

Dragon Ball: Alterations Based on American Cultural Myths

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Dragon Ball and its sequel *Dragon Ball Z*, originally written by Akira Toriyama, was adapted into an animated TV series starting in 1986 and is one of the most popular franchises in the world today. *Dragon Ball* follows the journey of a boy named Son Goku. *Dragon Ball Z* captures the years of Goku as an adult and is more action-packed and fast-paced than its prequel. A company named FUNimation Productions, led by Ken Fukunaga and Cindy Fukunaga, saw the potential in *Dragon Ball Z* due to it being more “action-packed” and a “really good fit for the U.S. market today” (Animerica). The dubbed show was eventually streamed on Cartoon Network and was popular from the late 1990s through the early 2000s (Kanzenshuu). Fukunaga described the show as different from most American animations due to how well the story and characters were drawn, and how there was depth, history, and a kind of richness that is unique to *Dragon Ball* (Animerica). Despite Fukunaga’s hope for the success of the series and the desire to “leave in [the] depth of story and characters that [were] present in the Japanese original” (Animerica), the dubbed series preserved little from the original in terms of characters and story elements. This disparity in expectation and reality raises questions such as: why has the narrative of *Dragon Ball Z* been altered so much, why specifically in the way that it was, and what are the ramifications for such drastic alterations? In finding an answer to these questions, specific differences between the original Japanese version and the English version of the show will be analyzed through the lens of American myths and culture. Furthermore, American archetypal notions of morality, nationalism, gender stereotypes, and identity will be examined. *Dragon Ball Z* for an American audience significantly alters the narrative by re-dubbing and rewriting the

script in order to appeal to American markets by obscuring the personalities and representations of the characters to fit American myths and stereotypes, commodifying the unique Japanese image of the franchise while removing its authentic elements.

The main character of *Dragon Ball Z*, Goku, was given dialogue regarding morality and justice to better fit the archetype of the superhero in the US by exaggerating the binary notions of Good and Evil and relates the character to Christian values and ideas. The Japanese version of Goku remains an authentic individual who possesses a set of personal morals, while the American version of Goku parallels Superman, who embodies binary views of morality while lacking a concrete personal identity. An episode that showcases this discrepancy of character is “Explosion of Anger”, where Goku expresses that he “came from earth in order to defeat [Frieza]”, and despite his “calm, quiet heart”, he is a “legendary warrior awakened by intense anger” and ultimately “the Super Saiyan, Son Goku” (Toei Animation). However, in the English counterpart of the episode, Goku shouts “I am the hope of the universe. I am the answer to all living things that cry out for peace. I am protector of the innocent. I am the light in the darkness. I am truth”, and shouts out “Ally to Good! Nightmare to you!” (Funimation) at the end of his monologue.

In the English version of the episode mentioned above, Goku does not mention his own identity as “Son Goku” and only mentions a set of universal values such as “peace” and “hope”, which fits him into the archetype of the dual-identity of the American superhero. Even though Goku does not have an alternate identity such as Superman to Clark Kent, this speech puts him in a position where his individual identity is less significant compared to the values he expresses. Paralleling Goku to a well-known superhero in the US such as superman allows American

viewers to relate to a familiar concept, which increases the chance of success for the franchise. Julian Chambliss, a comic scholar and professor, supports this point by arguing that “superman’s dual identity was the key to his success.” Nonetheless, the values that Goku expresses in his speech resonates that “Americans feel moral coercion to intervene in every place that is - in their opinion - endangered with oppression or injustice” (Bogdanowicz). Phrases such as ‘universe’ and “all living things” relate to this idea that Bogdanowicz outlines. Moreover, Goku uses the words such as ‘light’, ‘darkness’, ‘good’, and ‘truth’, which are binary concepts that relate to Christian ideas of heaven and hell, Good and Evil, and the “truth” that echoes God. Since Superman, who stands for “truth, justice, and the American way” is also an “entry-point for discussion of national identity” (Chambliss), Goku’s personality was further altered to comment on the ideas of American nationalism and exceptionalism as well. An episode that highlights this alteration is “Goku vs Vegeta.”

The dialogue between Goku and his opponent Vegeta is completely obscured to elevate Goku’s status as a tough and confident man and Vegeta as a power hungry conqueror, framing their relationship based on American notions of nationalism and exceptionalism. While Japanese Goku is still focused on his personal development as a martial-artist and Vegeta focused on asserting his personal status, the English versions of the characters are more concerned about power in an imperialistic way. In the Japanese version, Goku claims that he can overcome the elite if he puts in a tremendous amount of effort [to train] (Toei Animation). In the English version, Vegeta proposes to Goku that he “stand beside [him] in this conquest” and “rule the planets” while also referring to Goku as “a good man”, despite the disgusted attitude that Vegeta

shows towards Goku in the Japanese version of the episode. Goku claims “I have everything I could ever want right here on Earth” as a response (Funimation).

Even though both versions of these speeches are drastically different, they share similar ideas from the American myth. The Japanese version of Goku falls into the idea that one can improve the condition that one is born into through hard work. This concept of self improvement relates to the fundamental American myth that there is a “promise of a better ‘something’”, and that this ‘something’ is impossible to fulfill. This myth is what “provides motivation” and “becomes a catalyst of progress...and tendency to self-improve” (Bogdanowicz). However, this idea of self-improvement is universal, and less Americanized compared to the ideas that are attached to the altered version of the show. American Goku, as an alien, parallels the immigrant narrative of finding that “promise of a better ‘something’” on planet earth when he claims that it can give him “everything [he] could ever want.” In other words, he expresses the values and promises that are associated with the American Dream. On the other hand, Vegeta stands for the “American Demon”, which consists of a “complex of superiority” and “pseudo-imperialism” (Bogdanowicz), which is seen from his desire to conquer and rule over other planets.

This interaction between Vegeta and Goku echoes another myth, namely American Exceptionalism. This myth presumes America’s values...are worthy of universal admiration, and that America is entitled to play a positive role on the world stage (Walt). Goku, who has been portrayed as a tough American superhero and referred to as a “good man” by his enemy, embodies values that are associated with the US and is admired by outsiders such as Vegeta. The dynamic between the two characters suggests that there is something exceptional about Goku and that it will benefit Vegeta to play a “positive role on the world stage” in Vegeta’s standards.

Another crucial element of the episode is that respect and humility from Goku and Vegeta towards each other is replaced with exaggerated confidence and toughness. Multiple characters in the episode comment on the toughness and strength of Goku, alluding to the idea that strength and power are valuable traits for males in America, which is another point of significant alteration.

The American version of *Dragon Ball Z* exaggerates gender representations based on stereotypes, polarizing the divide between maleness and femaleness of the characters to a greater extent than the Japanese version of the show. Gender stereotypes are not unique to the US, but the tendency to create binarily divided stories is extremely familiar to the US. The earliest western collective fictions such as Christianity outline black-and-white divides in terms of not only morality but also gender. Similar to how Goku is framed as a superhero and given strict morals, he is strictly masculinized along with other male characters such as Gohan and Android 16. According to Mary Bresnahan, Yasuhiro Inoue, and Naomi Kagawa's study of sex stereotyping in anime, being "emotional" is considered a traditionally female trait, while being "dominant", "strong", and "concerned about control" is more stereotypically male. The main argument at the end of the study is that sexist media carries negative effects and reinforces gender expectations to both men and women instead of teaching new attitudes (Bresnahan, Inoue, Kagawa). Despite a thorough explanation for the way the study was conducted, the authors did not clarify whether or not the English or Japanese version of *Dragon Ball Z* was studied. This is a critical point, as the English version was heavily altered from the Japanese version in terms of dialogue and voice, which leads to the study itself being flawed. However, the metrics for evaluating gender stereotypes are still useful for analysis.

An example of exaggerated gender stereotyping in terms of dealing with one's emotion occurs in the episode "The Tragic No. 16!! An Enraged Super Gohan Begins Taking Action." In the Japanese version, Android 16 (No.16) attempts to convince Gohan to release his anger and fight to his heart's content, and counts on him to protect the nature and animals that he loves (Toei Animation). In the English version of the same episode, No. 16 is given a robotic voice and speaks with considerably less emotion, unlike in the Japanese version where he is human-like and empathetic. No.16 tells Gohan to "drop [his] restraints" because "[he] has the strength" (Funimation). This line not only removed a traditionally female trait, emotionality, from No.16, it also assigns a traditionally male trait, "strength", to Gohan. Similarly in Gohan's added English internal monologue, he says "I won't watch this anymore" with the subtext that he is ready to take control over the situation and become angry while lacking the same kind of emotional suspense in the Japanese counterpart. This example shows that characters in *Dragon Ball Z* fit strict gender stereotypes to a much greater extent in the English version than its Japanese counterpart. Furthermore, the emotional component of the Japanese characters refute Bresnahan, Inoue, and Kagawa's claim that gender expectations are reinforced instead of teaching new attitudes in DBZ. Therefore, Bresnahan, Inoue, and Kagawa's claim that *Dragon Ball Z*, is sexist and carries negative effects is much more accurate about the American version. In fact, relative to the conservative culture and attitude around gender in Japan, *Dragon Ball Z* should be considered very progressive due to the way it showcases more nuanced presentations of characters' gender identities. For instance, even when women in *Dragon Ball Z* take on forms of domestic roles, they are also brilliant scientists or martial artists. In terms of voices, males in the English version have deeper pitches and are represented to be more confident and controlling.

On the other hand, many important male characters, including Goku, are voiced by women in the Japanese version. The dichotomy between the gender identity of Goku and his voice inherently offers the characters a sense of androgyny. The opposed tendency of American interpretations to re-dub as to comply with expected societal roles offers commentary beyond gender but also on individual identity as a whole.

Individual identity is usually thought of in terms of freedom and authenticity in the US, yet, characters in the American version of *Dragon Ball Z* fit archetypes of pre-existing myths regarding their identities, alluding to the idea that compliance to certain societal identities is a part of American culture. The American myth of freedom and independence encourages people to be unique and authentic, which implies the ability to resist compliance to social norms. This leads to the thought that characters in media should be authentically represented to reflect the values of the myth. However, these values aren't represented in *Dragon Ball Z*. This disparity in expectation and reality regarding individual identity is examined by Damon Boria. Examining Jean-Paul Sartre's ideas, Boria argues that "the iconic American Myth of freedom...the independent individual - is actually the serialized individual." Seriality is the act of fitting into different societal labels with specific obligations associated with them. Boria argues that this seriality is "key to establishing the 'dictatorship of public opinion.'" Living as a "serialized subject", Boria suggests, is "cowering away from possibilities" (Boria 36-37). This idea of the serialized individual relates back to the altered versions of *Dragon Ball Z* characters. The way that Goku fits into a superhero archetype with a tough voice, and the way that No.16 was strictly interpreted to be a robot are examples of Sartre's idea of seriality. The public standards for these

characters prevent them from being represented in unexpected ways as opposed to the Japanese version.

The Japanese *Dragon Ball Z* characters are more fluid in expression and quite out of line with how one would expect them to be, which exemplifies the ways in which the English counterparts fail to allow deviations in character expression. However, the inflexibility with which English *Dragon Ball Z* characters are presented improves their appeal within American markets. Using Boria's idea of seriality and extending it to the audience, it's reasonable to assume that this American audience would be more compelled to see characters that operate under a similar set of societal expectations. Therefore, the English version of *Dragon Ball Z* is likely to be popular in the US by appealing to familiar American myths. However, removing the authentic elements and potential ideas that can penetrate and encourage internal reflection of American culture provokes the question whether the importation of eastern animation can really be considered cultural exchange.

Importation of foreign media is considered a form of cultural exchange, but only at a surface level. While keeping the unique look of Japanese animation, the localization of dialogue and narrative in the English version of *Dragon Ball Z* commodifies the Japanese cultural elements of the show while appealing to the American market. This point is supported by Michal Daliot-Bul, professor of Asian Studies. She claims that Japanese origins of anime such as *Dragon Ball Z* were used as part of its marketing strategy. Daliot-Bul extends this claim by emphasizing that "anime-inspired cartoons...[explore] the otherness of Japanese anime that comes into play with the otherness of Japanese culture itself, exhibiting the cultural fascination with cultures and the Other in late capitalism..." (Daliot-Bul). Ironically, the altered version of

Dragon Ball Z has removed most of its Japanese cultural references, and only the visuals aspect remains unedited. The idea of “otherness” is described in terms of cultural commodification by bell hooks in her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. She argues that the success of the “commodification of Otherness” is attributed to how it is “offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling”, and that “ethnicity becomes spice” that can “liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture” (hooks 21). Connecting hooks’ idea to Daliot-Bul’s idea of “otherness of Japanese anime” and how this otherness became part of its marketing strategy, *Dragon Ball Z* along with other imported Japanese animations were commodified for their innovative visual styles while taking away a large part of what made them unique to Japan. This commodification of culture removes the significance of what is valued about the culture itself and displays it in artificial manners that appeal to the mainstream American audience while reinforcing dominant, monotonic American myths that remain unchallenged.

Dragon Ball Z for an American audience brought significant changes to the characters and the script, commodifying the uniqueness of the Japanese image while removing its cultural elements to fit American myths and stereotypes. Unfortunately, the anime industry is not the only industry that was taken advantage of and modified to appeal better to an American audience. This is not to say that cultural commodification always brings negative ramifications: Anime like *Dragon Ball Z* has brought happiness to its consumers in the US, and some viewers use anime as a gateway for exploring Japanese culture on a broader scale. However, cultural commodification does not necessarily bring positive ramifications either, since it requires the removal of authentic elements of the other culture and misrepresents what may be important to the people that belong

to those cultures. Ultimately, it is important to evaluate both altered and unaltered messages that may come across media and the myths that are driving them to be compelling, and examine to what extent those messages are reinforcing dominant ideas of the context that they belong to.

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