

Published: Wednesday, January 17, 2007

Asia's Pop Culture Influences Keep Going West

By Valerie Seckler

There's a rising cool factor to many things Asian.

There's otaku, the Japanese culture of obsessive collecting, a sensibility reflected at stores like Giant Robot and Uniqlo. There's manga, whose lyrical style of storytelling and fantastical illustration have created a new audience of American girls for the genre of comics and graphic novels. There are the geometric forms and bright colors of anime that are increasingly marking pop culture, notably in video games, TV cartoons and "cos" play, or costume play, in which kids dress up as their favorite anime or manga characters.

"There is a raw, fresh quality now that people associate with things coming out of Asia," noted Kiwa Iyobe, a Tokyo native who came to the U.S. a couple of years ago and is now a trend analyst at Faith Popcorn's Brain Reserve. For example, in SoHo at Uniqlo's first global flagship, opened in November, T-shirts packaged with collectible, plastic figures that once would have been considered geeky or strange are now seen as something cool, Iyobe related.

The impact of such Asian influences is not unlike the effect of urban trends, offered Samantha Skey, senior vice president of strategic marketing at Alloy Media + Marketing. "Kids in the U.S. are looking to kids in Japan and China for the next big thing," Skey said. "Asian teens are ahead of the curve in fashion and in the technology they use."

Indeed, as people of Asian heritage gain greater prominence in the worlds of sports and entertainment, consumers are increasingly seeing them as part of a multicultural tapestry, rather than as a distinct segment, said Julia Huang, chief executive officer at interTrend Communications, an Asian marketing specialist. This, in turn, is creating the opportunity for Asian influences to begin seeping into marketing efforts, although this has yet to happen on a broad scale. "It permeates culture but has yet to make a massive jump to marketing on a mass level," Drew Neisser, president and ceo of Renegade Marketing, said. Still, the phenomenon can be seen in some ads, like the anime-influenced TV spot now airing for eSurance.

At the moment, the impact of Asian influences on marketing can mainly be seen as a nuance or coloration, such as a motif, a backdrop, or a color scheme, Huang said. Uniqlo's SoHo store was envisioned as "becoming media for Japanese culture," offered Shimichiro Shuda, chief marketing officer at Uniqlo USA. (Uniqlo's American arm now has four stores, including three in New Jersey.)

Shuda said the store's 100 or so limited-edition T-shirts, created by 40 designers who were asked to "design today's Tokyo," is one of the tools Uniqlo used to bring the Japanese capital's culture to New York. Another is its collection of 15 CDs of little-known music from the country, selected by Japan-based DJ Tanaka, which can be heard at the store's listening post ahead of a potential purchase. New offers of limited-edition Ts and niche CDs will be made at Uniqlo's store here from time to time.

"If you go to a J.C. Penney, a Wal-Mart, a fashion retail store, you'll be looking at a lot of Asian motifs in merchandise and marketing [media]," Huang pointed out, citing, for instance, the use of vibrant curry and saffron hues in displays in a launch of dinnerware at J.C. Penney.

"The comfort [level] is rising. The stereotype is getting less and less in mainstream entertainment," Huang said in speaking of the growing presence of actors, actresses, musicians and professional athletes of Asian heritage and their likely effect on marketers. "You're not pinned down to one kind of kung-fu profile, an action movie star like Jackie Chan."

There is a more visible and representative profile of Asian characters in prime-time TV thanks to the use of more diverse writers, albeit this is happening at a "very slow" rate, observed Karen K. Narasaki, president of the Asian-American Justice Center, which in 2006 published "Asian Pacific Americans in Prime Time: Setting the Stage." ABC's hit series "Lost," for example, features three Asian-American characters — more than any other show — and is the only one in prime time to feature a married Asian couple, whose relationship is marked by nuance. "The writer who writes about their characters is Latino," Narasaki noted, referring to the "Lost" roles of Jin-Soo Won, played by Daniel Dae Kim, and Sun Kwon, played by Yunjin Kim.

Similarly, Shonda Rhimes, an African-American woman, leads the writing team for ABC's "Grey's Anatomy," whose players include Sandra Oh in the role of Cristina Yang.

ABC and NBC in 2005 had the most regular prime-time roles for Asian characters among the six major broadcast networks, with five apiece; CBS had none.

In all, only 14 of 102 prime-time TV shows in 2005 featured at least one Asian-American in a recurring role, similar to the 2004 season, and Asian-Americans accounted for 2.6 percent of prime-time regulars, according to "Setting the Stage," compared with the group's 4.1 percent share of people in the U.S. population. (The population of Asian-Americans, 12.4 million people in 2006, is expected to climb to 15.7 million people in 2011, projected the Selig Center for Economic Growth.)

"You have to have a passion, a point of view beyond just diversity," Lyobe said when asked to assess how the media and marketers are connecting with people of Asian heritage. "We still have a long way to go. Actors are still asked to do something 'in a more Asian way' — to be a minstrel to get more work," continued Lyobe, who worked at a casting agency in Tokyo in 2005 that had the film "Babel" as an account. "It's going to have to evolve."

That condition is emblematic of the slowly building influence of Asian themes on marketers.

"It's a very sexy topic to consider Asian-American influences," observed Skey, whose company, Alloy, will distribute for D.C. Comics the first edition of Minx, a new series of indie-inspired graphic novels to bow in March with "Plain Janes." Minx's target audience of teenage girls has been primed to read graphic novels by manga. While the subtlety of manga's story lines and emotional interplay mark a departure from America's superhero comics, some of the fashion portrayed reflects Western influences, like jeans and bubble jackets, said Fred Gallagher, author and artist of the graphic novel "megatokyo."

Generally, as pop culture trends begin to achieve critical mass, Skey said, "First we hear clients ask about [them], then come the marketing dollars, five to 10 years later."

Minx and "Crossing Midnight" — a D.C. monthly comic that began with its January 2007 issue, telling the tale of a brother and sister in high school in Japan — are being published as comics gain an increasing respectability in the American mainstream. Traditionally, comics have largely been looked down upon here, unlike their longstanding status as an accepted form of literature in Japan, noted Karen Berger, a senior vice president at D.C. Comics. In fact, sales of manga in the U.S. reached roughly \$170 million in 2005, triple the \$55 million-worth people purchased in 2002, according to Milton Griepp, publisher of ICV2, a magazine about pop culture products. "Teen girls are a big part of that," he noted.

"We are looking to do a book that addresses the influence of Asian culture in America," Berger said of the genesis of "Crossing Midnight," a comic series that will be collected in graphic novels beginning this spring. It's set in Nagasaki, the first port Japan opened to Western ships and the target of America's second atomic bomb. Mike Carey, the comic's creator and writer, is seeking to blend aspects of everyday life in the U.S. with Asian cultural influences, such as are seen in the films of Hayao Miyazaki, director of the 2001 animated adventure "Spirited Away."

A fantasy of another kind is unfolding at Uniqlo's SoHo store, where the brand's first-ever "magalogue" portrays what chief marketing officer Shuda said is its breadth of styles. "You can use our styles to be anyone you want," he suggested. "We never had a magalogue to express the brand in Japan so, at least here in New York, we want to spend three to five years creating a [twice-yearly] book."

As items like T-shirts with Japanese tattoo designs and limited-edition sneakers pop up in urban boutiques and eventually are

reinterpreted for chains like Urban Outfitters, the challenge for brand marketers is how to touch the consumer's sweet spot so that it resonates, advised Thomas Tseng, a principal owner of New American Dimensions, a multicultural marketing company. "Marketers," Tseng said, "are just starting to wake up to these influences."