtitles in English and Malaysians can enjoy contemporary Japanese movies at an affordable price. This year marks the ninth year of this event.

Yamato, Krauss, Tamam, Hassan and Osman (2011) write about the engagements of ordinary Malaysians with Japanese popular cultures and point out that Japanese cultural products have become a part of everyday life and activities among young Malaysians who access to the products with their own effort. According to their research, many young Malaysians discovered Japanese media products through the Internet and that extensive circulation of Japanese popular culture products such as *anime*, *manga*, dramas, and films are available thanks to the online communities. However, the concept of free online distribution also had its limitations as young Malaysians who participated in their research were aware that not everything can be obtained from the Internet for free nor can it satisfy their consumption practices (Yamato, Krauss, Tamam, Hassan and Osman, 2011). For example, the releases of *manga* with translations over the Internet may be slower compared to the release in Japan and fans who are anticipating this will have to find their own way to obtain the copies. Besides that, fans that have developed a liking towards a certain product may also purchase the original quality item from Japan for collection. Many young Malaysians started to favour Japanese cultural products due to the continuous practice of consumption in their childhood ages, and the gradual exposure to watching Japanese media programs too, becomes a regular practice.

### 2.3 The Significance of Japanese Television Dramas in Asia

The popular culture sphere in relation to cultural economy integration has been discussed using the examples of Japanese television dramas primarily because “they generate most visible and stable consumer communities that facilitate audience research.” (Chua, 2008a, p.104). Chua adds that audiences of television dramas are stable in the sense that they reveal higher commitment in time spent watching dramas compared to listening to music that lasts a few minutes per song or watching films that lasts usually an hour and a half. Since television dramas are usually watched once per week and require the audience to tune in again the week after for the next episode, this practice also requires audience commitment for the narratives, plots or even characters portrayed. To have such effects on audiences, television dramas must be attractive for the audience to justify the need or motivation for continuous consumption. Therefore, to better understand why audiences like to watch dramas, the study of meaning interpretation and audience analysis are essential. A group of academic scholars have been studying on Japanese television dramas in order to facilitate comparisons between the production, circulation and consumption in Asian regions; Iwabuchi Koichi (2004) in Japan, Chua Beng Huat (2008b) in Singapore, Ubonrat Siriyuvasak (2004) in Thailand, Lisa Leung Yuk-ming (2004) in Hong Kong and Lee Dong Hoo (2004) in Korea.

The popularity of Japanese television drama had become increasingly apparent with the release of programs such as *Tokyo Love Story* (Fuji TV, 1992) and *Long Vacation* (Fuji TV, 1996), which attracted audiences from all over Asia,

notably Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, China, Singapore and Thailand (Leung, 2004). Iwabuchi (2008) suggests that Asian audiences of Japanese drama feel ‘culturally proximate’ and empathize with Japanese people. He adds that “Japan is perceived as similar but different, different but common” (p.131). He goes on to say that similar physical structures and cultural resemblance bring the audience to become more receptive towards Japanese dramas because it is easier to relate to oneself. Audience interviews conducted by scholars in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore reaffirm the significance of audiences identifying with cultural proximity and relatability in watching Japanese television drama (Iwabuchi, 2004). According to Chua (2008a), Singapore’s Mandarin Channel too, was able to employ television variety show formulas that adopted similar strategies from Taiwan, which in turn make them feel similar with the shows in Japan as well. However, Iwabuchi (2001) also argues that the notion of cultural proximity is not direct and should not be used in a straightforward manner to determine the reason for the popularity of Japanese television drama. The ways in which audiences identify with the media text in terms of cultural similarities or differences is necessary. Leung (2004) expresses that the ability of an audience to distinguish familiarity and differences in cultural elements enhances their readings and interpretation of the text, making the text more believable and relatable.

Many audiences in Asia tend to discover Japanese drama from other forms of Japanese popular culture such as *J-pop* (Japanese pop music), *anime* and *manga*. For example, many of the students I spoke to during field work admitted that they were led to watch Japanese drama because the drama was either an

adaptation from *anime* or *manga*, or it featured some of their favourite *J-pop* artists. The consumption of Japanese television dramas became a hit among its audiences, and this is mainly due to the way narratives have been packaged and presented. Japanese television dramas are said to be appealing because of its modern urban settings, stories of individuals in pursuit of success, struggles, hardships encountered in love, and how the challenges develop into achievements (Ko, 2004). Many Japanese dramas were produced by approaching modern style narrations that shed light on contemporary lifestyles in Japan. Such depiction of drama narratives have been regularly referred to as “trendy” dramas. In a way, audiences are attracted to such textual readings because it represents a way of life associated with their own everyday situation in the present setting (Iwabuchi, 2001).

### 2.3.1 On Watching Japanese Television Dramas

Most of the experiences in watching television drama seem to appear from complexities within the audiences’ means of deriving pleasures, enjoyment and emotions. Audiences get inspired from identifying with the narratives, characters, genres, plots, or even the settings in dramas. Audiences are particularly receptive to certain images or messages that they experience in watching dramas. In the case of Japanese television dramas, many fans recall their exposure to narratives and plots involving characters’ struggles and determination in accomplishing an objective, either in the form of achieving dreams or finishing a given work project.

Japanese characters are often embedded with a specific flaw in which they must overcome in order to achieve their dreams. This flaw is often structured as obstacles in working life, studies, romance, or even competitions, and the result of such challenges lead to the repeated messages for the audiences about not giving up, strive hard and stay optimistic in life. Audiences tend to refer to such messages in the text by reflecting them in their own similar experiences. For example, in the discussion about “*ganbaru*” message that Hong Kong audiences are receptive of, Leung (2004) discovers how audiences favour “life” messages in Japanese dramas. She adds that watching Japanese drama helps individual to cope with challenges in life and apply *ganbaru* spirit for achievement. The word *ganbaru* refers to a Japanese motto that motivates an individual to strive forward in an encouraging way. To put it simply, it means to “give one’s best and do not give up”.

One of the arguments raised about the consumption of Japanese dramas these days is that for the audiences to carry on consuming the media depends on the skills and knowledge audiences have acquired to access the media from different sources (Wong, 2010). The online community involving Japanese drama activities has given audiences new platforms to expand their viewing practices in favour of their convenience. In most interpretive practices, an audience produce different explanation than another audience. When audiences watch an episode, the messages embedded in the drama text rely on the viewer’s experience and knowledge of the world to derive meanings, and in turn describe them through sharing of opinions, predictions, plot ideas and other varieties (Baym, 2000).

Online forums for discussions and similar portals became a place for expressing personalization, characters, speculation, updates, spoilers, and sightings. In the mid-1990s when Japanese television dramas were recognized by audiences who favour the concept of “trendy” dramas, avid audiences sharing similar experiences who wanted to make narratives of their consumptions reaches to other fans online to express personal thoughts and feelings after watching (Hu, 2008).

By looking at television drama scripts and analyze how audiences are able to use their reflexive writing in expressing their interests on Japanese dramas, Kelly Hu (2008) explores the narrative reflexivity of online Chinese fans. Online Japanese drama websites offer a whole new dimension of drama viewing and serve as a digital platform for all drama fans to indulge. Hu’s analysis of Japanese drama fans reveals an association of narrative interpretation and therapeutic effects in which fans are receptive of deriving meanings in the drama, using its theme, genre, and characters, as well as the emotional scripts portrayed in particular scenes. The characteristics of therapeutic traits in Japanese dramas can be identified as inspiring, comforting, optimistic, and serve as a source of advice for people encountering similar situations. For instance, Hu gives an example from an online Chinese fan, Xiao Yeh, who says, “the magic of Japanese TV drama is amazing. When I came upon difficulties, the mottos from Japanese TV drama would emerge and make the decision for me” (p.118).

Transnational audiences of Japanese television dramas engage the media within an act of distancing and identifying with the characters in the narratives (Chua, 2008a). Audiences who watch imported television programs are able to

distant themselves from the culture originated from the production location. The relevance of the program is brought into the local perspective and audiences have to read the text within their own cultural framework (Chua, 2007). In other words, audiences make sense of the program by distinguishing the differences between the products of consumption along their own context of local cultural space. Additionally, such features offered through Japanese drama consumption may generate self-discovery that comes naturally to some audiences. It also means the emergence of cultural messages considered acceptable and that allow audiences to make connections with Japanese cultures along the local structure of social practices.

Chua (2008a) points out that a group of different audiences in the region differentiate themselves from different characteristics of active audiences along “capitalism-driven consumerist modernity” (p.107). The consumerist activities formed in contemporary lifestyle provided opportunities for media audiences to translate their consumption into acquisition of materials or ideal lifestyles for different purposes. According to Chua (2008a), capitalist development in East Asia other than Japan is a rather recent initiative that began in 1960s. Developments at the level of everyday life aim at catching up with modernity and capitalist lifestyle can be seen. Different Asian audiences see themselves gazing at other Asians, particularly Japan as the leading economically developed country in the region (Chua, 2008a). Asian audiences watching Japanese television drama in a sense are gazing the realistic depiction of Japan’s lifestyle presented in a form of fictitious narration. For example, as pointed out by Chua (2007), Singaporean avid

fans of Japanese television dramas became engrossed with sceneries and locations of their favourite drama scenes. The popularity of such response allowed local tour companies to set up tour packages to “trendy” drama sites in Tokyo specially designed for drama enthusiast. By visiting places they have seen on television screens, they are able to re-live the sense of *déjà-vu*, and experience familiarity all over again guided by the reminiscence of codes in narratives and characters.

In previous studies, the intertextuality of Japanese television drama is centered on Asian values and cultural proximity. Researchers have identified audiences of Japanese television dramas as cultural agents who relate themselves with Japan under the context of Asian distinctiveness. Iwabuchi (2002) introduces the idea of “nostalgia” or the sense of belonging that Hong Kong viewers feel when watching Japanese television dramas. Later, he reasserts the idea of “cultural proximity” in relation to the cultural identification that Asian viewers construct by associating with Japanese dramas and Japan modernity (Iwabuchi, 2004). Similarly, Leung (2002) introduces several aspects of identification among audiences such as trendiness and romance in Hong Kong women’s readings in Japanese television dramas. Leung (2004) then illustrates how Hong Kong audiences are able to translate the message of *ganbaru* (to strive and work hard), which is found in Japanese television dramas, into their local everyday practices. On a note, characteristics of what is considered to be relevant for cultural proximity in Malaysia may be different than that of Taiwan, Hong Kong or even South Korea where previous studies have discussed.

There is no doubt that Japanese popular cultures have greatly influenced the markets across Asia. Many literatures have significantly proved that transnational media can transcend border and be interpreted across different cultures. However, looking at previous discussions about Japanese drama consumption in Asian countries, audiences that are being represented are dominantly homogeneous, meaning that we read about Japanese media being consumed by mainly by Taiwanese, South Koreans and Hong Kong audiences as opposed to multicultural communities within Malaysia, Thailand or Indonesia. Many of the literatures focus on East Asian audience reception because of the ‘cultural proximity’ paradigm and historical significance that exists within that region. The tendency of aligning East Asian audiences based on the idea of closeness in space and culture raises questions about the implications of audience interpretation for South East Asian audiences. Unlike most of the East Asian countries which audience reception of Japanese television drama has been discussed, the settings in South East Asia tend to be more diverse and multicultural; hence, exploring the relationship between the socio-cultural background and foreign media readings is significant. In the next chapter, I will discuss the methodology of this research by presenting the process of data collection and outlining theoretical methods that assist in the completion this research.

## **CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research applies qualitative approach to analyze meanings produced by audiences who watch Japanese television drama. Two aspects of audience reception analysis are examined. Firstly, as previously mentioned, the reception among Malaysian university students who have experiences in watching Japanese dramas is explored under the assumption that each student produces different meanings out of media message and text. This helps to understand the dynamic interpretation processes that each student produces as they relate their viewing experience with knowledge they already possess. The meanings that Malaysian students generate are divided into themes and cultural elements based on the examples of Japanese television drama that the students refer to. Secondly, the attitudes of the students towards cultural differences between Malaysia and Japan that are resulted from their interpretation and sense-making of Japanese drama consumption are examined. In this aspect, it is important to take into account the local settings because various elements rooted in everyday life context generate ideological assumptions by the respondents on matters regarding foreign identity, culture and society.

### **3.1 Data Collection**

University students are chosen to represent the subjects in this research because of the following reasons. University is a place where students learn more about the diverse aspects of the social reality based on their choices of subjects in

their respective majors. They actively interpret new learning materials and bring new meanings to popular trends. At this level, students become particularly receptive to the cultural trends in the surroundings and are willing to explore on the use of media. In addition, they are perceived to be in the process of determining their future path and jobs in the society upon graduation. At this point, students tend to pay attention to the ‘reality’ presented in media programs in order to gain inspiration and new ideas while searching for their future directions and dreams.

The primary source of data in this research came from focus group discussions. Focus groups are significant for my research findings because it helps to promote active discussions among respondents who have different opinions and interpretation about Japanese dramas. Assuming different respondents have different ideas of interpreting Japanese dramas as well as consuming experiences; focus groups allow participants to express their understanding and communicate their behaviours in an engaging manner. Focus groups also help respondents to feel more relaxed and open to communication with groups of people who share similar interests with themselves (Lunt & Livingstone, 2009). The focus group discussion questions were designed to explore the significance of students’ interpretation in 3 different areas:

1. Overall impression of Japanese TV dramas and its content
2. Respondents’ narratives on what it means to watch Japanese TV dramas and everyday life around it
3. Evaluation of personal feelings of watching Japanese television dramas

In the context of focus group discussions, questions were designed so that they do not predetermine answers from the respondents, but to allow unexpected topics to be addressed (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996). The structure of open-ended question and question phrasing allows respondents to discuss about their consumption of Japanese television drama both directly or indirectly in a manner that tells stories of their viewing experiences in the cultural discourse, depending on what theme they value (Grossberg, Wartella, Whitney, and Wise, 2006). This structure also provides opportunity for the facilitator to further pursue clarification from the respondents who answer in a way that opens prospect for a wider range of opinions. During the focus group discussions, I have encouraged the use of examples from various drama titles that respondents have personally watched as this helps to generate more open responses guided by their personal recollection of images and feelings. Throughout the discussion, notes on behavioural characteristics and the overall response of the respondents were taken.

Besides focus group discussions, an online questionnaire was also circulated to both participants and non-participants from the focus group discussions. The purpose of the online questionnaire is to refer to the pattern of consumption among the students and look at the types of Japanese dramas from 2005 to 2010 that they have watched. Research on Japanese drama reception has been declining since mid-2000 and the examples of dramas from 2005 to 2010 helps to examine the characteristic of drama still considered popular among the respondents. On the other hand, secondary data consist of those from existing

literatures; journals, articles, books, and related print materials to grasp the theoretical analysis and works of other related media and culture scholars.

In this research, I draw on qualitative data from a total of five focus group discussions and one conversational activity with students from two different universities to assess on the distinctive features out of their sense making in watching Japanese television dramas. The respondents who participated in this research are students from Multimedia University, Cyberjaya campus and University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. I participated as the facilitator in all discussions.

### **3.2 Multimedia University, Cyberjaya (MMU)**

To recruit interested participants for this topic, I approached a student activity group called Japanese Cultural Society (JCS). JCS is an official student group in MMU that actively organizes and promotes Japanese cultures and activities on campus. The group also participates in outside Japanese activities and collaborates with various Japanese groups for public events. One of the major events that JCS organizes on a yearly basis is the Japanese Cultural Festival, which highlights Japanese cultures based on exhibition, food fairs, performances, and participatory cultural classes. I have met with three representatives from JCS before I began with the primary data collection to introduce this research and to seek permission formally in order to approach the committees and members of the group. With the approval and assistance from JCS, two types of recruitment methods were used. First, JCS committees were informed of my research project

during their meetings and details of interested participants who are willing to join the focus group were noted down. Similarly, an announcement was posted on the JCS committee Facebook event page to invite prospective participants. Second, an announcement was posted on the university online bulletin board on 22 July 2011 for a period of one week under JCS supported activity as only student activities or clubs can have permission to post on the bulletin board. The central criteria for the participating students is that he or she must have experiences in watching Japanese drama, particularly more recent titles from 2005 to 2010.

After collecting the details of the interested participants, I emailed them individually and distributed the questionnaire link. A total of sixteen respondents participated in the discussions which took place over the span of three days. The focus group discussions with MMU students were divided into two groups. The first discussion took place on 9 August 2011 and consists of six female and one male student. Languages used during this discussion were English with occasional Malay. A second focus group was conducted on 11 August 2011 with six female and three male students, including one international student from Nigeria, whose consumption of Japanese dramas and cultures had been influenced by JCS and several local fans. Besides these two groups, a conversation in Mandarin between two friends who are fans of Japanese popular culture and dramas took place on 10 August 2011. All discussions were held in MMU classroom with bookings acquired beforehand. In the case of MMU, the discussions took place at night as all participants mutually agreed that they have more time during the evening after classes are over. The discussions were recorded with the consent of the

respondents and lasted on average between one to one and a half hours. I returned to the university a week later for an informal lunch and dinner with twelve of the participants in three separate occasions. Additionally, one student showed me her entertainment program collections in her computer files which include English, Japanese and Korean dramas, variety shows, and movies.

### **Profiles of the Respondents (Multimedia University, Cyberjaya)**

**Table 3.1: Focus Group 1 (9<sup>th</sup> August 2011)**

<b>Name*</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Faculty/Year</b>
Kristin	19	Female	Chinese	Management (Yr 1)
Zakri	24	Male	Malay	Information Technology (Yr 1)
Aisha	17	Female	Malay	Creative Multimedia (Foundation)
Jia Jun**	19	Female	Chinese	Engineering (Yr 1)
Siti	18	Female	Malay	Information Technology (Foundation)
Sara	22	Female	Malay	Creative Multimedia (Foundation)
Azlina	21	Female	Malay	Information Technology (Yr 1)

\*Pseudonym \*\*Participated in all 3 discussions

Languages used in discussion: English with occasional Malay

**Table 3.2: Conversational Discussion (10<sup>th</sup> August 2011)**

<b>Name*</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Major/Year</b>
Jia Jun**	19	Female	Chinese	Engineering (Yr 1)
Lin Wen	19	Female	Chinese	Information Technology (Yr 1)

\*Pseudonym \*\*Participated in all 3 discussions

Languages used in discussion: Mandarin with occasional English.

**Table 3.3: Focus Group 2 (11<sup>th</sup> August 2011)**

<b>Name*</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Major/Year</b>
Hasmah	24	Female	Malay	Information Technology (Yr 1)
Sofiah	21	Female	Malay	Information Technology (Yr 1)
Azrin	23	Female	Malay	Information Technology (Yr 1)
Elisya	21	Female	Malay	Information Technology (Yr 1)
Nurul	21	Female	Malay	Information Technology (Yr 1)
Sam	20	Male	Chinese	Engineering (Yr 2)
Azhari	23	Male	Malay	Information Technology (Yr 2)
Jia Jun**	19	Female	Chinese	Engineering (Yr 1)
Ali***	22	Male	Nigerian	Information Technology (Yr 3)

\*Pseudonym \*\*Participated in all 3 discussions \*\*\*International student

Languages used in discussion: English with occasional Malay

### **3.3 University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur (UM)**

A different approach had been used to recruit students for focus groups. Students in University of Malaya (UM) were recruited from the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics with the referral from a professor, who is the senior lecturer and coordinator of the department. I met up with the professor through an appointment to introduce this research and to seek permission to conduct focus group discussions with students majoring in Japanese language. An announcement was made in three classes (Year 1, 2 and 3) and a total of thirty seven students have shown their interests. Out of thirty seven, twenty one participated in the focus group discussion. All students share the same major in Japanese language. The focus group discussions were divided into three groups; Year 1 with four female and one male student, Year 2 with eight female students and Year 3 with seven female and one male student. All group discussions were conducted in English with the exception of Year 1 students, which Mandarin is used occasionally. In addition, all discussions were audio taped as well and lasted on average of one and a half hours. Unlike the discussions that were held in MMU, all three groups were interviewed at daytime in gazebos and hallway spaces as the classrooms were used for lectures. The same online questionnaire was distributed electronically to the students.

**Profiles of the Respondents (University of Malaya)**

**Table 3.4: Focus Group 3 (21<sup>st</sup> September 2011)**

<b>Name*</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Major/Year</b>
Yi Ting	20	Female	Chinese	Japanese (Yr 1)
Farah	19	Female	Malay	Japanese (Yr 1)
Chun Hong	19	Male	Chinese	Japanese (Yr 1)
Mazlinah	20	Female	Malay	Japanese (Yr 1)
Min Lee	20	Female	Chinese	Japanese (Yr 1)

\*Pseudonym

Languages used in discussion: English with occasional Mandarin

**Table 3.5: Focus Group 4 (28<sup>st</sup> September 2011)**

<b>Name*</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Major/Year</b>
Rina	19	Female	Malay	Japanese (Yr 2)
Chin Yee	20	Female	Chinese	Japanese (Yr 2)
Caroline	20	Female	Chinese	Japanese (Yr 2)
Siew Wen	21	Female	Chinese	Japanese (Yr 2)
Voon Hui	21	Female	Chinese	Japanese (Yr 2)
Min Lim	21	Female	Chinese	Japanese (Yr 2)
Voon Cheng	21	Female	Chinese	Japanese (Yr 2)
Mun Lee	21	Female	Chinese	Japanese (Yr 2)

\*Pseudonym

Language used in discussion: English

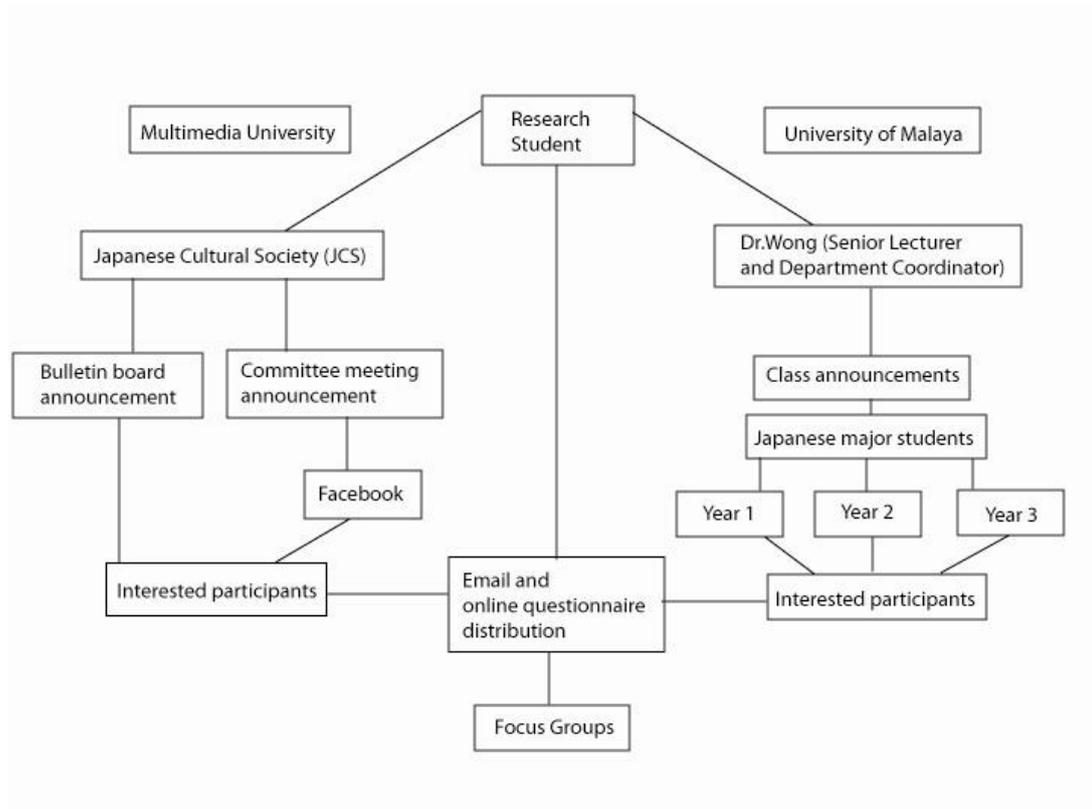
**Table 3.6: Focus Group 5 (21<sup>st</sup> September 2011)**

<b>Name*</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Major/Year</b>
Li Xin	23	Female	Chinese	Japanese (Yr 3)
Ying Ying	22	Female	Chinese	Japanese (Yr 3)
Hooi Ting	22	Female	Chinese	Japanese (Yr 3)
Sin Yee	22	Female	Chinese	Japanese (Yr 3)
Siu Jen	22	Female	Chinese	Japanese (Yr 3)
Wen Li	23	Female	Chinese	Japanese (Yr 3)
Jo Ann	23	Female	Chinese	Japanese (Yr 3)
Razak	23	Male	Malay	Japanese (Yr 3)

\*Pseudonym

Language used in discussion: English

**Figure 3.1: Primary Data Collection**



### 3.4 Data Transcription and Analysis

The recorded audio were transcribed and categorized according to the respective focus groups. Within each transcribed data, themes were categorized individually with the purpose of identifying characteristics that would generate dominant themes. Once every audiotape have been transcribed and coded according to themes, the relationship between the audiences' narratives and the variability of cultural frameworks were analyzed. Based on Hall's encoding and decoding model, Seiter (2004) points out that audiences make sense of television programs based on their individual everyday experiences. Hence, exploring the

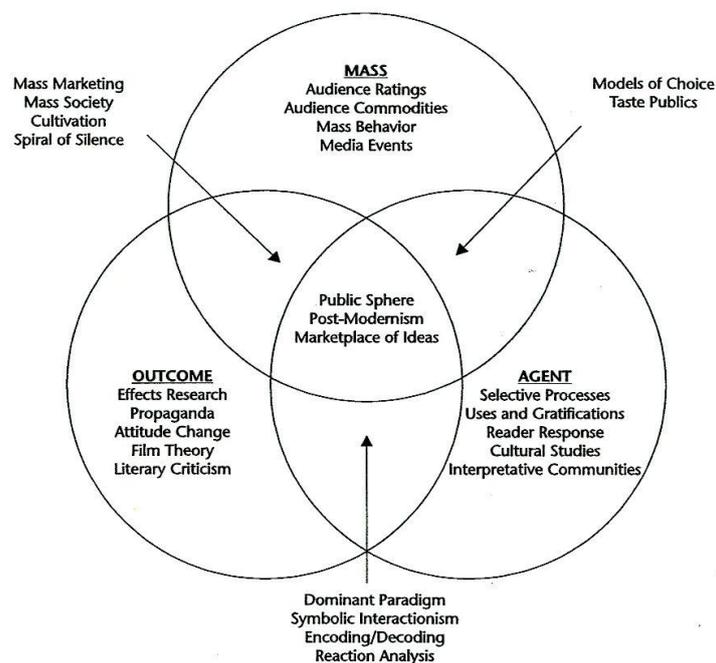
evaluation of personal experiences of watching television drama generate stories and values audiences produce in making sense out of their media consumption.

The analysis of this study employs social exploratory research, which deals with how Malaysian students give meaning to their Japanese drama viewing experience. It is also my interest to study on the impressions that local students have on Japan and how far knowledge they currently possess on Japan generates perception about Japanese dramas and consequently, their feelings about Japanese cultures. In other words, this research looks at ‘audience-as-agent’ of cultural interpretations by taking into consideration the selective tendencies of the respondents when interpreting the text and recognizing the socio-cultural influences that determine their social interpretation (Webster, 2009).

As Webster (2009) points out, “audience-as-agent” (p.81) refers to the way of studying the audiences as “free” agents who consume the media that they want and developing their own interpretation of the texts. In other words, audience has control over the media and is open to make meanings out of their consumption. Webster’s model as illustrated in Figure 3.2 points out the three basic methods in studying audience. Under “agent”, the approach represents the voices of the audience and seeks out what they do with the media. However, it does not mean that “audience-as-agent” are positioning themselves in control over the media without external influences. Even though audience may seem to be able to act “freely” with media of their choices, their actions are based upon institutional structures and social surroundings that help them shape their decision (Hall, 2001; Webster, 2009). Despite having groups from two different universities, my

intention in this analysis is not to make a distinction out of the different institutions, but rather to shed light on the audiences' "selective processes" that Webster (2009) mentions as well as to look at how different foundations influence their consumption of Japanese dramas.

**Figure 3.2: Concepts of the Audience (Webster, 2009)**



The theoretical outline guiding this audience reception analysis is the study of hermeneutics explored by Wilson (1993). According to Wilson, hermeneutic theory recognizes that audiences watching television produce identification with the images that appears familiar and construct hypothetical ideas to negotiate with the unfamiliar features of the program. Wilson (1993) argues that "the processes of identification in viewing a program are always centred around sense-making" (p.86). In his view of hermeneutic theory,

audiences are actively engaging in a variety of reading practices to construct sense including hypothesizing of future outcomes, recollection of past memories, and reworking differences into similarities. The approach using hermeneutics helps to develop a detailed textual description of actual audience account based on the identification produced by audiences who share a lived experience in this phenomena and find meaning in watching television (Wilson, 1993).

Relating the association between media consumption and everyday life is essential in the analysis of this research as well. In understanding this relationship, everyday life is projected as the domain in which various socio-cultural elements work around it (Kim, 2008). More importantly, according to Kim (2008), it becomes necessary to look at the relationship of audience and media in the context of everyday life because characteristics of a society and how these characteristics are transformed were shaped by the ordinary experiences and actions – how messages are received or rejected, questioned and acknowledged, and critically reflected in practices of everyday life. It is also equally important to look at what types of attitudes audiences developed towards media and how these attitudes work with their expressions because people tend to take for granted experiences that have become so mundane and ordinary that we often overlook how simple things can potentially construct a new thought.

From the data generated through fieldwork, I seek to present the reception by Malaysian students based on the following perspectives; (1) identification with Japanese television dramas, (2) audience narratives based on personal socio-cultural experience, (3) the cultural limits of distance and space, and (4)

translation of media texts into cultural values. This study argues that the success of Japanese television drama reception among Malaysian students depends on the attitude constructed by the audience towards media text. Additionally, the nature of audience attitude is influenced by the context of everyday engagements within the local social and cultural environment. The following chapters discuss the findings of the research by looking at the types of characteristics in the meanings that respondents produce from watching Japanese dramas.

## CHAPTER 4. MAKING SENSE OF JAPANESE TELEVISION DRAMA

This chapter looks at the ways in which Malaysian students as audiences produce meanings out of Japanese dramas. The respondents who participated in the discussions demonstrate many levels of identification with Japanese dramas. Even though they do not seem to have any existing attachment to Japan, the respondents are able to embrace Japanese dramas without any problem in comprehending. People in Malaysia grew up being exposed to the presences of Japanese cultures including food, movies, animation, comic books, drama, and fashion. Living in a multicultural society, the respondents pointed out that their experiences with Japanese culture began during their childhood. Audiences have been able to understand Japanese programs thanks to the subtitles in Bahasa Malaysia which accompanied all the Japanese programs aired on television. Many respondents have memories of watching Japanese television dramas in local television channels during late 1990s. One respondent commented about her initial experience in watching Japanese drama during her childhood.

“I started liking Japanese things when I was six. That time it was *Beach Boys* that I watched because my sister liked the actor and was watching, so I watched along with her. I was in Johor back then and it was shown on TV. I didn’t even know about the title or anything about the drama back then” (Lin Wen, MMU).

Similarly, many respondents claimed to have watched titles such as *Great Teacher Onizuka* (GTO) (Fuji TV, 1998), and *Beautiful Life* (TBS, 2000). A few also recalled to have been influenced by family members such as Min Lim (UM) who watched *GTO* with her brother and Azlina (MMU) who received all her drama materials from her sister who downloaded them. Also, some respondents said to have started watching Japanese drama because they were ‘led’ towards drama by other forms of Japanese popular culture. Jia Jun (MMU) remembered her looking for dramas because her favorite *J-pop* idols acted inside the drama. Farah (UM) initially watches *Naruto* (TV animation; TV Tokyo, 2002) and began searching for other animations when she discovered *Hana Yori Dango* (TV animation; ABC 1996 and TV drama; TBS, 2005). This pattern suggested that Japanese cultures and media, in particular, have been incorporated into their daily lives, rather than just a ‘passing fad’ (Yamato, Krauss, Tamam, Hassan, & Osman, 2011). What do they see in Japanese drama that made them so memorable? Thus, I shall look at some of the drama elements which attract audiences and how the respondents associate textual messages when making sense of their viewing experiences.

#### **4.1 Watching Dramas as Entertainment**

Fictitious media program is often associated with leisure. It is an activity for enjoyment and relaxation. Audiences seek media programs often when they do not have much to do and feel like being entertained without having to worry much about everyday life. We could be labelled as losing track of time for enjoying and

forgetting about the need to focus on temporal issues that we have to deal with in everyday life (Sherry, 2009). The respondents also tend to look at watching television programs as a time shared with their loved ones and families. One respondent described rather comically about watching Japanese dramas with her family as follows:

“For me, it’s more like an entertainment. In my house, the television is always on from day to night. My parents are like a garbage bin that receives everything. So they would watch Japanese drama too. Usually we would watch together. I’m the type who likes to talk and explain things so when my mom and dad cannot understand what’s happening in the drama, I would explain to them. It’s kind of like a sharing moment for me” (Yi Ting, UM).

Indeed watching Japanese drama offers the luxury of doing nothing but just to sit back, relax and enjoy what’s on the screen. On a casual level, there may seem to be not much of an interactive activity going on between the audience and the media text. Fiske (1992) describes that the acquisition of ‘popular cultural capital’ will not be able to move an audience towards a higher socio-economic. Instead, the benefit appears in the form of pleasure and enjoyment. This raises a question: for Malaysian students who identified with Japanese television drama, would it be accurate to depict their viewing as a mere form of entertainment? Would it be reasonable to say that dramas offer nothing more than good entertainment? Quite the contrary, I would argue that media as mere entertainment is problematic because this would make the audience a passive receiver who is

unreceptive towards their viewing experience and not capable of arguing with the outcome of the media. In the discussions, respondents have invested their time and effort to watch every episode of the drama that they like. Their interest in Japanese dramas is a result of becoming actively and emotionally attached to the drama narrative, themes and characters (Chua, 2008a).

To illustrate that watching dramas generates functional meanings to audiences, we need to take into consideration the socio-cultural state in which the audience is positioned (Ang, 1985). In this study, all the respondents are more or less exposed to Japanese cultures promoted by local institutions. Students from MMU are involved in the Japanese Cultural Society (JCS) events and activities while students from UM are taking Japanese language as their major. Many respondents see Japanese dramas as a guide to their current role in the university. Several respondents from UM acknowledged their viewing not only as entertainment but also as educational values which could justify their experiences. They also regarded their viewing practices as a learning method. For example, most of the UM respondents mutually agreed that watching Japanese dramas help to improve their language skills such as the following examples:

“I can do my *fukushuu* (revision) while watching” (Sin Lee, UM).

“I start to watch Japanese drama to improve my Japanese especially in listening...It increases my interest in Japanese language” (Caroline, UM).

“Sometimes I watch drama without subtitles to test my level. I found out that yes I can understand” (Voon Hui, UM).

“At first it (watching Japanese drama) was just a pastime because my brother watches it. I relied on subtitles back then and did not even know it was a Japanese drama. After I learn Japanese language, it became a learning method for me” (Ying Ting, UM).

Watching Japanese dramas functions as an educational tool for their studies. Although some students found watching Japanese drama as an ideal learning tool, others may have a different approach. For example:

“Some of the dramas I watched came from manga, most which caters teenager audiences. For example, *LIFE*, *Iryu*, *Liar Game* and so on. I like story telling because I want to create a game. I’m doing SEGD (software engineering and games design). Maybe I will write some stories in the future. So Japanese drama is a good reference for me” (Hafiz, MMU).

One student from UM pointed out that she became fascinated with the usage of “*keigo*” in Japanese dramas, which is the honorific language in Japan and is considered difficult even for local Japanese to master.

“The most impressive thing is *keigo*. Not sure which drama but I think one of the ‘*jidai geki*’ (period drama usually set in historical Japan such as the Edo period). They (the characters) are using *keigo* to quarrel and it’s a very

high standard form of argument that I have experienced. It's a very careful usage of words and this is what I noticed after I have learned Japanese" (Li Xin, UM).

Students who watch Japanese drama interpret the text meanings and may find elements suitable for practical use in the local society. Individuals make sense of the most creative ways media use can support their personal objectives when facing challenges in everyday life. Watching Japanese television drama cannot be simplified as just entertainment because an audience develops tendency of being structural and analytical towards their media experiences. For the students, watching Japanese drama is similar to conducting an experiment; frequently asking questions, making hypothesis and negotiating with the results. One of the reasons why watching dramas can become enjoyable is because the students receive or 'get' a cultural message to negotiate with the text itself. In other words, watching dramas is a form of productivity that relies on the audience identification with the social world to make it functional. For instance, ideas that appeal to the audience for watching drama derived from his or her life histories, what they are currently engaged with, tastes, and what they want to pursue (Ang, 1985). In fact, audiences make great effort to continuously watch a drama episode by episode after they began to watch it, so there must be elements that keeps them in active consumption. Audiences identify with not only the familiar elements in drama, but also the 'foreign' characteristics because they derive pleasures from "looking at a different world" (Chua, 2008b, p.197). Japanese drama is a portal to

view the lives of the Japanese, which the respondents can contrast with their local society.

## **4.2 The Significance of Viewing Pleasure**

Watching a drama can be characterized as a visual media experience. Visual elements in a drama usually consist of the actors, actresses, locations, sceneries, clothes, food, furniture, vehicle, everyday items, technological gadgets, and more. Audience's visual experience of watching drama is rather intangible. Audiences have strong sense of awareness on the images that they see. More specifically, they can be critical with the visual quality of the drama, ranging from the physical appearance of the characters, the clothes that they are wearing, to the locations of the scenes. What they refer to as physically attractive may differ among individuals, as tastes are unique and subjective. The significance of visual pleasure is discussed here because many respondents expressed about their identification with different types of drama characteristics that derived from their own viewing pleasure. Viewing pleasure is derived from the audience desire of identifying with the familiar and foreign aspects of an imported program (Chua, 2008a).

### 4.2.1 Characters

Many of the respondents seemed to be rather receptive of the appearance of Japanese actors or actresses in dramas. In fact, when I raised a question on what was memorable about Japanese drama, Nurul (MMU) enthusiastically

responded “obviously the guys”. At a glance, Nurul’s immediate reply seemed quite humorous. I observed the reactions of the other members in the focus group. Having been amused, many of them burst out to laugh. Nurul added that she would usually search or ‘wiki’ the drama to find information on the actors before deciding if she wants to watch it. If their appearances are up to her taste or if she finds them attractive to her standard, she will watch the drama. While Nurul tries to explain her preference, I see a few of the female participants within the group nodding their head gently, signifying that they can relate to Nurul’s behavior. Ironic as it may sound, the respondents are laughing about the matter not because they cannot comprehend Nurul’s way of prioritizing physical appearance, but because they too, realized that they were inclined to do the same. It is considered natural for the respondents to do some research on the casts of the drama they are about to watch.

Although respondents tend to be discreet about their interpretation of physical appearance of the drama casts, they are not reluctant to judge whether a character’s appearance in the drama is worthy being the lead character. Sara (MMU) from focus group one, who referred to a drama called *Yamato Nadeshiko Shichi Henge* also known as *Perfect Girl Evolution* (TBS, 2010), pointed out that the hero of the drama is good looking. Hafiz, from the same group inserted a comment on how he disliked the drama although he enjoys the *manga*, particularly because he disapproved of how the female lead appeared on the screen. Of course, this is to be expected because every individual constructed his or her own definition of ‘beauty.’ Chin Yee (UM) expressed that she was very

happy to be able to watch good looking male characters in Japanese dramas and claimed that she would probably be consuming Japanese dramas for the rest of her life. Even though it is the producers who make decisions about the casts in the drama, it is ultimately the audiences who tells if they can relate to the way characters are casted.

#### 4.2.2 Originality

Japanese drama is sometimes re-made, often, in different formats or different casts. The overall theme and settings of the drama would remain similar to the original. For example, a Japanese drama titled *Hanazakari no Kimitachi e* (Fuji TV, 2007) or *Hana Kimi* in short received another remake that came out in July 2011. This drama was adapted from the original *manga* by Hisaya Nakajo. The remake is similar to the original in all aspects except for the casts and theme songs. Some respondents find this equivalence problematic. Chin Yee (UM) expressed her frustration toward the remake of *Hana Kimi* specifically because the new casts did not match up to her standard she initially established when watching the first version. Jia Jun (MMU) believes that the recent remakes of Japanese dramas are produced for the purpose of popularizing new actors or actresses that have yet to be well known among viewers.

On the other hand, the respondents also seem to be rather sensitive about originality of the program in different cultural productions. For example, a Korean drama titled *You're Beautiful* (SBS, 2009) was remade into Japanese, entitled *Ikemen Desu Ne* which began airing on July 2011. This remake by TBS was

possible because the original Korean version received tremendous positive responses from Japanese viewers when it made across Japan. This anticipated remake was given negative feedbacks by drama fans outside Japan after the Japanese casts were revealed. Many criticized that the appearances of the actors do not live up to the standards compared to the Korean version (jaychieh0208, 2011). Hafiz (MMU) argued that the problem lies in the fact that the Japanese version adapted every bit of the Korean version and had no Japanese elements in the drama. He added that Japanese elements would have made the drama less comparable and hence, reflects some originality. Following this, Jia Jun argued that even if the Japanese version is different, audiences would still tend to compare, except this time, they would compare the differences between the characteristics in each version instead of similarities. With frustration, she pointed out that “the only problem now is that it is exactly the same”. Watching drama one after another moves an audience from a text to another textual reference and so, the audience develops the habit of constantly comparing a new text under the influence of a previous text (Allen, 2001).

Respondents may react critically over the originality of the drama, but what is fascinating with regards to such reaction is that, ironically, they seem to dislike the remake drama not because it copied the former, but because the remake is assumed to be lack of creativity and originality in terms of ideas and presentation. The respondents find it difficult to like a remake version of a drama because they have difficulty in acknowledging the standard of production and the aesthetic quality. Not only had the remake version reproduces the story in familiar

settings, but also the scenes had become so similar and repetitive. The difference lies within the audience's comparison between the technical aspects of each version, such as picture quality and artistic value (Coward, 2010). It is difficult to construct any new meanings when watching the remake version because the audience's interpretation of the program has been already predetermined by memories from watching the original version.

Since the respondents are highly attracted to the visual appearances of the text, the aesthetic values presented in Japanese dramas seem to be a significant characteristic for viewing pleasure. There is more to understand about the significance of other elements in Japanese dramas such as cultural values or messages. Watching Japanese drama is cited as a window to the lives of the Japanese people and its society in everyday basis. The students get involved in watching Japanese dramas because they can 'participate' in a Japanese 'reality' that is different from their own local culture.

### **4.3 A Different Sense of Reality**

“When I watch Japanese dramas in the beginning, it was like entering a new world. Looks different from our world” (Razak, UM).

The respondents identified with Japanese dramas as a fresh perspective of reality, another one that exists across international borders within Asia. Japanese lifestyles and society culture portrayed in Japanese dramas are different from the reality in Malaysia. When audiences look at the characters, backgrounds,

materials, and cultural behaviours in Japanese dramas, they sense a different feeling than what they had experienced locally. Ang (1985) points out that the nature of the content of stories reflects ‘realistic illusion’, which may give the impression that events on screen happen in actual world.

Chun Hong (UM) praised Japanese drama for their successful portrayal of realistic social problems. Quoting the drama *Last Friends* (Fuji TV, 2008) as an example, he referred to the boldness of Japanese drama in portraying sensitive societal issues such as domestic violence and homosexuality. Yi Ting (UM) also pointed out that Japanese dramas were not reserved when it comes to portraying matters regarding life and death. Japanese dramas nowadays mainly centred around themes related to social life and problems actually existing in Japanese society. Many Japanese dramas produced over the recent years have projected the issues that Japanese society is facing such as the aging society, gender equality, family issues and health problems. One respondent referred to how deeply each episode of a Japanese drama developed social issue and characters who try to tackle the problem. She pointed out that the originality of the plot is what makes Japanese dramas attractive.

“Each plot or story has its own problems, issues and ways to be critical and calm. And then the next issue came after one had been solved. It seems that in each episode, there are different problems. So, I don’t feel so sick of watching it. Each episode exceeded my expectations in terms of the plot” (Elisya, MMU).

Below are some of the examples of Japanese dramas that the respondents referred to as a realistic portrayal of issues in the society.

**Table 4.1: Examples of Japanese Dramas based on Societal Issues**

Title	Network/Year	Theme/Subjects
One Litre of Tears	Fuji TV, 2005	Incurable disease, life and death, family conflicts
The Story of Yamada Taro	TBS, 2007	Poverty, family conflicts
LIFE	Fuji TV, 2007	School life, bullying, depression, suicide, rape
Last Friends	Fuji TV, 2008	Domestic violence, homosexuality, gender identity disorder
Ninkyo Helper	Fuji TV, 2009	Aging society, dementia, abandonment, rejection

Note: Refer to Appendix B for Japanese drama titles mentioned in this study.

The respondents engaged with the tragic social problems presented in the media text by emphasizing and emotionally relate to the issues. Dramas with such portrayal of society problems are often projected in a more serious manner. In this case, the respondents reacted to the storyline and how the characters in Japanese dramas acted upon a situation by positioning themselves as the characters and evaluate the appropriateness of the actions taken in responding to the issues. They tend to instinctively question their own reaction towards a social issue and assess the methods that they think is suitable for handling such issue. Therefore, it is

common to see that audience depended on their own consciousness about human values when making sense out of the program that they are watching.

Many respondents tend to be conscious about how they view the characteristics between themselves and the protagonist in Japanese dramas. The achievements of the protagonist became their source of inspiration and relief and they see themselves being able to embody the success in reality. When watching a protagonist encountering an obstacle in his or her life, audiences sympathize with the situation because they can relate to their own existing challenges in everyday life. During the discussion with the respondents, I found that the respondents tended to rely on the personal side of their life as they relate to the characters and the issues presented in the drama narratives. Here's an example of how a respondent positioned herself in relation to the character's personality in a drama.

“I felt that the main character has an easygoing personality. Anything is okay for her. She's not necessarily good in everything, but because of her hard work and determination, she'll do what she wants to do, and she will try until she succeeds. She became an international flight attendant in the end. That's how it influences me and for matters I'm not good at. If I put an effort, I can do it. I'm not very good in anything. The first time I chose to study IT (Information Technology), I didn't even know how to use a computer. Whenever there's pop ups, I get surprised and don't know how to react. So I know no matter what, you'll have to put effort. You can be good in something just like that” (Nurul, MMU).

Based on the comment above, Nurul was referring to the drama *Attention Please* (Fuji TV, 2006) which tells about an aspiring female cabin attendant and the challenges that she faces while trying to achieve her dream. The reason why Nurul became attracted to this character named Yoko is because Nurul believes herself to possess similar personalities as Yoko. As both have easygoing personalities but not necessarily good in things that they do, Nurul found comfort in the idea that she too, can be successful in her life as Yoko did when she finally became a cabin attendant. Another respondent, Razak (UM), who recalled about watching a drama called *Liar Game* (Fuji TV, 2007) finds himself fascinated with the characters. "It's quite complicated but the characters are interesting, especially the main actor and actresses. The way she behaves reminds me of myself.....(and later reasserts) she's worse. Too straightforward". Elisya (MMU) also recalled how a drama's protagonist reminded her of someone she used to cherish. She claimed that the character in the drama and the person she refers to in real life resemble each other about ninety percent in terms of personality and behavior. Thus, watching the drama caused her to have recollection about the person she missed.

#### 4.3.1 On Watching One Litre of Tears

*Ichi rittoru no namida*, or known internationally as *One Litre of Tears*, was broadcasted on Japan's Fuji TV from 11 October 2005 to 20 December 2005 with a total of eleven episodes. In Malaysia, it was broadcasted on 8TV from 4 August 2007 to 20 October 2007 from 6-7pm every Saturdays (Lowyat Forum,

2007). *One Litre of Tears* is a drama about a fifteen year old schoolgirl named Aya, who suffered from a degenerative disease called Spinocerebellar Disease. This incurable disease is caused by a defect in the gene which affects the brain and spinal cord to properly coordinate, causing the loss of muscle control of the body gradually (US National Library of Medicine, 2010). This drama was based on a true story and the script was based on a diary which Aya had wrote throughout her struggles with the disease until she could no longer hold a pen. Aya's diary had been published into a book and was sold in Japan for over one million copies (ReviewAsia, 2009). This drama also depicts how her family struggle with their changing lives as Aya's physical ability worsens, and bedridden until she succumbs to the disease at age twenty five. Many reviews have stated that the human and emotional values this drama brought to its audiences have created awareness towards the meaning of life. It teaches us to value our lives as well as the people around us and the lesson that giving up easily is not an option.

According to the online questionnaire which I have distributed to both participants and non participants of the focus group discussion, thirty out of forty students have responded that they have watched *One Litre of Tears*, making it the most popular Japanese drama among other titles that were released from 2005-2010. As the title goes, many respondents have told me that they literally cried 'one litre of tears' while watching the drama. Many claimed that this drama is the most memorable tear jerking drama they have ever watched, and some even said that the emotions came pouring out unexpectedly. Respondents are well aware

that this drama was based on a true story. The idea that this story actually happened in reality further promoted the realistic qualities of the drama. A few respondents expressed their reactions towards the drama as following:

“It inspires you not to give up in life. Messages inside are pretty strong and able to influence you. It also makes you want to watch more” (Sam, MMU)

“I love to watch 1 litre of tears. I watch every single day over and over and over...” (Azlina, MMU)

“The most influential drama to me was 1 litre of tears. I cried watching it” (Yi Ting, UM)

“It’s a very inspiring storyline and it taught me to appreciate my life. Live is short, so enjoy it” (Ying, Ying, UM).

*One Litre of Tears* effect seems to cause many people who have watched it feel inspired about the meaning of ‘life’ itself. When I mentioned to other Malaysians about studying the audience reception of Japanese dramas, I was often told about how great *One Litre of Tears* was. Many people could not forget their experiences of watching it and claimed it as one of the best dramas out there. One of the reasons why this drama receives so much love is because of how the lead character carries herself to live life to the fullest despite the hardships she had to go through. Life is often equated as survival and how one could make the best out

of it without having any regrets later on. Several of the respondents gained an educational message about life from watching the drama.

“I think *One Litre of Tears* really affected me a lot. In the beginning I felt normal watching it, but as the story goes deeper and Aya’s symptoms started showing and how she handles the situation, I think that it really showed me something I did not realize. The precious moments and the true meaning of my life. I did not realize about it until I watch this drama” (Azlinah, UM).

“It taught me something. One thing that I learned from the drama is don’t say ‘sorry’, but say ‘thank you’ when you receive help from others. I learned that and I like the drama very much” (Caroline, UM).

#### **4.4 Seeking Intangible Values**

The word ‘value’ alone can mean many things. It could refer to an assessment of how much something is worth, whether for keeping or to be used. Value can be identified as a consideration for something dearly cherished and holds significance in one’s belief. In addition, values can be shared and understood by a group of people or cultures who determine whether a value is considered desirable or not. In the context of this study, value takes shape in many traits and is defined as an intangible asset to the audience. Values that the respondents extracted from their experience of watching Japanese dramas do not take shape in material form. Many respondents identified with the values

embedded in cultural messages that they have interpreted from watching Japanese dramas. Values here refer to the worth of certain behaviour or action acknowledged by the general society and cannot be seen with the eye or felt physically. It affects personalities and self opinion about the way one should conduct oneself ethically for others to consider. An important element that adds to the favourable perception of Japanese dramas would be how values can be projected as a desired form of asset to the audiences.

Many of the respondents pointed out that Japanese television drama teaches them moral values in daily life related situations. Moral values can be characterized as a proper and decent behaviour that people should follow for the general good. Identifying moral values in watching dramas takes up a certain level of concentration for one to be able to assess what is relevant and applicable in everyday life without putting at risk being critiqued by others. Identifying with values in Japanese drama seems to depend on whether one can be inspired by the messages constructed in the drama that honestly represent a moral behaviour. The practicality of seeking values is combined with an inner self-help desire among the respondents, who finds everyday life itself a challenge, as demonstrated in the following examples:

“After watching, it motivates me to study or do something else that challenges myself, in a good way. Sometimes it changes my point of view towards my life and surroundings to more positive ones. I was also able to apply it to my everyday life because I actually jot the good points down on a book” (Kristin, MMU).

“I’m a type of person who lives in my own world. I tend to dream a lot. After I watch a drama and I discover a moral value I don’t have, then I would think whether I should do it or not. How shall I change? Can I be like that? Even if I have adapted it into my own personality, I would feel like its myself unconsciously. Watching *One Litre of Tears*, the value that I have learned the most is the way she (Aya) tried to be courageous, despite her close encounter to death. She still tries her best and motivating the rest, saying that it’s not so scary and it’s not the end. I’m the type who likes to laugh and be happy so I discovered the motto ‘don’t worry be happy’ from this drama and it becomes my personality” (Yi Ting, UM).

What we can deduce from the respondents’ approach towards discovering values is that their view of life is a mixture of sentiments that alternate the differences between the characters on screen and their own attitudes. The respondents discovered about values that they did not carry within their personalities and adopted the new value in their everyday life. They seek solidarity over life problems and, for some, they discover appreciation to simple things in life that have been taken for granted. A respondent mentioned about finding joy and happiness in making the simplest decision and action in her life. Voon Hui (UM) recalled how she often puts the blame on trivial matters in her life. “Now I can stand, walk, eat and sleep, I really need to appreciate my life than

blaming it”. Voon Hui’s new found appreciation for life too, was influenced from the drama *One Litre of Tears*.

Based on the conversations with the groups, I have recognized that the respondents are responsive to two types of principles that classify as their definition of values present in Japanese dramas. The first principle is the spirit of *ganbaru*, which means giving one’s best in doing something. As briefly mentioned in Chapter Two, *ganbaru* refers to a type of motivation that promotes the concept of perseverance in achieving a certain task. *Ganbaru* also encourages one to hold on without giving up one’s effort and the strength that one puts in the process is more favoured than the outcome of the result. When somebody shouts “*ganbare*” or “*ganbatte*”, this gesture gives encouragement to others as well as oneself. Leung (2004) points out that Hong Kong audiences who watch Japanese dramas in the 1990s such as *Long Vacation* and *Love Generation* are capable of constructing “hyper-reading” in their interpretation of *ganbaru*. She refers to “hyper-reading” as follows:

The extent to which the audience interprets the fantastical elements in media texts as ideological messages – ideological in the sense of ideas and values that give meaning to one’s life constructively and even spiritually – and actively and creatively consuming them in real life, transforming them into reality (Leung, 2004, p.101).

This hyper-reading allows the audiences to adopt *ganbaru* as a value and localize it in their everyday life experience. Many of the respondents’

identification with *ganbaru* related messages in Japanese dramas support Leung's idea that transcultural audiences of Japanese drama are capable of hyper-reading, such as the following comments:

“When they want to do something, they put like 120 percent of effort instead of 100 percent to achieve it. The spirit and teamwork is there” (Sam, MMU).

“I really liked it and I watch it again and again. I liked the spirit portrayed in the drama because he tried again and again. Every time he missed an opportunity i would be so frustrated ...why he missed again!” (Mun Lee, UM) (referring to the drama *Buzzer Beat* (Fuji TV, 2009)).

“In *GTO* (Fuji TV, 1998), the character is really strong and is trying to change things. He can do things he wants and is determined. It shows that we need to be strong” (Min Lim, UM).

#### 4.4.1 Discipline

Another principle that the respondents are fascinated with is the concept of discipline in Japanese society. There are two types of ways how the respondents would construct their impression of the Japanese discipline. First, the respondents tended to identify with the idea of Japanese discipline from a viewpoint that is influenced by how a non-Japanese would attempt to portray Japanese behaviour. Many foreigners who have experiences living with the Japanese society wrote

about their understanding of discipline in Japan, such as Jayaprakash (2009), who exemplifies discipline as good conducts shown by the Japanese people in public places, when using the train or taking an escalator. Second, the respondents are influenced by how the media depicted Japan on the aspect of discipline. For example, the *tsunami* incident on March 2011 caused the media to highlight Japanese discipline by depicting the locals queuing for supplies patiently during the time of hardship (Japanese model, 2011). The respondents who watch Japanese dramas identified with some of the characteristics of discipline that they can relate to in their everyday aspects. A few of the respondents gave their own opinion about discipline in Japanese society from the following comments:

“In some dramas, they portray about office life and you’ll realize the people are all so hardworking. They also respect culture. Even in events, they would be supportive and join the cause” (Lin Wen, UM).

“Sometimes things depicted on Japanese drama can seem to be overwhelmingly good and it makes you wonder if it is really like that in Japan. I’ve been in Osaka for a month, compared to our country their people are more discipline and hardworking” (Farah, UM).

“I think Japanese are very discipline and punctual. It makes me feel like following their discipline and be punctual myself. I really respect them because when the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami happened, they lined up to receive food and supplies amidst the hectic situation” (Mazlinah, UM).

“They can survive by themselves. For example, the tsunami incident. I know they received help from others but they do most of the things by themselves. They came back up and solved many things during the disaster. That’s one thing I admire about Japan. For about two weeks, the whole news is about Japan. After that, it became silent. As if things had already become stable” (Nurul, MMU).

The notion of discipline in the respondents’ remarks perceived the self-obedience and respect towards other people that the Japanese carry within their personality. It is a form of obligation towards maintaining peace and order for self and others to create efficiency in a society. Discipline in this manner refers to the absence of authority and punishment in which the importance of moral behaviour and its value is emphasized over the enforcement of regulations. For example, many of the respondents expressed that they are impressed by the discipline of Japanese people who are consistently hardworking in carrying out their routines and carrying pleasant manners in the society.

The identification with Japanese discipline among Malaysian students occurred due to the cultural differences in the depiction of discipline between Japan and Malaysia. For instance, in work culture, employees in Malaysia are not obligated to work overtime, whereas in Japan, working overtime is common and expected for the employees. In addition, the principles promoted through the Look East Policy favour learning about Japanese values for locals to adopt. If the characteristic of an ideal disciplined individual is measured as a standard for

adaptation into one's behaviour, the respondents are viewed capable of recognizing their lack of discipline. They are able to assess on a different meaning of self discipline due to the influence from observing Japanese behaviour and reflect on the need to improve oneself and progress as a contributor to the society.

MMU students from focus group one stated that Japanese discipline could be observed in how the Japanese characters interact and communicate with each other, through everyday life such as eating or sitting and even through their use of public transportation in Japan. Azlina added that both *ganbaru* and discipline can be best observed in sports based Japanese dramas, particularly when the characters are immersed into giving the best performance. Kristin also said that looking at how the characters perform also made her want to try playing sports after watching sports related dramas. The intangible values discussed here are significant to the students because their everyday life as a student deals with the ups and downs in managing their academic work and socializing with their peers. They watch dramas to 'escape' from a reality temporarily and seek inspiration from another 'reality' on the screen. Identifying the significance of values and discipline in watching Japanese dramas can help create opportunities for students to formulate their interpretative skills in reading media text and why they take plight in making sense the way they do.

Throughout the focus group discussions, all respondents were unified in agreeing that Japanese dramas were capable of motivating people with their storyline and characters. Farah (UM) mentioned that the varied plots in Japanese dramas made it unique, with various genres and themes, unlike Korean dramas

that would focus significantly on romance storyline. Similarly, Mazlinah described how local dramas tended to rely on the same formula in producing local dramas by recycling the same theme over and over. Respondents favour Japanese dramas because it offers diversity and a variety of themes, which makes watching each drama unique and unpredictable.

In addition, they are able to learn from the values based on the actions that the characters have acted upon. Audiences also think about the quality of the values and determine the worth of having it associated with their everyday life. They are enthusiastic towards selecting the positive values and admire perseverance in difficult times. Even if their lifestyle and cultures are different from the characters in a drama, it does not seem to matter because the values are considered relevant for local practice. Value is not defined by cultural revenues, nor is it restricted across different cultures but depends on how one projects the practice of value that is appropriate for the local society.

## CHAPTER 5. MALAYSIAN STUDENTS AS ACTIVE AUDIENCES

Identification with foreign media programs plays an important role in supporting an audience's perception; favouring or disfavouring messages which texts deliver. Media audience relates with the lives of the people on the screen and identify with the narratives and stories of others by placing their cause of action and justification as one of our own (Wilson, 2007). The narratives on screen become a place to construct meaning over what we consider as right or wrong and decide whether decisions or actions taken would be appropriate or not based on our own principles. As previously discussed, audiences respond differently to the same set of program. This means that individuals are selective of media messages and pay attention only to elements most receptive to them. Malaysian students as audiences are constantly active in media reception and presenting meanings to themselves by "finding similarities (and differences) in their circumstances to those on screen" (Wilson, 2007, p.36). They embrace multiple meanings in different narratives and develop opinions and attitudes towards different cultures. Watching Japanese dramas allow audiences to observe and construct their image of Japan. The drama narratives may be fictionalized and presented as superficial but audiences are capable of drawing out elaborated meanings by sharing the significance of other people's plight by placing it as one of their own.

The respondents already seemed to have formed a certain kind of attachment with Japan, particularly on its culture and society. Malaysians are no stranger to Japanese influences and presences overall. Many of the respondents

carry the objectives to develop more knowledge and understanding about Japan and increase their cultural contact with the Japanese society. Before looking at how Malaysian students depict the images of Japan through watching Japanese dramas, this section explains why, despite the culture contact with Japanese popular cultural influences in Malaysia, audiences tend to rely on self effort to search for resources on Japanese dramas in the Internet.

At present, many Japanese drama audiences and enthusiasts in Malaysia have to rely heavily on online sources and peer-to-peer sharing methods to obtain titles and episodes due to several reasons. Firstly, local television broadcasting services have shifted towards airing more Korean dramas lately as the reception of *Hallyu* or Korean Wave has tremendously increased. There are 6 local TV channels in Malaysia; TV1, TV2, TV3, NTV7, 8TV, and TV9. For instance, at present, NTV7 (2012) and 8TV (2012), two of four private television stations in Malaysia, offers a total of seven Korean drama titles. Meanwhile, only one Japanese drama titled Full Throttle Girl (*Zenkai Girl* in Japanese) is currently airing on 8TV every Sunday (Full Throttle Girl, 2012). Other foreign Asian dramas originated from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore but rare from Japan. On the other hand, Malaysia's largest pay satellite television service, Astro offers 2 Japanese based channels; NHK World and Animax. NHK World (Astro, 2012) offers programs from The Japan Broadcasting Corporation. However, only certain programs have subtitles and many local audiences do not have the literacy to fully comprehend Japanese language without relying on subtitles. Animax (Astro, 2012), on the other hand, offers anime related programs either with English audio

or Japanese audio with English subtitles. As English is the second language in Malaysia after Bahasa Malaysia, local audiences are able to understand the contents from Animax channel. Ironically, in May 2010, Animax has introduced Korean dramas into their program line-ups for Malaysian viewers (Animax, 2010).

Secondly, even though Japanese dramas are available in VCD and DVD formats in local media stores, this usually happens only after the original broadcast in Japan is over. On the other hand, online Japanese drama sharing websites usually provide the episodes of current Japanese dramas with subtitles less than a week after it was broadcasted in Japan for either downloading or streaming. In addition, the VCD and DVD box set versions are not reliable in terms of the quality of its subtitles translations. The subtitles produced by the online fan “subbing” community are said to be of better quality and more accurate. Thirdly, the first and second features mentioned above require the audience to have television set and DVD player as well as the monthly subscription for satellite TV channels. Young people in Malaysia, particularly students and working employees, may not necessarily have the means or the time to watch dramas on televisions any more. Instead of following the TV schedules, young people work their media consumption around personal schedules in favour of their own use of time and convenience using personal mobile media players such as laptop, cell phones and tablet. The following section looks at ways the respondents depict Japan through Japanese dramas.

## 5.1 The Depiction of Images of Japan through Dramas

Throughout the late 1990s, Japanese “trendy” dramas had become popular among audiences in Asia who found themselves immersed into the realistic imaginaries of modern lifestyle depicted in these dramas. Yet, the current Japanese “trendy” dramas and the “trendy” dramas during the 1990s could not have been more different. In the 1990s, we see the popularity of Japanese dramas through the reception of *Tokyo Love Story*, *Beautiful Life*, *Long Vacation* and such (Iwabuchi, 2001; Leung, 2002). These dramas manifest as the urban love story of young people amidst of hardships and struggles in coping with one’s job and societal obligations. Previous analyses of such drama reception have found that audiences tend to relate personal aspirations with the dynamic and modern lifestyle depicted in these dramas (Iwabuchi, 2008). The hero or heroine often work hard to obtain love and happiness in the end despite any challenges that they face through living in the city. This process gives audiences a sense that they too, could achieve their dreams if they work hard. In addition, romance seems to be the reward or the achievements from working hard towards the end of the story (Leung, 2002).

In the late 1990s, Asian audiences favoured Japanese dramas because the depiction of modern Japan is deemed fascinating to them. Yet, at the same time, the rest of Asian countries are coping with their own modern development, regarding Japan as the model in the aspects of technologies, economics, and work values. According to Leung (2004), a survey conducted in Hong Kong reveals that audiences tend to relate to Japanese drama easily because of similarity in traits

between Japanese and the Hong Kong locals. They have “similar hair colors, fashions and way of life” (Leung, 2004, p.102). Leung (2004) points out that Hong Kong audiences feel cultural familiarity with Japan through dramas, which allows easier identification and accessibility. Many researches that had been done in Taiwan and Hong Kong produces Iwabuchi’s (2008) notion of “similar but different, different but common” (p.131) concept in distinguishing why the local audiences feel generally closer to Japan over others.

However, referring to Malaysian audiences who watch Japanese dramas with the notion of cultural similarity should be carefully reconsidered. This is because it is crucial to consider that the term “cultural proximity” is also used to associate the closeness of racial similarities and to some extent on the physical characteristics present in the East Asian societies. For the respondents, it is not about how similar one’s physical attributes are with one another, but on how they embrace Japanese values and beliefs suitable for personal achievements. Iwabuchi (2002) suggests that “cultural proximity should not be regarded as a predetermined attribute to the text” (p.134), as such consideration would devalue the audience’s active role in interpreting texts for viewing pleasure. Therefore, it is significant to seek how audiences identify with the elements in drama text. Based on the observations from Chapter Four, Japanese dramas are easier to relate for the respondents because they can identify with cultural messages that reflect the value of *ganbaru* and discipline from the storyline and the characters personalities. Based on the examples from Japanese dramas from 2005 to 2010, the messages on “life” and the spirit of *ganbaru* had been intensified and romance

seemed to be secondary compared to those in 1990s. Caroline (UM) remarked that she favoured Japanese dramas over Taiwanese and Korean dramas because the latter two focused dramatically on romance over life achievements. All respondents unanimously agreed that watching Japanese drama developed *ganbaru* spirit for them to adopt when facing difficulties in life. Because many of the characters in Japanese dramas were young and in their 20s, students can easily relate to them as well. The respondents favoured the motivational stories that they could access to in Japanese dramas.

The respondents do not necessarily accept the images in Japanese dramas directly without thinking of the implications for local practices. In terms of culture, there are some elements of Japanese characteristics considered difficult for local consumption. Siu Jen (UM) remarked that Japanese women enjoy putting on heavy makeup and wear loud fashionable clothes, suggesting that it is difficult for Malaysian women to comprehend such fashion sense because they tended to be more conservative. Several respondents also found that Japanese characters in the drama tend to react in exaggerated ways. According to Li Xin (UM), “they overreact quite often...they must make things three degrees more serious than the real ones”. She referred to the overemphasized expressions of the Japanese that seemed animated as if most Japanese characters were portrayed as quirky and ecstatic. Wen Li (UM) also seemed to be uncomfortable with the exaggerated expressions and claimed that they did not feel natural. The respondents identified these characteristics as “*oogesa*” in Japanese, which referred to exaggeration. These remarks suggested that the expression of “*oogesa*” is uncommon in the

local everyday practice. This can be explained by the difference of “*genki*” spirit in Malaysia’s cultural context. Japanese individuals engage with *genki* in their personality in many social occasions such as work life. For example, it is common for employers in Japan to expect their employees to put *genki* into their work, and in terms of feeling, the *genki* spirit produces an energetic attitude to the atmosphere (Jones, n.d.). *Genki* refers to as being energetic and lively and is usually looked as a positive expression in social relationships. Carrying the *genki* spirit produces a friendly tone to the overall atmosphere, signalling that one is full of live and energy. Malaysians are generally more reserved individuals and the people tend to put *genki* in their attitudes only during celebrative events or special occasions. The respondents’ view on Japanese characteristics as a form of exaggeration in regards to *genki* suggests that the *genki* attitude in Japanese cultural context were thought to be more compelling than in Malaysian society.

This kind of involvement in watching drama is similar to what Wilson (2007) describes media audience reception as ‘playful’. Wilson explores on Malaysian responses towards American television programs and draws a distinction between values that are accepted and not among Asian viewers. Wilson mentions that:

The Asian viewers whose reactions to American television are considered below both celebrate and voice concerns about narrative content perceived to be prescriptive, with possible consequences for conduct. But they do so not entirely seriously. It is television they are discussing after all, a

temporary distraction from 'real life', with necessarily uncertain implications for living (Wilson, 2007, p.55).

Even though Wilson's argument refers to American programs such as Oprah Winfrey, Malaysian students who watch Japanese programs also produce a distance from identifying in a straightforward manner with the images that they see on the screen (Wilson, 2009). Watching a program can distract an audience and allow them to temporarily forget the tedious reality, but at the same time, audiences cannot identify with the media content if the message is debatable in their own comprehension and understanding to the local position.

Watching how the Japanese react to one another and communicate with others in the drama reminds the respondents of quite distinctive social characteristics when the social manners and cultural practices were different than what they have practiced in Malaysian society. Here, the audience is watching a foreign program and is not involved in the culture of the original location in Japan (Chua, 2007). Any knowledge that the audience apply to comprehend their consumption is based on the audience's own cultural context. That is, the audience has come to terms with the distance between his or her location and the product location – unlike watching a locally produced program where one's cultural identity is embedded within the original location of the program. The respondents from the focus groups have a common position. They are all conscious of the fact that the drama they have been watching originated from Japan. Each participant possesses a certain amount of knowledge on Japan. This knowledge could be either from their direct experiences of engaging directly with

Japanese society or from the accumulation of literary works on Japan and media consumption.

## **5.2 Selective Identification with Cultural Messages**

Lin Wen (MMU), whose father has been to Japan for a business trip, often listened to the experiences and stories that he talked to her. Her father told her that Japan was a very safe and clean country. When someone drops or loses personal belongings in public places, that person is sure to get it back. He also mentioned the freshness of *sashimi* in Japan and he told her to try some in local Japanese restaurants even though she disliked eating raw seafood. In addition, her father told her his experiences of taking a crowded train during rush hours and that eating in the train is just a regular habit among busy Japanese employees. She heard of stories about Japan and understood how the society operated. She grew up watching Japanese programs, ranging from documentaries to anime and dramas. She then accumulated these experiences and tried to project them in local scenario. For example, she was aware about how Japan and Malaysians interpreted punctuality differently. Lin Wen said, “this is something Malaysians can learn from. Even if they are late, they do their best to quickly arrive. Malaysians are more difficult. Japanese respect other people that they meet. And they won’t take for granted even if they are late”. This shows that she incorporated the stories of Japan from another person as a constructed image of Japan and compared the differences between both cultures.

Identifying Japan based on stories heard from another source or reading about Japan through books and newspapers is common for most respondents. They related with Japanese cultures based on the messages that they receive both from personal experience, from the word of other people and more. In addition, the respondents gained knowledge about Japan through participation in Japanese related events. Students from UM frequently emphasized the educational aspects of watching Japanese television dramas, especially on listening and speaking skills. These students included the purpose of consuming Japanese programs as part of their educational exercises to learning Japanese language. On the other hand, students of MMU emphasized the cultures and values that they have learned by watching Japanese people's interactions in the dramas. Students from UM also expressed similar opinions, and that they learn social manners by watching how Japanese act in television dramas. Watching Japanese dramas provides a reflection back at one's everyday life and allows audiences to extract moral messages as a source of advice. According to Grossberg, Wartella, Whitney, and Wise (2006), earlier literature suggests that media serves as "emotional release and a source of advice" (p. 264) for everyday life basis. It would seem that watching television drama has been constructed into an activity that supports coping with challenges that students face in the university life.

Respondents claimed that watching Japanese drama helped them to verify their own knowledge of what they already knew about Japan with more certainty. For example, Razak (UM) mentioned that he noticed how in the drama *With Love* (Fuji TV, 1998), there are scenes which the customers were seen given high

quality services. He later said that he had the same experience during his stay in Japan as a short-term exchange student. Wen Li (UM) expressed that she learned about Japanese hierarchical society, particularly on people's relationships based on seniority and one's age. She added that even though Malaysia had similar hierarchy on seniority, it was not often put into practices when people interact with each other. In addition, Siti (MMU) who referred to *Zenkai Girl* (Fuji TV, 2011) spoke about Japanese companies, where it is usual for employees to work overtime. Based on the image of Japan expressed by the respondents, it seemed that the Japanese are perceived as well-mannered, respectful, and hardworking. Japanese dramas have become the mirror that projects contemporary Japan, as the realistic features of the text enable students to imagine the state of current Japan that they see on the screen (Ryan, 2010).

In Chapter Four, the notion of "hyper-reading" by Leung (2004) was introduced, which discusses that audience interprets elements in drama as ideological messages. The term 'ideological messages' here can refer to what Ryan (2010) puts as a "mistaken cognition that prevents us from seeing reality as it is" (p.40). This indicates that, depending on how one organizes their set of rules in media consumption, ideological messages can help to construct a set of ideas that cluster assumptions based on how we identify things. For example, referring back to the readings of the students on Japanese dramas, the ideological message of Japan as a hardworking society enhances the meritorious qualities present in one's perception of Japan. The respondents' appreciation for educational values that they received from Japanese dramas gradually increase. Additionally, they

found themselves friendlier and more agreeable towards elements associated with Japan, or should I say, more capable of being tolerant with the gaps between local and Japanese cultures.

### **5.3 Japanese Dramas as the Cultural Educator**

The position of Japanese drama as a cultural educator is interesting. Many students expressed that their knowledge about Japanese cultures expanded from watching dramas. Some also mentioned that they tried out new things from watching Japanese dramas. For instance, Azlina (MMU) claimed that she became intrigued with a Japanese food called ‘*takoyaki*<sup>1</sup>’ as it was frequently featured in the drama *Gokusen* (NTV, 2002) and decided to buy them in Jusco supermarket out of curiosity. Later, she added that she also tried Japanese cream puffs after watching *Zettai Kareshi* (Fuji TV, 2008). Like ‘*takoyaki*’, Japanese cream puffs also made it into the Malaysian market and received good response from the public. For non-Japanese audiences, images from the drama carries cultural elements that bear the ‘Japanese’ label which the respondents are intrigued with. Food is a tangible cultural aspect that many audiences easily discover from Japanese programs besides fashion and consumer products.

The intangible aspects of cultural values that audiences could learn from Japan are the behaviours, attitudes, social manners, traditional practices and so on. Another image that respondents responded with is the use of public transportation

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<sup>1</sup> Takoyaki is a type of a Japanese pancake which is shaped into a ball, stuffed with octopus and garnished with a special sauce and bonito flakes. It is a popular street snacks which is commonly available around Japan.

in Japan. Out of the six conversations with the groups of students, four mentioned on the use of public transportation in Japan that they frequently see in Japanese dramas. Lives of the characters in the dramas are constructed to organize their logistics around the use of public transports such as buses, trains, bullet trains, and even bicycles. It is common to see that Japanese people cycle, take busses or trains to their school or work place on a daily basis in reality itself. The respondents were envious of the efficiency of using buses, trains, and even bicycles in Japan, because in Malaysia, public transportations are rather inefficient. One respondent, Nurul (MMU), explained that the gap between Malaysia and Japan could be illustrated by comparing their local trains. Other respondents commented by illustrating the differences in road users' manners and drivers' discipline between Malaysia and Japan. Azrin (MMU) said, "there are little kids trying to cross the road and they would lift their hands, cars would stop for them...Malaysia wise, it's not possible". As the conversation continues, the respondents complained of the local transportation's inefficiency in keeping time.

Several respondents from UM experienced one month stay in Japan as part of their program and commented about the differences in punctuality between Japan and Malaysia. Farah (UM) said, "I went to Osaka and the train is late for about one to two minutes. They would announce it over the speaker. If in Malaysia, you can wait half an hour and not see anything". The respondents told me that they had been inspired by the Japanese and tried to keep themselves punctual with time. However, most of them said to have failed to comply because

the local conditions did not provide the environment for one to be efficiently punctual all the time.

The conversation also included discussions about how Japanese streets look like in general. For the respondents, Japanese society portrayed a clean and neat image that was always associated with hygienic maintenance. For example, one respondent expressed:

“...by looking at Japanese streets, you will see no rubbish around. Just look at KL at any random street, it’s pathetic. I was curious as to how Japanese educate the public to become so well-mannered. If I have the opportunity to bring such value over to Malaysian public, it would be good. For myself, if I have a trash and could not find a bin anywhere, I would keep it in my bag first.” (Min Lee, UM)

The Japanese dramas are favored by the respondents also because the narratives facilitated awareness about the harsh realities in society, the ‘reality’ is always associated with social issues that concerns with the wellbeing of the society. The social issues portrayed in the dramas served as the educational learning material to look for human values and hints to cope with everyday life challenges. It is said that Japanese dramas are not biased when it comes to portraying social issues including those on sensitive topics that one would not openly discuss in the public such as homosexuality and domestic violence.

“There are many series that inspire others, like *One Litre of Tears*, *GTO*, *Buzzer Beat*, *Last Friends*, *Wonderful Life*. For Japan, they can emerge as the top because they have tried many types of style for example, drama

which involves motivational contents. Then, family and other society issues such as homosexuality as well. Some countries will not pick these types of sensitive issues to become the theme in their drama series, for example Malaysia. We are too conservative” (Yi Ting, UM).

As this comment indicated, respondents tended to view Japan as being advantageous than the local Malaysian circumstance. Japan is more attractive for the students because it is different from Malaysia. This kind of tendency is often problematic because respondents carry powerful ideological messages about Japan that could be used against the local conditions. Students who carried positive feelings about Japanese society were able to reduce the significance of the attractive aspects in local cultures when direct comparison is made between Japan and Malaysia. They demonstrated positive attitudes towards Japanese cultures and criticised local aspects that looked too familiar for them. Here, the differences between Japan and Malaysia in terms of attractiveness are overemphasized by the respondents. This is caused by the respondents’ tendency of representing the reality of Japan as “imagined” Malaysia by thinking that Malaysia should be like Japan.

As the focus group conversations had become deeper, I asked the respondents if comparing Japan and Malaysia is even possible. Majority of the students responded that they were well aware of the significant gap between standard of development in Japan and Malaysia. Comparing between the two cultures in terms of attractiveness is rather illogical. This does not mean that watching Japanese dramas directly caused the respondents to criticise on cultural

differences, but that it contributes to the cultural climate that allows audiences to impulsively judge two different social environments. Part of this tendency is caused by the lack of ‘valid’ knowledge or actual experiences in Japan. The respondents not only relied on their short term experiences with Japanese society but they also referred to stories about Japan told or written by other people. Their sources of information can be questioned in terms validity and accuracy. The respondents grew up learning about Japan, the version represented in Malaysia, and they would not be able to produce sufficient understanding of actual differences. Hence, the respondents compensated their short supply of knowledge by fantasizing Japan’s cultural world, which would help to project an idealized local cultural sense of modernity.

The way ideological messages function is that it creates cultural idea that audiences assume as accurate. This contributes to how audiences negotiated readings in their use of media and that the negotiated readings can have multiple forms or “hybrid meaning” (Ott & Mack, 2010, p.226). For example, some respondents may interpret the ideological messages in *One Litre of Tears* as a form of familial endurance. Respondents who disliked depressing dramas may reject its emotional aspects, but they could relate with the perseverance of the main character in holding on to her life during painful moments. At times, audiences take for granted the ideological messages that they get through media to confirm their image about a certain culture. This is especially true when we are not critical towards what our interpretations have generated.

#### **5.4 Malaysian as Cultural Agent**

According to Befu (2003), Japan's positive image gives "added value" (p.15) to its cultural products, and this positive image is influenced from the appealing descriptions that draw attention to the country's technological advancement, powerful economy, efficient society, and vibrant popular cultures. Like the rest of Southeast Asia, Malaysia too, has become fascinated with the success of Japanese economic stability and societal values that the Malaysian government made efforts to learn from Japan, for instance, sending students to Japan under the Look East Policy. Presently, there are wider options available to obtain media sources which further intensified the consumption of Japanese programs among audiences. In addition, technological changes opened up opportunities for media audiences to respond to meanings, interact with other audiences and conceptualize their consumption habits. This practice has allowed audiences to expand their social network and provide feedback through various means of dynamic interactions (Livingstone, 2009; Napoli, 2011).

Transnational audiences of Japanese dramas are capable of becoming cultural agents because they actively identify with texts in daily lives; Japanese drama is the window with which audiences open to gain opportunities to understand about Japanese society and how they wish to act upon the influences of their beliefs. Media use dynamic words, images, music and interactive components to convey certain ideas and the audience lock on to these ideas while thinking about how to take meanings of the messages. Media are considered powerful in the sense that they can inspire action through values and meanings,

whether consciously or unconsciously (Ryan, 2010). These influences would change over time, often pressured by the constant changes in digital technologies.

A 'social learning theory' was introduced by Miller and Dollard (1941) to argue that people can learn the behaviours from watching others and be influenced to act. To apply this to media consumption, audience who observed behaviours of the characters on screen would learn and imitate the behaviours of actors. Two of the respondents, Hooi Ting (UM) and Rina (UM) responded that constantly watching Japanese dramas made them receptive to 'bowing' that the Japanese characters do when greeting other people. As a result, they too, unconsciously bow to other people naturally. However, social learning theory alone is inadequate to explain the audiences attitudes resulting from media consumption. This is because audiences require more than just motivation to learn behaviours, such as the condition in which their socio-cultural significance works around individual behaviours through implications of local consciousness (Grossberg, Wartella, Whitney, & Wise, 2006). Hermeneutics theory applies in the audience reception analysis of this study because social learning theory does not explain how an audience accepts or rejects a particular behaviour demonstrated in media texts and how textual behaviours are regarded. Nevertheless, social learning theory is useful in that it offers further debates about the effects of media towards viewers' attitudes.

Malaysian audiences are capable of mediating the consumption of Japanese television dramas and become cultural agents who contribute to producing an identity of Japan. As we can see, students in these focus group

discussions are extremely perceptive to the intangible values that they have extracted from watching Japanese dramas. They were influenced by the value of *ganbaru* and become inspired for not giving up in life and give one's best when doing something. They admire the discipline of being punctual, respectful, hardworking, and living life without regrets. Watching Japanese dramas allowed them to picture behaviours of the Japanese on screen that they believe are closely associated with actual Japanese society. This explains the reason why so many Malaysian students are interested in going to Japan; to see for themselves whether their perception of Japan matches the knowledge about Japan that they acquired locally. All the respondents expressed their hopes of going to Japan to personally experience its culture and society. Describing the Japanese as hardworking, punctual, family oriented, respectful, and clean, the respondents got accustomed to the Japanese images that they experienced on the screen, and hence visiting Japan becomes a tool for verification of the knowledge they already hold. The respondents took an active interest in going to Japan not only because of all the things they heard or seen about Japan, but that their accumulated interest on Japanese cultures generated fandom attributes among the respondents.

The respondents who participated in the focus groups revealed characteristics that can be identified as fandom behaviours towards Japan. According to Joli Jensen, characteristics of fans are often explained in terms of their psychological behaviour (2001). Jensen states that fans may consist of regular individuals or groups of people who strongly “display interest, affection and attachment” (p.301) towards their subject of interest. Fans set boundaries that

are used to identify themselves away from the rest. They appear to be more passionate and be willing to put more effort in learning more about their subject of fandom. These characteristics can be identified based on some of the respondents' comments in the focus groups.

The respondents possess characteristics of being fans of Japanese popular culture in certain aspects. For example, Jia Jun, Nurul and Azlina (MMU) considered themselves fan of *Arashi*, *KAT-TUN* and *NEWS* respectively. *Arashi*, *KAT-TUN* and *NEWS* are idol boy bands in the J-pop industry and several members have also made appearances in acting and hosting activities in Japanese entertainment programs including dramas, films and variety shows. Ryan (2010) argues that young fans are more prone to attach themselves to a celebrity or an idol that they favour to seek an identity that is considered ideal in the society. There are many aspects as to why a fan is attached to celebrities on screen. For some, it speaks for a longing of authoritative power over information and first-hand experiences related to their fandom activities (Fiske, 1992). For others, attachment to celebrities leads them to self confidence when they are uncertain of whether their behaviour and personality would fit into the community. Therefore, they often project themselves in the role of the celebrities that they see on screen and discover what is considered as ideal or strengths to compensate for values that lack in their individual lives (Ryan, 2010). For the respondents, fandom is a way to seek inspiration and knowledge. In Taiwan, Japanese idols have become the source of inspiration for Taiwanese audience to expand further on what they already know about Japan in a more constructive manner (Aoyagi, 2000).

Audiences of Japanese media programs who become fans of an idol constantly seek for activities and events that his or her idol is involved in; concerts, photos, commercials, films, drama series, and so on. Although the lives of Japanese idols may not display the everyday lifestyle of regular Japanese, they represent a part of urban lifestyle that fans are interested in exploring. For example, fans can become enthusiastic about what their idols are eating, or what their music represents. This enthusiasm helps fans to learn more about Japan, for instance, the way Japanese people behave in public occasions and how the Japanese entertainment industry works.

Being a fan, however, does not necessarily mean associating oneself with another person or an idol. A person can also be a fan of a trend, a culture, a genre, or even a country. Chin Yee (UM) is an enthusiastic fan of Japanese dramas and always looked for new materials to watch every season. When it comes to dramas, she said, “I want to be the first to watch it so that when I go to school I can talk with my friends and discuss about it. I’m that kind which is why I need to watch every single week. I watch it alone. My life is like an *otaku*<sup>2</sup> life.” Later, she said that she watched a lot of dramas in 2007 and it is part of the reason why she took up learning Japanese language. As a fan of Japanese dramas, Chin Yee’s remarks indicated that she revealed high level of motivation to watch newly released dramas so that she can create conversations with her friends about the drama contents. She also learned Japanese language to understand Japanese dramas better so that she will not miss out on the details in the text. Being a fan of

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<sup>2</sup> Otaku is a Japanese term used to describe individuals who possess an obsessive nature towards their interests, especially on anime or manga.

Japanese dramas has significance in benefiting her social activities and language skills.

We need to take note that most of the Japanese popular culture influences in Asia are promoted and circulated among local industries (Iwabuchi, 2002). Even the circulation of media products takes place with the contribution of not just the local media industry, but from diverse consumption activities by the society that engages in everyday practices. Japanese popular media promotion in Malaysia is distinctive in that actual Japanese celebrities, musicians or idols, basically people whom we see on screens, hardly go outside Japan for promotional activities, if not never. So instead of the personality, we make out of products, services, technological know-how, investments, and values from the Japanese that are promoted in our local society. The tendency to 'look East' in Malaysia illustrates the strong initiatives among the people to rely on Japanese promotional events and opportunities as a window on Japan.

The Look East Policy in Malaysia not only improved Malaysia's relations with Japan but also opened up Malaysia as a market for Japanese consumer goods, services, investments, and franchise brands. A growing number of new Japanese consumer brands entering Malaysia have made products and goods from Japan a local familiarity. Take a Japanese casual clothing chain store UNIQLO for example, it has a total of 3 stores in Malaysia and has been a recent fad among Malaysians<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Towards the end of 2010, the first Uniqlo flagship store opened right in the middle of the city, Kuala Lumpur, attracting more than 2000 customers during its opening. See Chan, J. & Oh, I. Y. (November 17, 2010). Japanese fashion brand hits our shores. *The Star Online*. Retrieved from <http://thestar.com.my/metro/story.asp?file=/2010/11/17/central/7422448&sec=central>

According to Furuoka (2007), one of the limitations of the Look East Policy lies in the fact that Malaysia and Japan are too different in terms of the social and cultural backgrounds. One of the major critiques about the policy is that fundamental background differences rooted in the culture and society of Malaysia and Japan were often not distinctively addressed before implementing the Japanese system of management. For instance, working ethics and organizational culture in Malaysia are different from Japan, for example, training methods and working hours. This caused many local employees difficulty in adapting to Japanese working styles at Malaysia Japanese companies. However, it was often made clear by the former Prime Minister Mahathir that adopting Japanese method and values does not mean that one should blindly or passively follow Japanese ways. Instead, Mahathir stated that Malaysians should use values that they have learned from Japan as a guideline to create a system that suit to the locals (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2002).

Speaking about Japanese popular culture, Mahathir and Ishihara (1995) states that South East Asian audiences can relate to Japan because of the empathy that Asians relate to other Asians based on the examples of the *Oshin*<sup>4</sup> popularity. “Our pop culture strikes a sympathetic chord across Asia. No hard sell is necessary; the audience is receptive” (Mahathir and Ishihara, 1995, p.88). *Oshin* is a Japanese drama that became a phenomenon after it was aired from September 1984 onwards to countries in Asia including Singapore, Thailand, China, Hong

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<sup>4</sup> *Oshin* is a 297 episode Japanese television drama that aired in Japan in 1983. The drama follows the lives and hardships of a Japanese woman named Oshin during the Meiji period. See Takahashi, K. (1998). The impacts of Japanese television programs: Worldwide “Oshin Phenomena”. *Journal of Regional Development Studies*, 143-156.

Kong, Macau, Malaysia and Indonesia (Takahashi, 1998). According to Takahashi (1998), the drama produces human value messages related to “perseverance” and “patience” and was so popular that by 1995, 44 countries have experienced the *Oshin* boom. The popularity of Japanese popular culture which spreads all around Asia is considered possible by cultural commonality that Japan share with Asia (Mahathir and Ishihara, 1995). Asians can identify with the hardships and perseverance of other Asians and that we can succeed too if we put efforts. For Malaysians, Japan is a reference when it comes to good work ethics, good education and discipline, and the quality of products and services.

Leung’s (2004) research on Hong Kong audiences shows that they tend to select elements in Japanese dramas that suit with their “longstanding stereotypes” (p.98) of Japan. This is in line with some of the tendencies that have developed among the respondents in Malaysia. The respondents connected Japan with advanced technologies, vibrant city life, good discipline, punctuality, glamorous fashion, quality products and services, and trendy youth cultures.

These stereotype examples may be the result of the dominant ideological messages that Malaysians derive about Japan. Indeed, few people in Malaysia would actually suggest that they know more about Japan without relying on the principles that the Look East Policy had been promoting. Such thinking would cause a setback for young people, especially students, whose sources of information in their past experiences derive from the local efforts of promoting Japan based on the policy itself. It is true that young people are learning about Japanese values through Japanese media consumption, but their learning curve

would be affected due to the fact that these dominant ideological messages are pretty much indifferent to how most Malaysians would typically label Japan.

Students choose to watch Japanese dramas because of the diversity in messages and values. This indicates that the ‘attractiveness’ of Japanese dramas depends on their appeal to create awareness about human and social values. Simultaneously, the recipients’ local surroundings promote learning from the Japanese, and the locals in general look favourably to what Japan can teach them. For others, Japan itself is fascinating especially when the cultures are so different. Consuming Japanese media mediate the consciousness of intangible values for self-improvement, whether emotionally or intellectually, however, it is not surprising that many Malaysians maintained optimistic attitudes to learn from Japan, given how the local settings assist in promoting Japanese culture and values.

## CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

The features of this research in some ways reflect the ‘push and pull’ culture concept that James Lull (2006) introduces. Lull defines the ‘push’ as expression of cultural aspects that are inherited or acquired unconsciously over a period of time. The cultural aspects constitute the basic orientation of our daily practices in the society we live in. ‘Pull’ refers to the active nature of seeking autonomy in one’s cultural experiences. It suggests a higher degree of individualism and dynamic engagements to embrace new ideas. In this study, ‘push’ is represented by the Japanese cultural influence and knowledge that Malaysians are already aware of. For example, Malaysians already have the basic understanding of what characterizes as Japanese food, the types of language they use, and the features of Japanese people. ‘Pull’ can be represented by Malaysian audiences of Japanese television dramas who actively seek definitions of their consumption in their own way. This involves flexibility in choice, selection, and interpretation.

With the development of technologies, Malaysian audiences have become increasingly active with their use of media products. The use of Internet expands the sources for knowledge acquisition and opens up new ways for obtaining media files. As a result, more audience are relying on personal laptops or portable media to watch a program outside their home, without the need to rely on television. New consciousness that they have developed from drama viewing experiences

redefines personal knowledge about Japanese culture and society that they have previously established.

This study has explored the reception of Malaysian students as audiences of Japanese television dramas in relation to the active nature of audiences who constantly seek new meanings and interpretation in media use. Audiences produce identification with various elements they experience while reading media texts and contribute to the different sense making activities by relying on personal perspective. In addition, the nature of the relations between Japan and Malaysia produces a favourable environment for Japanese popular culture and media to be consumed by the locals in general. Considering the objectives that the Look East Policy had promoted, Malaysians are constantly showered with Japanese cultural opportunities and are introduced to many activities or events that are aimed at promoting exchanges and friendship. Japanese popular culture is seen as an educational material for Malaysians who interact with it, seeking guidance to deal with the harsh realities in everyday life.

Indeed, the ways an audience operate around the consumption of Japanese dramas in everyday life seem to be infinite. Similar thinking process and the sense of enjoyment are clear when audiences come together to agree on the positive or negative aspects about dramas. More importantly, examining the audiences' exposure to selected media texts suggests that audiences respond to socio-cultural values and messages available in media text by associating with their local conditions. Audiences are also capable of recognizing representations displayed in foreign programs, where the aspects of everyday life on screen become seemingly

familiar with their own lives. Subsequently, continuous exposure to these values promotes self-improvement, through which the audiences become capable of displaying their resolution to change for the better. This research featured the diversity of audience personalities, interpretations and attitudes which supports Oliver's (2002) discussion on individual differences in media use. Oliver argues that media enjoyment differs among individuals, who actively select and interpret media messages, by acknowledging diverse characteristics of their emotional response. For instance, audiences produce different level of empathy with text; individuals respond to sad or tragic narratives differently, those who relate grief with more empathy could end up crying or feeling depressed.

According to Otmazgin (2007), Asians who consume Japanese popular culture products are capable of taking new interpretations on Japan's image. Yet, it does not mean that they feel obligated to identify with Japanese themselves straightforwardly. This is supported by the some of the respondents' attitudes, as they are able to reject cultural images that they felt redundant or complicated to engage with. Looking at the patterns of Japanese drama themes over the last few years, it seems there is a gradual shift in the messages or meanings that they are projecting. In the 1990s, the "trendy" dramas focus on working individuals set in a big city, presumably Tokyo, who live their lives while encountering opportunities to fall in love. Along the way, we can see how these individuals are challenged in various aspects of living in the city, from their housing condition to coping with challenges in their jobs. From the mid-2000, more Japanese dramas have depicted young people and youth as students or fresh graduates in search for

their dreams and how they cope with challenges in the society to achieve their aspirations. Besides that, Japanese dramas have become bolder in approaching various themes related to actual social issues such as poverty and aging, which audiences appreciate. Japanese dramas succeed in displaying intangible human values which resonate with the ideal characteristics among young people who are concerned with the challenges imposed by their own social environment in Malaysia, particularly their obligations within the community.

Japanese cultural commodities ranging from food, films, digital technologies, fashion, and media products are ubiquitous in Malaysia, especially since the local industries have adopted these products for the local market consumption. As one of the prominent economic powers in Asia, Japan primarily became a look-out for countries that are still in the process of development as sources of capital and technology advancement (Iwabuchi, 1998). The flow of Japanese television dramas in the Asian region, whether through the means of digital technologies (TV, DVD) or online sources (streaming or downloading sites), has provided the local audiences with media for entertainment and leisure, and most importantly, something to think about. The appeal of Japanese dramas is said to be lost towards the end of 1990s, but Japanese drama has still been consumed and remained widely translated throughout Asian region. Even though Asian audiences do not seem to be discussing much about Japanese dramas than before, it does not mean that nobody is watching anymore. Young people are still consuming Japanese “trendy” dramas as of today and the ample media sources accessible online is undeniable.

The prospects for Japanese cultures in Asia have developed favourably among Asian consumers in the recent years. Japanese influences too, have become a familiar experience for most Malaysians. Japanese presences have reached stability in Malaysia and that Malaysians are becoming more comfortable with the ideas and values from Japan. Young people in Malaysia are receptive to the intangible aspects of cultural meanings and values in Japanese culture and society because they assist with seeking hopes and dreams for achieving success. The success of transnational media consumption is often measured by the ability of a culture to consume and make creative usage out of the imported media products. More importantly, the way of explaining success in foreign media usage relies on the readings by cross cultural audiences who demonstrate their diversity of readings with consideration of the local environment. Malaysia has created an atmosphere that encourages learning from Japanese culture and influences, through which receivers, especially young people, are approaching them with much interest. Just as how Tsai (2003) recorded and shared the accounts of her journey based on her research subject about Japanese television dramas in Taiwan, this thesis became an early record of my academic research in exploring with transnational media and popular culture receptions.

Lastly, I would like to conclude with four implications discovered from this research. First, students allow their changing social and cultural experience to influence their consumption of Japanese television dramas. They bring in their role in their respective position as university students and consuming Japanese popular culture becomes part of their story. Second, these students as audiences

are selective of the factors as to why they decide to watch and what the activity of watching meant to them. For many, Japanese dramas are seen as both entertainment and education for moral values which can enrich their everyday lives. Third, students produce higher level of tendencies to identify with the positive aspects of Japanese drama narratives and characters. Their creative process of making sense and extracting meanings out of media text is to compensate for the lack of certain qualities that they believe are needed in their everyday lives, the values that makes them a better individual. In other words, they are highly receptive to the messages which emphasize on “meaning of life” in Japanese dramas. Lastly, the success of Japanese television drama reception, deemed as favourable, among Malaysian students depends on the emotional response through attitudes (dynamic and changeable) produced by individuals to identify with media text. Additionally, the diverse attitudes towards media are influenced by the context of everyday engagements with the local social and cultural environment. The environment is supported by the role of the Look East Policy in promoting Japanese culture and values, thus influencing the way Malaysians think about Japan.

### **6.1 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Studies**

Like many other research, this study also has its limitations. To begin, the reliability in the methodological aspect of this research can be questioned in terms of representation, particularly when majority of the participants involved are female. Drama viewership has been represented mostly by female viewers who

reveal higher level of participatory in serial based programs. I did not discuss further on the relations between gender and media reception due to the complexities that may occur should unilateral opinions become exclusive. Furthermore, by pointing out arguments based on dominant gender, I may lead the readers to assume that female students are more receptive and favourable towards Japanese dramas compared to male students. However, we cannot deny the appealing effect of dramas towards female audiences, as much of the research done by previous scholars did reveal that majority of television dramas are dominated by female viewers (Kehily and Nayak, 2008). Nevertheless, gender relationship associated with media use indicates the many opportunities for exploring new meanings to discover the significance of sense-making among active audiences.

The focus in this research is aimed at seeking the interpretations by students who naturally identify with Japan because of their own involvement with Japanese cultures. We need to bear in mind that the perceptions by students in MMU and UM cannot be generalized into representing the overall population of university students in Malaysia. The environment in MMU and UM created an advantage for the consumption of Japanese popular cultures among the students but others may not offer similar atmosphere.

Besides that, the focus group discussions in MMU and UM were conducted in an entirely different manner. Discussions held in MMU had been done in a closed space (classrooms) and UM in an open space (gazebos and hallways). This makes it difficult to determine if the nature of the focus group

settings had any implications towards the students' participatory role and on the data collected. Furthermore, due to time constraint, I was unable to speak to each participant individually or spend more time in getting to know their personal opinions. I tend to believe that there are several students who would be more willing to express their personal interpretation which they may be reluctant to mention in focus groups.

Another limitation to this research is that the globalization aspects of how Japanese popular culture has been marketed and circulated in Malaysia have not been discussed in a more comprehensive manner. The challenge in this process is that many of the Japanese presence or influences in Malaysia were gradually embedded into the everyday lives of the locals that it is difficult to seek exactly how Malaysians' association with Japan become favourable. Therefore, one of the suggestions is for future research to be conducted based on the notion of globalization to seek more clarification on the popularity of Japanese popular cultures in Malaysia. Even though many literatures have discussed about Japanese popular cultures under the context of globalization, the Asian region is presented as one. Malaysia too, has been clustered as an Asian country that is receptive of Japanese influences but no distinction has been made to identify the globalized movements in Malaysia independently. Moeran (2000) sees the idea of Japanese products and goods being marketed in Asia for consumption as part of an effort in globalization processes. Referred to as 'corollanization', Moeran (2000) points out the relationships in which Japanese goods and products are circulated and marketed in Asia through Appadurai's proposal of five 'scapes; ethnosca

(people), technoscapes (technology), finanscapes (capital), mediascapes (information and images), and ideoscapes (ideologies and concatenations of images).

As Befu (2003) explains, Japan is attractive in terms of its “functionality and presentation”. He presents an interesting discussion on how the image of Japan brings out a “value” for both positive and negative connotation. Positive evaluation of Japan’s image deals with the idea of a developed nation with good economics and modern technologies while the negative image tends to deal with the historical wartime conduct of Japan’s military past. As mentioned previously, the social and political condition in Japan-Malaysia relations tend to lean more favourably towards accepting Japanese influences and cultures in Malaysia’s development. Most of the highlights on Japanese popular culture and its popularity overseas came from researches focusing on the spread of Japanese popular products and its successful reception in foreign markets. Likewise, these researchers exemplify the influence of ‘soft power’ in Japanese popular culture context and its capability to gain favour among foreign consumers (Befu, 2003; Leheny, 2006; Moeran, 2000; Otmazgin, 2007; Peng, 2007). The term ‘soft power’ has become commonly used under the notion of Japanese popular culture to explain how “non-traditional ways such as culture and values” (p.77) can become attractive to others and influence them about certain ideas (Otmazgin, 2007). Hence, if the influences of Japanese popular culture in Malaysia are studied based on the concept of five scapes and soft power, it may present very

interesting results that will contribute to other future researches related to Japanese popular culture and media use in Malaysia.

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## **APPENDIX A: GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE**

1. When and how did you begin watching Japanese dramas?
2. What influenced you to watch Japanese dramas?
3. What are your impressions about Japanese dramas?
4. Why do you favour watching Japanese dramas?
5. What are the characteristics that you like about Japanese dramas?
6. Describe your surroundings when you watch Japanese dramas.
7. Use an example of Japanese dramas from 2005-2010 and describe how watching it has affected you.
8. What do you think are the best traits in Japanese dramas?
9. What do you expect from watching Japanese dramas?
10. Does watching Japanese dramas fulfil your expectations on its quality?
11. What does watching Japanese dramas means to you personally?
12. What did you learn from watching Japanese dramas?
13. What are the elements in Japanese dramas that you best identify with?
14. Do you think that the events portrayed in Japanese drama are closely associated with life? If so, please explain why.
15. How would watching Japanese dramas help you to relate with Japanese cultures?
16. How would you relate watching Japanese dramas with your personal experiences with Japanese culture?
17. What type of genre do you like best in Japanese dramas?
18. What criteria you have for selecting Japanese dramas to watch?
19. Does watching Japanese dramas affects your student life positively or negatively? If so, how?
20. Please use an example of Japanese drama and explain why everyone should watch this drama.

## APPENDIX B: LIST OF JAPANESE DRAMA TITLES

### 1990s

<b>Title</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Network</b>	<b>Genre/Theme</b>
Tokyo Love Story	1991	Fuji TV	Romance
Long Vacation	1996	Fuji TV	Romance, Music
Beach Boys	1997	Fuji TV	Comedy
Love Generation	1997	Fuji TV	Romance
Great Teacher Onizuka (GTO)	1998	Fuji TV	School, Human Drama
With Love	1998	Fuji TV	Romance

### 2000s

<b>Title</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Network</b>	<b>Genre/Theme</b>
Beautiful Life	2000	TBS	Romance, Human Drama
Wonderful Life	2004	Fuji TV	Sports
Hana Yori Dango	2005	TBS	Romance, School
One Litre of Tears	2005	Fuji TV	Human Drama, Family
Attention Please	2006	Fuji TV	Comedy, Work
Iryu Team Medical Dragon	2006	Fuji TV	Medical
Liar Game	2007	Fuji TV	Mystery, Psychological Thriller
LIFE	2007	Fuji TV	School, Youth Problems
Hanazakari no Kimitachi e	2007	Fuji TV	Comedy, School, Romance
Last Friends	2008	Fuji TV	Friendship, Human Drama, Homosexuality, Domestic Violence
Zettai Kareshi	2008	Fuji TV	Comedy, Romance
Buzzer Beat	2009	Fuji TV	Sports, Romance
Yamato Nadeshiko Shichi Henge	2010	TBS	Comedy, Romance
Ikemen Desu ne	2011	TBS	Drama, Music
Zenkai Girl	2011	Fuji TV	Comedy, Romance, Work