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Final Research Paper

My Gaijin and Me: How Foreigners in Japanese Anime like “Little Witch Academia” are used to Perpetuate Japanese Nationalism



Figure 1. Promotional poster for Little Witch Academia

In Japanese anime, we often see foreigners shown in a light that can be different from the Japanese characters. Shows like *Pokémon* and *Hetalia* display foreign characters as quite different from the Japanese, both in appearance, and personality. This poses the question, how does anime show us the Japanese view of foreigners in relation to themselves? “Gaijin (外人がいじん, short for *gaikokujin* 外国人がいこくじん), or ‘foreigner’ in Japanese, is a complicated word that means a lot of different things to a lot of different people,” though its concept is very noticeable in much of Japanese pop culture, particularly anime, where characters’ appearances are designed completely from scratch with free range to create (Hashi, 2013). Using the example of the shōjo (catered to teen girls) series, *Little Witch Academia* (particularly recent the television reboot), it can be seen that *gaijin* in anime are used to show their otherness compared to the Japanese characters, who are often shown as the affable

everyman. *Little Witch Academia* has a cast of international characters with the only Japanese person as the central protagonist juxtaposed with a diverse cast of *gaijin* with clear personalities used to reflect their origin country. ***Little Witch Academia* clearly demonstrates how *gaijin* culture in anime is used to build up the notion of Japanese nationalism, as the Japanese protagonist is shown as painfully ordinary amongst extraordinary stereotypical foreign peers, yet is still the triumphant hero at the end of the day.**



Figure 2. Plucky Akko sports a short skirt, wide eyes, and a can-do attitude

Little Witch Academia is a franchise of films and television shows that focuses on Atsuko “Akko” Kagari, a Japanese teenager obsessed with magic who gets accepted into Luna Nova, an academy for young witches based in Europe, despite having no magical abilities whatsoever. She is the embodiment of the classic “everyman” trope, babbling, bumbling, and always barely making it through life. Her personality consists of a can-do attitude, and a naively positive demeanor. She is not particularly stereotypically Japanese, and more stereotypically a teen girl. “Akko’s empty-headed nature is hardly new

to the anime protagonist. An overwhelming amount of anime default to a more generic character presumably to appeal to a wider audience Akko somewhat fits this mold, very purposefully. She’s supposed to be an average person” (Atelier Emily, 2017). Her classmates, however, all hailing from different countries, each have unique personalities that set them aside from each other, showing different stereotypes in their appearances and character. As is apparent many forms of Japanese television that in order to display *gaijin* in pop culture, foreigners’, “category are determinant for the implicit construction of foreigner stereotypes,” meaning that foreigner stereotypes in Japanese culture stem both from their preconceived notions of those cultures, but also from their own constructions of what those “outsiders” look like from the Japanese perspective (Fukuda, 24). In *Little Witch Academia*, each character has a stereotypical name, a clear national background, and personalities and skills that allude to how the Japanese view those cultures. There is Lotte Janson, a Finnish girl who is blonde,



Figure 4. (Pictured) portly Jasminka (far left) and quiet Constanze (5th to the right)

freckled, and frumpy, with a penchant for talking with fairies (which are very prominent in Scandinavian culture), Constanze Amalie von Braunschbank



Figure 3. Lotte is awkward but witty, the reasonable one of the group

Albrechtsberger, who's obnoxiously German name is played for laughs while she focuses on the mechanical side of magic (a clear nod to German engineering) and is literally mute in the show with no dialogue, and Jasminka Antonenko, a burly Russian girl who's specialty appears to simply be a human vacuum for food. Each character is clearly portrayed as stereotypical from a Japanese standpoint. I will focus on three particular characters in more detail, as they differ compared to the protagonist in a nationality-based way.

Diana Cavendish is a British witch who comes from a family of affluent magical people. She is the best in her class, and so extremely skilled, even the teachers often ask for her aid in serious issues on campus. She is blonde, pale, and extremely well-postured. She comes off as arrogant, serious, pessimistic, and often displays the ubiquitous British



Figure 5. Diana always seems to look like she thinks she's better than everyone else...most of the time, she'd be right

“stiff upper lip.” Her view of Akko is quite judgmental, as she is brash, naive, and unskilled compared to herself. Still, this viewpoint changes as the plot continues, as Akko becomes increasingly more helpful in their magical school despite her seemingly non-magical nature at first glance. Diana eventually warms up to her peer, though after much convincing. She and other British characters in the show give a clear example how the Japanese view the British as intelligent yet serious, and even overtly snooty and proud. Still, there is a relationship between those cultures that is not all negative. Diana does come to admire Akko over time, due to her

perseverance, which can be an illusion to Japan and the Japanese still being superior to the stereotypical image of the prideful British in terms of motivation and hard work.

Second is the American character, Amanda O'Neill. She's a fiery redhead (her name and



Figure 6. Amanda may be tough on exterior, but often teams up with Akko for adventures

appearance imply she is meant to be Irish American) who wears short skirts and wrinkled shirts, and likes a bit of mischief. She often causes trouble in the show when she steals magical artifacts to advance herself in school, or simply because she likes them, and she is also quite athletically inclined as one of the most talented

broom flyers in Luna Nova. Her character often clashes with Akko, who she thinks is too sensitive, yet quickly develops a friendship with her when they start working together. Amanda is a clear example of a look into the Japanese view of the American psyche; Aggressive, difficult to work with, extremely impulsive, yet still a friend. She is both an antagonist to the hero as well as a partner, similar to Diana, also similarly to how the Japanese may view Americans.

Finally, I wish to focus on one of the main characters who clearly stands out from the others, both in appearance as well as personality, as she is less a stereotype, and more a new entity. This is Sucy Manbavaran, a Filipino witch who is cynical, brooding, and quite sarcastic. She displays a love for poisons, often seen collecting mushrooms and other items that could be used to create deadly brews. What makes her the most interesting character to analyze in how the Japanese portray foreigners in anime, is firstly, that she is the only other character besides Akko who is from Asia, and secondly, she is the only human character that does not have a human skin tone. Sucy's inspiration seems to stem greatly from



Figure 7. Sinister Sucy looks the part with drooping red eyes, hair that covers her face, and long, witchy dress robes for a Burton-esque flair



Figure 8. Sucy seems to take style hints from the Queen of macabre herself, Morticia Addams

the likes of American pop culture icons like Morticia and Wednesday Addams, so her character displays a uniform that is long and lanky (unlike her peers' short pleated skirts) with long hair that covers half of her face, and pale skin. Sucy is a pale greenish-purple hue with red eyes, unlike her classmates who are all some variation of a normal skin tone. What makes this so interesting is how her character being Filipino relates to how

Japan sees other Asian cultures, especially Southeast Asians. Japan has a troubled history with how the country treats Filipino people in particular, a recent incident, being, "where a Japanese citizen of Japanese-Filipino ethnicities was arrested and questioned for several hours for 'looking suspicious'... on suspicion he was not carrying a foreigner ID" (Arudō, 122).

Incidents like this show the idea of particularly negative otherness with foreigners in Japan.

While Sucy is still a friend of Akko, there is a lot of subtle tension between the two, often playing tricks on the protagonist, simply for mildly malicious fun. There is a negative

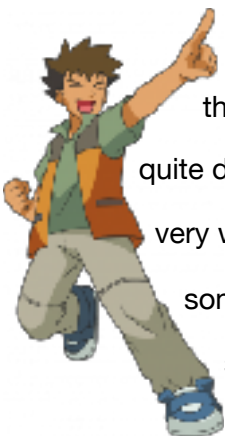


Figure 9 Pokémon breeder Brock's ambiguous ethnicity has sparked controversy since his debut

connotation that kind of characterization has that is quite different in contrast to the white characters in the show. This can be seen in Sucy's design as well. She is quite different from all other characters in the show, and she frankly, stands out as a very witchy girl, but one must harken back to her background, which poses

something problematic. Much like how Brock, the character from the *Pokémon* series is much darker than other characters in the show, with slants for eyes

rather than actual eyes to insinuate he is not Japanese, but clearly not white,

Sucy is shown as very otherworldly, which begs to question how Japan views the Philippines. This paired with her demeanor as sinister, sometimes almost

evil, and with very little dialogue each episode despite being one of the three main characters,

it should be noted that much of this design seems to stem from the Japanese idea of *gaijin* and

"the other", especially when this pertains to people of color.

What makes all this relevant to Japanese culture is how these foreign characters interact with the Japanese protagonist, Akko. Diana forms an admiration for her despite her arrogance, Amanda forms a friendship with her despite her stubbornness, and Sucy becomes her friend over the course of about 15 minutes of screen time despite her vitriol towards pretty much everyone. This Japanese Average Joe with no magical abilities eventually becomes the hero, able to learn magic herself, and gaining the support of her peers, making her the missing piece to the puzzle of *Little Witch Academia*'s likely



Figure 10. As the series progresses, Akko starts to find her gift, and gains recognition and respect from her peers

unintentional commentary on

gaijin and Japanese people. “From her in-universe actions to interviews with creator Yoh Yoshinari, Akko is not a complex entity. Wholly driven by her impulses and passions, she stumbles into most things by chance” (Atelier Emily, 2017). She’s optimistic, strong-willed, and more determined than any other character in the show, and this is eventually enough for her peers to feel compelled to join her. Essentially, what this tells us is how the Japanese see foreigners as quite different from themselves, yet are still eager for their approval and support. At the end of the day though, the Japanese do see themselves as plucky and determined to do well, even if that does not seem feasible. Akko is literally a normal human in a school full of witches with real magical powers, yet this does not stop her from trying (which pays off later in the series). Kosterman and Feshbach defined “national identification” as the “maintenance and continuous reproduction of the pattern of values, symbols, and memories, myths and traditions that compose the distinctive heritage of nations, and the identifications of individuals with that particular heritage and those values, symbols, memories, myths and traditions,” which is very clearly seen throughout *Little Witch Academia* in its diverse cast with different national

histories, stereotypes, and values (Rivers, 112). To expand on this, they “define nationalism as ‘a perception of national superiority and an orientation toward national dominance’ (p. 271). On the other hand, the authors define patriotism as being ‘one’s feelings toward one’s country....it asserts the degree of love for and pride in one’s nation – in essence, the degree of attachment to the nation’ (p. 271), whilst internationalism is identified as a concept which ‘focuses on international sharing and welfare, and reflects empathy for the peoples of other countries’ (p. 271) (Rivers, 112).

Little Witch Academia blends these three similar concepts together, showing a Japanese character that is portrayed as the dominant hero despite her flaws, is clearly meant to be routed for due to her Japanese heritage (given the initial target audience in Japan), and is eager to work together with those from other countries. This shows that the Japanese view themselves as the ones that will persevere and be victorious, even if the *gaijin* may display themselves as better, more skilled, and more powerful. With persistence, determination and a bit of internationalism, Japan sees itself as a country that will prevail, and wishes to teach that to its youth, even subconsciously. *Little Witch Academia*’s relationship with nationality and *gaijin* culture is most clear in how these stereotypical foreign characters interact with a



Japanese character that is clearly supposed to be relatable to the average Japanese girl, and in turn, to the Japanese psyche in general.

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