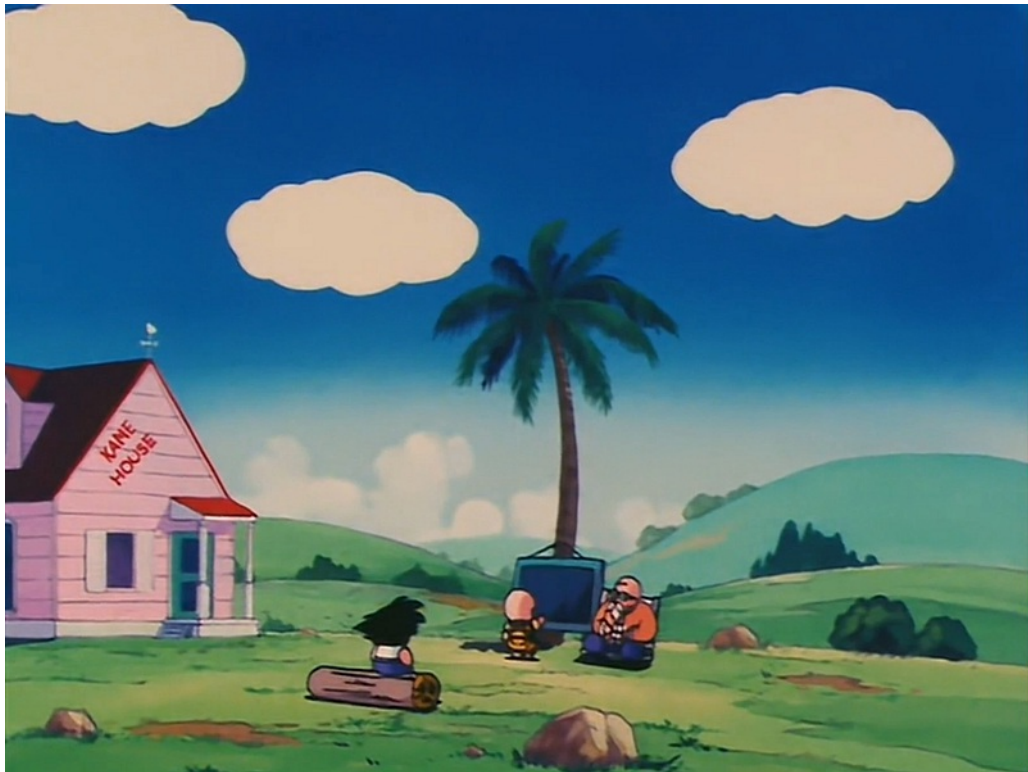

You are what you watch

The effects of foreign television programs on Filipino identity



Early episodes of Dragon Ball

Back then, I would rush and make sure I would finish my tasks before 5 PM to catch the latest episode of Dragon Ball Z as soon as I arrived from school!” my father enthusiastically narrates to me after asking him, “What is your favorite T.V. show?” I turned to my mother to try and ask her the same question, but I stopped myself. I recalled my younger self seeing my mother hyperfocus on the television to catch the latest developments of a Korean love triangle. That was enough for an answer. The same can be said with my girlfriend, but instead of watching the shows on television with Filipino dubs, she watches on her phone with Netflix. These observations resurfaced a question I have always thought about as a child, “How can these people who look nothing like Filipinos on T.V. speak Filipino?” The trend continues today, with Korean Drama (K-Drama) and Anime constantly topping Netflix Philippines’ most-watched weekly charts. Reflecting on that, I argue that because the Philippines had little time to develop its own identity in the film and entertainment sector post-colonization, the dominance of Japanese and Korean shows will only contribute to the pre-existing inferiority complex of Filipinos by obstructing growth in the Filipino film and TV industry.

Four hundred and seventy-seven years; four years; and forty-eight years. From 1521 to 1946, the ideals, lives, and dreams of Filipinos were caged

by Spain, Japan, and America (Blancaflor, 2018; Philippines Statistics Authority, n.d.; Office of the Historian, 2018). The inferiority of Filipinos was caused by colonization in several ways. First, the colonizers imposed their own culture and values on the indigenous population, which led to a loss of traditional Filipino customs and beliefs. Second, the colonial government instituted a system of racial segregation, placing Filipinos at a disadvantage in education, employment, and social status. Lastly, the economic policies of the colonial government favored the interests of businesses and landowners over those of the Filipino people, resulting in widespread poverty and inequality. Having little time to develop one's culture led Filipinos to deal with a colonial mentality, an ethnic and cultural inferiority (Decena, 2014). This inferiority complex can harm Filipino identity. It can make Filipinos feel ashamed of their culture and heritage. It can also lead to feelings of envy and resentment towards foreigners. In some cases, it can even cause Filipinos to doubt their abilities and worthiness.

Film and television shows are one of the most prominent expressions of Filipino culture due to the rise of symbolic actors like Dolphy “The King of Comedy” and Fernando Poe Jr. “Da King” for Action movies in the 90s (Matalog, 2020; Bardinas, 2019). After they both passed, most Filipinos noticed and agreed that the local film industry's quality started to dwindle when television networks started to air shows with themes not aligning with the country's morals, which will be discussed later in the paper.



Crash Landing on You — A K-Drama that took the Philippines by storm

It was 2003 when K-Drama dubbed in the Filipino language, or Tagalog, was first introduced to Filipino audiences through the broadcast of ‘Successful Story of A Bright Girl’ (MacDonald, 2022). When the series

ended, Joey Abacan, vice president for Program Management of a leading television network, noticed how the taste of Filipinos became very discriminating, desiring more shows of similar quality. As a result, enormous demands from Filipino viewers prompted the biggest Philippine TV stations to import more South Korean programs, which constantly topped the ratings (Anarcon, 2021).



Naruto — a classic anime series

Similarly, Filipinos' love for anime began in the early 2000s. TV networks brought in a variety of Tagalog-dubbed shows. This helped make anime content more accessible to its audience, kids in cities and provincial areas coming from all socioeconomic backgrounds (Adobo, 2022). The audience for anime is also wider than other cartoons made exclusively for younger children because it can tackle serious themes such as persevering in an unequal society. Some fans even grew up watching anime because their parents were also fans. Personally, some of the greatest memories I have with my family came from watching *Naruto* together — turning the struggles a certain character is going through into opportunities for sharing, vulnerability, and life lessons.

Filipino shows tend to be pale compared to K-Drama and anime because of their plot and production value — especially during the 20th century. This noticeable difference is what contributes to the feeling of inferiority. First, the plots of most Filipino shows broadcasted on the largest television networks centered around themes such as adultery and revenge. Being a Catholic country, this mostly discourages audiences from households who want to instill positive values in their family. Interestingly, television networks continue to milk these themes because of strong demand from the viewers, who are mostly proletariats that

enjoy gossiping to pass the time during manual-labor shifts (Payos, 2016). This stark difference in negative themes versus the wholesome and practical concepts in anime and K-drama, for example, discourages viewing homemade shows. Second, the production quality of the majority of Filipino shows suffers because they are produced on a low budget (Qin, 2016). Movies and T.V. series alike often look cheap and poorly made in comparison to foreign shows—especially in terms of video effects.

That is why when the maturity of the internet expanded the viewing of shows from televisions to computers ranging from phones to desktops, Filipinos flocked to foreign shows (Guingab, 2021). Filipinos took advantage of this rise to equalize content creation away from large-scale organizations and into their own independent hands. However, this only applied salt to the wound as the social media content of Filipinos is made up of harmful pranks, poverty porn, and other shallow forms of content created by fellow Filipinos. Consequently, Filipinos bash and conclude that their content is inferior to other cultures that lean on creating educational content with complex storytelling techniques. This phenomenon of Filipinos dismissing content made by their own is called cultural cringe. For context, A A Phillips coined the term ‘the cultural cringe’ to describe an Australian tendency to identify their literature and art as inferior to work produced overseas (Philips, 2006).



Trese—a Filipino “Anime” about creatures from Filipino Superstitions

The good news is production quality of Filipino shows has dramatically improved in recent years. This is most evident in *Trese*, an animated series featuring Filipino superstitions, and the upcoming *Voltes V* showing off Hollywood-like video effects (Lecaros, 2021; Ramos, 2022).

The characters are now complex and they come with nuanced storytelling. Filipinos can now produce world-class shows. This is due to the influence of foreign television programs setting a higher bar for what audiences expect from their entertainment. Although there are similarities in film style and techniques, I would argue that this does not represent Filipinos succumbing to international standards. Instead, Filipino producers merely borrow mediums to tell more original stories from their rich cultures.

You are what you eat. This phrase helps convey that identity is formed through the media we consume. Instead of food going into your mouth, ideals creep into your brain, defining how you think and, consequently, who you are. Imperatively, **you are what you watch**. Filipinos who watch foreign shows go against the idea of nationalism growing with romanticism, as stated in a book called “The Lies that Bind” (Appiah, 2018). In contrast to France’s proud arts and literature celebrating their independence which continues to be a theme in their media today, Filipinos will have almost nothing to romanticize due to the lack of representation in the media they consume. This does not make Filipinos less Filipino because it is simply evolution proving to us that national identities are complex. Cultures reinvent and evolve as made evident by the improvement of shows made possible by the borrowing of cross-cultural mediums.

After 529 years of colonization, Filipino expression through the local film industry of the Philippines thrived. The lack of desirable content in 20th-century shows, however, pushed both Filipino viewers and broadcasting networks to import foreign television shows as prime-time programs, which obstructed further growth of the culture. Fortunately, Filipinos took this downtime as a time of learning. As the internet exposes more Filipinos to higher-quality content, the majority of recent shows are receiving positive reception as they exhibited improvement in storytelling and visual effects. Ultimately, K-Drama and Anime may have stunted the development of Filipino culture, but they also improved it indirectly by introducing new mediums and inspiring innovative ways of storytelling in contemporary Philippines.

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