

BRENT WILSON

3. BECOMING JAPANESE: *MANGA*, CHILDREN'S DRAWINGS, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL CHARACTER

INTRODUCTION: CULTURAL INFLUENCES IN CHILDREN'S DRAWINGS

We now have considerable evidence that children in various parts of the world draw humans, animals, and objects differently (Aronsson & Anderson, 1996; Wilson, 1987; Wilson & Litvoet, 1992; Wilson & Wilson, 1979, 1981, 1984). Although cultural graphic influences on the style of children's drawings have been documented, the consequences of these influences on children's lives have not been studied. If one culture provides graphic models that are radically different from those of another, and if children use those models, do they affect the way children see themselves, influence the way they conceive of their society, determine the way they construct their views of the world, and perhaps even govern how they live their lives? If we are to understand the role that art making plays in the lives of children, we need to pose questions such as these and search for answers.

One of the predominant cultural graphic influences on the style of young people's drawings is that of the popular media; there may be no country where the influence is more pronounced than in Japan (Wilson, 1997). As I will show, when Japanese children enter kindergarten, some of their drawings already reflect one or more of several distinct styles of *manga* (the comic books read by the Japanese from infancy into adulthood). The influence becomes ubiquitous as Japanese children grow older. The strong *manga* influence present in Japanese children's drawings provides an opportunity to study the role of media in providing models through which children understand themselves and their society. The use of *manga* by Japanese children also provides an opportunity to study the "collusion" between commercial forces and children in shaping conceptions of national identity.

A GRAPHIC NARRATION TASK: CLASSIFICATIONS OF CHARACTERS AND STYLES

I am currently conducting two related inquiries of Japanese children's graphic narratives. One study involves an analysis of thematic content and narrative structure of these *manga*-influenced graphic narratives. The second more basic study, reported here, is an analysis of *manga* types and characters. As a researcher, however, I find myself torn between modern and postmodern desires. On the one hand I feel a

compulsion to study cognition, to present classifications, and to point to a table of statistics relating to the types of characters Japanese children depict in their graphic narratives. On the other hand, what I really wish to do is to read the graphic narrative characters as signs that will inform us about children, art, and culture. I'll try to have it both ways.

Children's sequential narrative drawings have been studied for two decades (Wilson & Wilson, 1983, 1987). In 1988, as part of an ongoing cross-cultural study of children's story drawings, I visited various regions of Japan to collect samples of young peoples' drawings. In schools in and around Joyetsu, Monbetsu, Nagasaki, Osaka, and Utsunomiya, 1151 students in kindergarten, second, fourth, and sixth grades were given sheets of 12 x 16 1/2 inch paper on which six 4 1/4 x 4 3/4 inch frames were printed. Instructions were to draw a story by creating characters, placing them in settings, showing what happens, what happens next, and how things finally turn out. In short, students were asked to respond to a task to produce graphic narratives much like those that they were accustomed to seeing in *manga*.

The Classifications

Preliminary analyses of Japanese children's graphic narratives revealed that the popular media, especially *manga* and *anima* (animated cartoons) strongly influenced their drawings. In fact, Japanese children's drawings so closely resembled *manga* and *anima* that it was possible to develop a classification system based on specific types of *manga* characters. The method of classification, in effect, consisted of asking, "What are the sources of the characters children put in their drawings and are those human, animal, and other characters drawn using the shapes and configurations for bodies, heads, eyes, hair, limbs, etc. that are found in commercially produced *manga* and *anima*?"

Figure 1 illustrates the major classifications used. They include: (a) doll-like characters—the contemporary paradigmatic *manga* female type's heart-shaped face (although some are drawn with a flattened chin), saucer-shaped eyes, and razor-cut hair (the bodies range from elongated Barbie-like bodies to diminutive Cupie-doll types); (b) animals and birds—the most common is an anthropomorphic rabbit with enormous stylized ears and simple facial and body features (including other animals such as cats, bears, foxes, birds, and turtles—fish were not included in this classification); (c) cyborgs and superheroes—the classification includes robotic types and humans with extraordinary powers; the most common cyborgs are an atomic-powered cat named Doraemon, superhuman samurai warriors, and robotic types; (d) monsters are limited to a few Godzilla types usually depicted as no larger than household pets; (e) comic characters include a variety of types, nearly all of which invite derision because of their peculiar features and abnormalities; (f) other *manga* types consist primarily of humans, mostly males, with a variety of stylized features such as large eyes and shaggy hair, and vegetables and flowers often depicted with human characteristics; (g) mixed types contain hints of some of the features from one or more of the foregoing *manga* types combined with features associated with Japanese child art; and (h) non-*manga* drawings—humans and animals (of the types children

either borrow from one another, learn to draw from their observations of photographs and non-*manga* illustrations, or sometimes learn to draw by themselves). The non-*manga* classification also includes things such as architectural structures, automobiles, space ships, etc. containing features that are sometimes found in *manga* but which are difficult to attribute to specific *manga* styles. Some non-*manga* drawings are clearly associated with child art, others are stick figures, while a sizable number depict sports figures such as baseball players (often similar to the life-like figures found in *manga* sports stories but with insufficient characteristics to identify them specifically with *manga*). Finally, in the case of the youngest children, the classification included scribbles, and geometric and amorphous shapes.

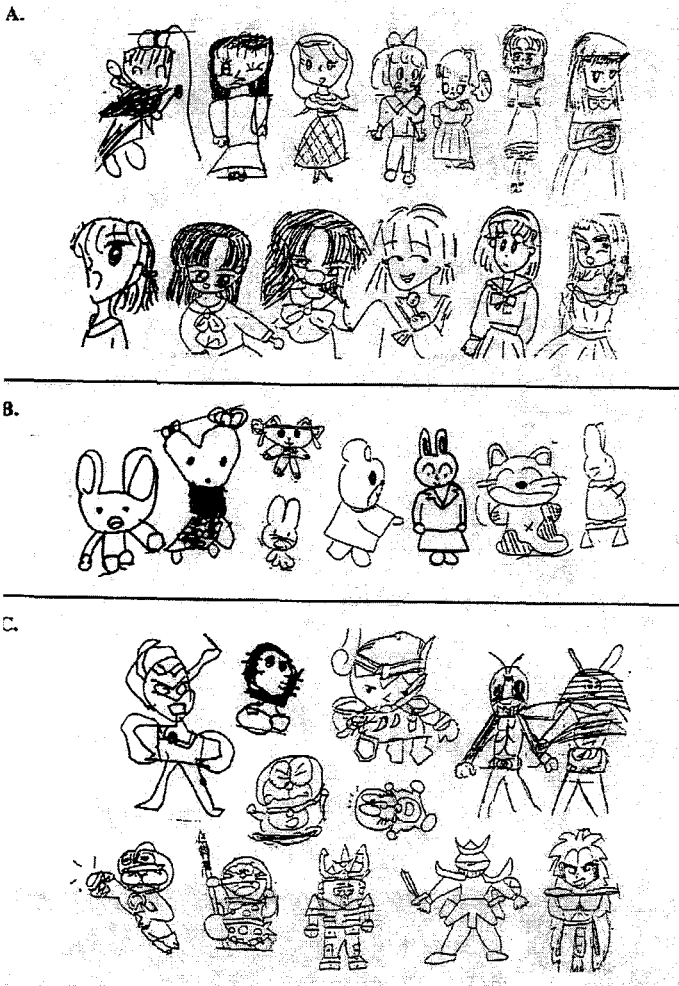


Figure 1. (A) Manga "Dolls Types," (B) Animals, and (C) Cyborgs

Most of the narrative sequences consisted of six frames, but some children used as few as three and others as many as 16 frames. In the analysis process all the frames were reviewed to determine whether one or more *manga*-type characters were present in the sequence. (1) If one or more *manga*-type characters were present, the one most dominant or the most characteristically *manga* character was classified. (2) When there was no clear indication of one or more *manga*-like types in the narratives, a determination was made regarding the presence of features that were influenced by *manga*, but did not follow a paradigmatic *manga* style. These characters were classified as "mixed types." (3) When characters, other objects, and things appeared not to have been influenced by *manga* they were placed in the non-*manga* classification.

The Presence of Manga and Non-manga Types in Japanese Children's Graphic Narratives

Table 1 shows a variety of different patterns in the use of *manga* characters by Japanese children. Only two-percent of kindergarten children produce the paradigmatic "doll" figure. By sixth grade, however, 19 percent of the drawings contain this "doll" figure as the dominant type. Twelve percent of the kindergartners produce a prototypical animal character, and by second grade, 18 percent of the children's narratives are built around these cuddly creatures. It is notable, however, that the incidence of cuddly creatures declines between second and sixth grade. Seven percent of the narratives, from kindergarten through sixth grade, are based on a cyborg character and there is little difference in usage among the grades. It is interesting that monsters are hardly used by any group. The presence of comic types is rare in kindergarten and second grade drawings, while fourth and sixth grade students employ comic types in their drawings between four and five percent of the time. The use of other *manga* types increases steadily from one percent in kindergarten to 25 percent in sixth grade. The classification "mixed types" reveals that a third of the kindergarten children may have tried to draw *manga* characters, but didn't quite succeed. From second through sixth grade the presence of mixed types declines—perhaps indicating a growing mastery of *manga* features and types. Finally there is a decline in the presence of non-*manga* types after kindergarten (46 percent). Approximately one third of the drawings of second through sixth grade depict non-*manga* styles and types.

Table 1. Percentages of Manga and Non-manga Types among Japanese Children

Grade	Doll	Animal Bird	Cyborg	Monster	Comic Type	Other Manga	Mixed Types	Non- Manga
Kinder -garten (94)	02	12	05	00	01	01	33	46
Second (351)	12	18	09	03	01	04	18	34
Fourth (409)	14	14	08	02	04	11	16	30
Sixth (297)	19	06	05	01	05	25	14	34
Total (1151)	11	13	07	02	03	10	20	34

When the types are combined for all four groups, 46 percent of Japanese children's drawings in the sample show the direct influence of *manga*. When this figure is combined with the mixed types, two thirds of the Japanese drawings are influenced by *manga*. The influence of *manga* is probably even higher than the data reveal. Some of the realistically drawn sports characters and things such as automobiles, space ships, and architectural structures found in *manga*, but not easily identifiable as *manga* styles, must surely have affected the children's drawings. Moreover, many of the children who chose not to draw *manga*-type characters in their stories, probably could have—if they had been invited to.

In short, the influence of *manga* on the characters and features of Japanese children's narrative drawings is enormous. What are the consequences of Japanese children's use of *manga* models? What do these findings tell us about Japanese children and Japanese society?

THE SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF JAPANESE CHILDREN'S NARRATIVE DRAWINGS: PRETEXTS AND TEXTS

The entire Japanese *manga* industry can be seen as an enormous sign that contains a collection of other signs that when read, tell things about the Japanese people. When Japanese children create their own versions of *manga*, their modeling of adult *manga* may also be viewed as a sign composed of other signs. Every individual *manga* sequence drawn by a Japanese child becomes a sign that contains a collection of other

Educational Innovation in Economics and Business VI
Teaching Today the Knowledge of Tomorrow

Johannessen, T.A.; Pedersen, A.; Petersen, K. (Eds.)

2002, XVIII, 334 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0478-0