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## **World Wrestling Entertainment in Japanese Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

### **Introduction**

Approximately 16,000 pro wrestling fans were jammed into the Yokohama Arena on 01 March 2002, paying \$1.1 million to see the first show by American international sports entertainment property World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), formerly a regional promotion in the Northeast that launched a national media phenomenon in the 1980s when it paired with the growing strength of cable and pay-per-view television and remains based in Stamford, Connecticut, creating the first most successful wrestling touring group and television program on a national level.

Shane McMahon, who along with sister Stephanie is heir to the McMahon family wrestling empire controlled by their father, Vince McMahon, was scheduled to come out early in the show, in front of the capacity crowd. His family company had not been to Japan for a show since the mid-1990s, when they only drew 4,500 fans in the same building, and fans hated parts of the show so much they chanted “refund.” Something had changed by 2002, though, and WWE was the place to be for thousands of people in Tokyo.

McMahon entered the ring, accompanied by translator Wally Yamaguchi—a figure Japanese pro wrestling fans might know as a referee for Japanese wrestling organization All-Japan. As McMahon began to speak to the crowd through Yamaguchi, the duo was met with a loud series of boos. According to journalist Dave Meltzer, “The crowd, particularly the ringsiders, were furious. They wanted WWF, not WWF translated into Japanese.”<sup>1</sup> Shane

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<sup>1</sup> Meltzer, Dave. *The Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, 11 March 2002, 5. At the time of this show, the WWE was still called the World Wrestling Federation, but the name was changed after a dispute with the World Wildlife Fund for the shared acronym.

McMahon, knowing this wasn't the reaction he had expected when introducing the WWE show to the fans, decided to change course midstream and kicked the translator out of the ring.

Instead, he started speaking to the audience in "slow and easy English."<sup>2</sup> Even though many in the audience only had a cursory understanding of what he said, he received a standing ovation.

This was a pivotal moment for the WWE. Amidst sagging popularity in the States, the company hoped to aggressively pursue an international audience, and this reaction from Japanese fans—and the gate the Yokohama show drew—was certainly the type of response they needed. Gaining a complete understanding of the WWE's relationship with Japanese fans in the four years from 2002 until 2006 illuminates revealing data that helps inform larger questions. What has been the historical link between American professional wrestling and Japanese fans? Does the WWE draw a different audience than Japanese pro wrestling? How does this moment, when Shane McMahon kicked his translator out of the ring to a standing ovation, fit into a discussion of globalization? The violence and mayhem of the pro wrestling world can inform us about the transcultural flow of popular culture by understanding how the WWE's very Americanized presentation balances with the interests of a Japanese audience, and this study intends to understand the negotiation of globalized popular culture consumption by examining the ways in which cultural products have to be designed differently with an international audience in mind.

The intent of this essay is to use historical accounts of American pro wrestling in Japan, drawing particularly on journalistic work, as well as a few excerpts from the memoirs of American pro wrestlers. While these sources have given a strong on-the-ground account of the reaction to American wrestling in Japan, there has been no attempt in writing to examine the trajectory of the WWE's popularity in Japan. By taking into account what led up to this 2002 to

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

2006 period, as well as journalistic accounts of the WWE's show during these four years, I hope to bring to the surface and examine the vernacular theory inherent in this work.<sup>3</sup> Particularly, I draw heavily on the week-by-week accounts of Dave Meltzer, the only professional journalist who covers international pro wrestling on a weekly basis through his *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, covering the events of pro wrestling and mixed martial arts in America, Canada, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Japan, and elsewhere.

This study draws heavily on understanding the business success of these shows, measuring success by attendance statistics and the amount of revenue WWE shows generate in Japan. My intent is to try and understand the cultural and social capital of the WWE by its correlation with an ability to generate financial capital. In his illuminating study of the Tsukiji fish market, Theodore C. Bestor writes of a study of “trade and economic institutions as they are embedded in and shaped by the cultural and social currents of Japanese life, an ethnography of how economies—how markets—are themselves created by the production and circulation of *cultural* and *social* capital as well as of goods, services, and financial assets”<sup>4</sup> (emphasis his). While my study does not include ethnographic research, Bestor's call for understanding how the cultural and social are intertwined with the financial is a pivotal justification for my use of business data and journalistic accounts to understand the phenomenon of American wrestling in Japanese culture in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Further, in his examination of the transnational links of American and Japanese culture through the Pepsi “Pepsiman” advertising campaign, Noel M.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas McLaughlin writes about theory outside the academy and how the local expertise of non-academics should be taken into account. In short, it's arguing for a truly ethnographic anthropological approach to theory, in which theory is not in the exclusive domain of the academic and in which non-academic voices are considered to have valuable contributions to understanding the world. McLaughlin, Thomas. “Introduction: Theory Outside the Academy.” *Street Smarts and Critical Theory*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1996, 3-30.

<sup>4</sup> Bestor, Theodore C. *Tsukiji: The Fish Market at the Center of the World*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2004, xvi.

Murray writes that “a methodology needs to be developed to facilitate the analysis of migration and transformation of meanings across country markets.”<sup>5</sup> While this study does not share his goals of an anthropological study of advertising and does not arrive at a methodology as to how one can study transnational migration across markets, I hope that the data provided here will further bolster the validity of such an approach.

Above all else, this study hopes to add to the growing literature that examines the phenomenon of *pop cosmopolitanism*. As described by Henry Jenkins, the concept looks at the ways in which people experience other cultures through pop culture products, both learning about those other cultures and creating their own meanings in the process.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Jenkins writes about the fervor for authentic Japanese anime in American culture in his book *Convergence Culture*, focusing particularly on the activity of “fansubbing,” in which fans provide as much Japanese cultural information as possible to subtitle the works themselves and attempt to retain as much of the original meaning as possible.<sup>7</sup> One possible explanation for the moment in which fans requested the removal of the Japanese translator for Shane McMahon is their desire to experience an authentic American product. The balance WWE has shown throughout the four years in question between providing that authentic product, while also making concessions to the Japanese audience, illuminates the complicated transcultural flows of pop cosmopolitanism that will be explored throughout this essay.

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<sup>5</sup> Murray, Noel M. “Pepsiman! Toward a Theory of Symbolic Morphosis in Global Advertising.” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 39.6 (2006): 1077-1092, 1077.

<sup>6</sup> Jenkins, Henry. “Pop Cosmopolitanism: Mapping Cultural Flows in an Age of Media Convergence.” *Globalization Culture and Education in the New Millennium*. Ed. Marcelo Suárez-Orozco and Desiree B. Quin-Hilliard. Berkeley: U of California P: 2004, 114-140.

<sup>7</sup> Jenkins, Henry. “When Piracy Becomes Promotion.” *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York UP, 2006, 156-161. For more information, see Leonard, Sean. “Progress Against the Law: Anime and Fandom, with the Key to the Globalization of Culture.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 8.3 (2005), 281-305.

## Scholarly Interest in American Pro Wrestling

Current American interest in pro wrestling takes an unlikely lineage, best traced out by scholars Gerald W. Morton and George M. O'Brien in their book, *Wrestling to Rasslin': Ancient Sport to American Spectacle*. They trace the roots of the American exhibition of wrestling to athletic competitions in Egyptian, Jewish, Greek, and Roman cultures and a long tradition of "real" wrestling in European culture. That wrestling tradition in Western culture collided with Native American conceptions of wrestling as well and spread in popularity through the Civil War, when troops on both sides wrestled each other as a pastime. Many of these soldiers, after the war was over, began touring with carnivals to display their wrestling skills. Not surprisingly, carnival barkers like P.T. Barnum soon decided to capitalize on the showmanship, giving these grapplers costumes and characters and fixing the matches. The increasing visuality and performative style of pro wrestling bonded with television from its infancy, and wrestling has thrived in both national and regional distribution ever since.<sup>8</sup>

Since French Semiotician Roland Barthes first examined professional wrestling in 1957 (translated into English in 1972), American academics in particular have sought to understand why millions of people across the country are attracted to this performance of violence. Barthes claims pro wrestling is "a spectacle of excess," as the hero's struggle against the unfair tactics of the villain provides a plethora of symbols of suffering and justice.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, sociologist Erving Goffman finds the power of pro wrestling to be a key narrative, in which the hero adopts the rule-breaking tactics of his opponent in order to retaliate against him, only after the

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<sup>8</sup> For more information on the historical relationship of American wrestling and television, see Beverly, Forest Steven. *A History of Professional Wrestling as Television Programming*. Master's thesis, Auburn: Auburn U, 1989.

<sup>9</sup> Barthes, Roland. "The World of Wrestling." 1957. *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972, 15-25, p. 21.

rulebreaker has first broken the frame of fair play.<sup>10</sup> In other words, pro wrestling fans like the show most when the rules break down, and it is that departure from the rules that causes the excitement of a match's climax.

Other scholars have taken the opposite approach, trying to understand why fans enjoy wrestling when, so often, the villain comes out with a victory. Both Barthes' and Goffman's theories examine why fans enjoy the struggle of the hero, but that struggle does not always end in revenge. Anthropologist Jim Freedman defines this struggle between hero and villain as a metaphor for the struggle between the ideal of capitalism as a community of equal opportunity and the reality of capitalism as a lack of adherence to basic rules necessary for fair competition.<sup>11</sup> While the hero is battling under the assumption of fair play, the villain is taking advantage of the loopholes, and Freedman believes the audiences he studies in rural Canada understand that disconnect between the professed values of equality and competition and the reality, where the cheater always seems to get ahead. Media scholar Henry Jenkins has written about pro wrestling as a masculine melodrama<sup>12</sup> and as a populist form of entertainment that defies conservative/liberal titles in the American pop culture landscape,<sup>13</sup> while Sut Jhally and Jackson Katz attempt to demonstrate the narrow conceptions of masculinity in the pro wrestling world.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Goffman, Erving. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1974, 418.

<sup>11</sup> Freedman, Jim. "Will the Sheik Use His Blinding Fireball? The Ideology of Professional Wrestling." *The Celebration of Society: Perspectives on Contemporary Cultural Performance*. Ed. Frank E. Manning. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1983, 67-79, pp. 71-73.

<sup>12</sup> Jenkins, Henry III. "'Never Trust a Snake': WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama." *Out of Bounds: Sports, Media, and the Politics of Identity*. Ed. Aaron Baker and Todd Boyd. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997, 48-78.

<sup>13</sup> "Wrestling with Theory, Grappling with Politics." *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*. Ed. Nichols Sammond. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2005, 132-166. This book, as the only anthology of essays by multiple scholars on pro wrestling currently in

Both Jim Freedman<sup>15</sup> and Sharon Mazer<sup>16</sup> have furthered an understanding of pro wrestling by conducting an ethnography of pro wrestlers themselves, as Mazer details the training process of the professional wrestler and the unclear line in that initiation process between “real” and “fake.” An ethnographic research approach has been taken up by Nick Trujillo as well to attempt to measure the complexity of the audience and many of the incorrect stereotypes the American pro wrestling audience has been labeled with, including some of the stereotypes of his own research team.<sup>17</sup>

My previous work on pro wrestling has attempted to combat some of the narrow confines scholars like Jhally and Katz have put on the pro wrestling world by examining a popular pro wrestling figure who does not fit into their narrow descriptions as to how wrestling defines manhood.<sup>18</sup> My ethnography of pro wrestling fans in Kentucky, Indiana, and Tennessee, finds varying levels of engagement in the pro wrestling text, from an appreciation of the event as a dramatic show and athletic exhibition to active engagement as part of the show.<sup>19</sup> Some American fans believe that a loud and involved crowd are a major part of what makes a show

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print, is a helpful companion for understanding many of the takes on American and Mexican professional wrestling.

<sup>14</sup> Jhally, Sut and Jackson Katz. *Wrestling with Manhood: Boys, Bullying, and Battering*. Media Education Foundation, 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Freedman, Jim. *Drawing Heat*. Windsor, Ont., Canada: Black Moss, 1988.

<sup>16</sup> Mazer, Sharon. *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1998.

<sup>17</sup> Trujillo, Nick, Paul Cruz, Georgine Hodgkinson, Heather Hundley, Ahna Ligtenberg Heller, Rebecca Livingston, and Daren Obenaus. “A Night with the Narcissist and The Nasty Boys: Interpreting the World Wrestling Federation.” *Qualitative Inquiry* 6.4 (Dec. 2000), 526-545.

<sup>18</sup> Ford, Sam. “Mick Foley: Pro Wrestling and the Contradictions of the Contemporary American Hero.” *Bodies of Discourse - Sport Stars, Media and the Global Public*. Ed. Michael Real, Cornel Sandvoss, and Alina Bernstein. Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton P, forthcoming 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Ford, Sam. “Role-Playing in the Stands: A Symbolic Interactionist Ethnography of Professional Wrestling Fans.” In revision process, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*.

“good” and see their job as playing this role, or else sending a message to the promoters when they don’t like a show by not playing their part.<sup>20</sup>

Japanese fans and Japanese wrestling, however, have a much different history and traditionally a different form of audience engagement, as well as a divergent range of expectations from a pro wrestling performance. These scholars, and a wide variety of other academic pieces on pro wrestling throughout the past few decades, may explain various reasons why American wrestling fans enjoy pro wrestling performances, but they do little to explain how and why Japanese fans enjoy American pro wrestling. Certainly, the cultural specificities of Japanese and American culture make any cross-cultural reading problematic, but my approach—considering my lack of knowledge about Japanese culture—centers more on the WWE response to the Japanese audience, rather than trying to proscribe a motivation on the WWE’s Japanese fan base.<sup>21</sup> In order to understand the Japanese relationship with American pro wrestling, however, I want to very briefly examine the history of American wrestling in Japanese culture.

### **Americans in Japanese Wrestling**

The most important figure in the formation of professional wrestling in Japanese culture was Rikidozan, a Korean-born immigrant who became a national cultural icon while hiding his

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<sup>20</sup> In my study, I even found some fans who justified their involvement in the show by explaining that, while they knew the wrestling was fake, there were some there, including children, who didn’t know the truth, and they didn’t want to spoil the magic for them.

<sup>21</sup> Here, I hope to take the approach that Chad Dell does in his book, *The Revenge of Hatpin Mary*. Dell is writing about female fandom of pro wrestling in America from 1945 to 1960. While he has the luxury of interviewing some former female fans of wrestling after the fact, the majority of his approach is to understand this phenomenon by examining journalistic accounts from the period. In lieu of actually being about to see these phenomena firsthand, these accounts from the time period provide the best opportunities for understanding the Japanese audience’s interaction with the WWE. Dell, Chad. *The Revenge of Hatpin Mary*. New York: Peter Lang, 2006.

true ethnic identity. Rikidozan was first a fairly accomplished sumo competitor, coming from the very different athletic background that pro wrestling has in Japan. However, pro wrestling as it is currently known in the country did not begin until the post-World War II period, when the American conception of wrestling collided with the Japanese sumo traditions. According to historian John Molinaro, Rikidozan was recruited by Americans in a 1951 pro wrestling tour, hoping to capitalize on his sumo fame.<sup>22</sup> He was soon taken to Hawaii and then to San Francisco, where he became a headlining wrestler, teaming with former boxing champion Primo Carnera. After a year in the U.S., where he was scheduled to lose only five of 260 matches, word had made its way back to Japan as to the success of their sumo competitor in American pro wrestling shows. The clever marketing of Rikidozan, by giving him both a chance to learn the pro wrestling style from Americans while also making him a mythical figure back home by sending news of his success through the news wires, led to Rikidozan announcing the formation of Japan Pro Wrestling Association in 1953.

Rikidozan became a well-known name in wrestling in both countries and, through partnership with American promoters, made wrestling a staple of early Japanese television, much as it was in America. The formula was to bring in big American wrestlers for Rikidozan to fight, and the sight of a Japanese man chopping down the 6'6" and 6'7" American Sharpe Brothers became a cultural legend and both cemented pro wrestling in Japanese culture and American involvement in Japanese pro wrestling.<sup>23</sup> Molinaro writes, "Thousands of fans crowded department store windows and parks that had television screens set up to watch the match live and cheer on their native son as he exacted revenge on the U.S. for leaving their nation poor and

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<sup>22</sup> Molinaro, John F. "Rikidozan." *The Top 100 Pro Wrestlers of All Time*. Toronto: Winding Stair P, 2002, 14-19.

<sup>23</sup> Molinaro points out the irony that Rikidozan was actually Korean and the Sharpe Brothers were actually Canadian, but that didn't matter much in terms of the storyline, p. 17.

devastated,” and the “brilliantly orchestrated morality play of Japan vs. America would become a staple of Japanese wrestling and a defining theme of Japanese network television for decades to follow.”<sup>24</sup>

While Japanese characters were largely known in American culture as an occasional heel performer who threw salt in the eyes of opponents, like Prof. Toru Tanaka and Mr. Fuji in the McMahon family’s WWE (then called the World Wide Wrestling Federation), American performers were a fundamental part of the Japanese wrestling phenomenon, and eventually became accepted in both *face* (hero) and *heel* (villain) roles. However, the *gaijin* wrestled a different style when touring Japan, based on the sumo tradition and cultural factors that led to an audience that disliked the theatrics of American pro wrestling, particularly outside interference, disqualifications, or matches with “cheap” endings. The presentation of wrestling was, in a way, more serious, and the Japanese audience was much quieter. Wrestler Terry Funk, who is a wrestling legend in both the U.S. and Japan, writes in his memoir, “The fans in Japan always reacted to wrestling differently than the fans here. A lot of it was the way it was presented to them, in the ring and from the commentators. The sense of realism stretched from their training to their booking. It created a domino effect—from the promotion, to the reporters and then onto the people.”<sup>25</sup>

For instance, American world champion Lou Thesz, who was famous in this country for his serious take on wrestling and for eschewing the theatrics of some of his more colorful contemporaries, described his shock when he landed in Tokyo with a mob of people he claims the newspapers estimated as 15,000 who were there to greet him. “They were there to welcome

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<sup>24</sup> Molinaro, p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> Funk, Terry, with Scott E. Williams. *More Than Just Hardcore*. Champaign, IL: Sports Publishing, 2005, 62.

me, the first world champion wrestler to ever visit Japan. That's when I began to suspect that pro wrestling had an enormous future in Japan," he said.<sup>26</sup> Another American wrestler who became a major draw when he toured Japan was "Classy" Freddie Blassie, who was known as "The Vampire" in that country. The Japanese promoters had advertised him by showing pictures of his biting opponents, and when he saw the ads on coming to Japan, he started filing his teeth while doing press interviews to play up the "vampire" aspect of his character there. Legend has it that, during his series of matches with Rikidozan, "six elderly men suffered heart attacks watching the brutality of close-ups of Blassie biting. Blassie became a household name."<sup>27</sup>

After Rikidozan's murder at age 39, Japanese wrestling was dominated by two major stars who studied underneath him, The Giant Baba (owner of All-Japan) and Antonio Inoki (owner of New Japan). Both had ties with American promoters and regularly brought in American wrestlers for tours, with Japanese wrestling publications often including pictures and information about American wrestlers. However, American promoters seldom put on cards in Japan themselves, instead working through relationships with Japanese promoters.

### **WWE's Previous Trips to Japan**

Current WWE owner Vince McMahon's father, Vince Senior, ran the WWE from the 1960s until the early 1980s and had a working relationship with New Japan Pro Wrestling, occasionally featuring their wrestlers on his shows at Madison Square Garden and sending his wrestlers to Japan for tours. The figurehead president of the company on the shows themselves was even Japanese for a while, with Hisashi Shinma from New Japan playing the WWE

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<sup>26</sup> Thesz, Lou, with Kit Bauman. *Hooker: The Autobiography of Wrestling Legend Lou Thesz*. Self-Published, 1998 (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.), 156.

<sup>27</sup> Meltzer, Dave. "Freddie Blassie." *Tributes II: Remembering More of the World's Greatest Professional Wrestlers*. Champaign, IL: Sports Publishing, 2004, 14-27.

President role.<sup>28</sup> However, when the WWE expanded on cable television in the 1980s and put many regional promoters out of business, they opted to begin touring in Japan in joint-promoted shows with Japanese promoters instead of merely sending over a few wrestlers for a tour. In America, Ted Turner-owned World Championship Wrestling and the WWE were both looking at ties with the Japanese market, considering the continued success of Japanese wrestling since the 1950s.

WWE worked with both All Japan and New Japan to promote the “U.S. and Japan Wrestling Summit” on 13 April 1990, not promoted as a major deal in America but promoted heavily to the Japanese audience through the two Japanese organizations. The show was considered something of a disappointment for not selling out the huge arena rented for the event, but it drew 41,000 fans and a \$2.1 million gate, and drawing a 14.1 rating on NTV.<sup>29</sup> With all the promoters trying to put a show on together, arguments ranged from endings of matches to where the ring would be positioned to how the ring announcer would announce time limits.

Another WWE joint-promoted show, held on 30 March 1991, along with the Super World Sports promotion, drew 42,000 fans, but reports are that only about 25,000 had paid and the rest were giveaways.<sup>30</sup> The main event pitted top American star Hulk Hogan and a top Japanese star, Genichiro Tenryu, teaming against an American team who had wrestled often in Japan, The Road Warriors. The undercard featured former sumo Grand Champion Koji Kitao against an American with sumo background, John Tenta. The final attempt at a co-promoted show with SWS was on 12 December 1991, in which WWE star Hulk Hogan defeated Japanese

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<sup>28</sup> Meltzer, Dave. *The Wrestling Observer Newsletter*. 24 May 2004, 17.

<sup>29</sup> Meltzer, Dave. *The Wrestling Observer Newsletter*. 28 July 2003, 5-6.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 21 June 2006, 4.

star Genichiro Tenryu. The show drew about 40,000 fans, with about 31,000 of those paying for a gate of \$1.5 million.<sup>31</sup> SWS closed its promotion soon thereafter.

As mentioned before, WWE continued on with attempts to promote shows in Japan itself, but a show in the mid-1990s only drew 4,500 fans for a 17,000-seat arena, and that number included a lot of giveaways, “the smallest crowd ever for a pro wrestling event in that arena” at the time.<sup>32</sup> Aside from the aforementioned refund chant, reports from that show was a quiet crowd, many of whom reportedly only came to buy WWE merchandise rather than wanting to actually see the show.

### **WWE in Japan: 2002**

Reports are that the March 01, 2002, show was the exact opposite of the WWE’s mid-1990s show at Yokohama, with every character down to the opener being popular. More than 200 reporters came to the press conference a month before the show,<sup>33</sup> and Japanese promoters were reportedly stunned at the tickets selling out in the first day, since their events were not often selling that quickly in 2002.<sup>34</sup> Feedback indicated that the majority of the fans for this show were there to see the WWE and, as opposed to the audience in the mid-1990s, were not necessarily Japanese pro wrestling fans. The \$1.1 million gate was one of the largest for a non-televvised event in WWE history, and even the families of Japanese wrestlers competing for the WWE had to pay for tickets, with almost no giveaways. According to Meltzer, the crowd acted as an American crowd would rather than a traditional Japanese audience, cheering “for the trademark spots as opposed to the building of matches as a Japanese crowd would.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 27 September 2004, 10.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 11 March 2002, 4.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 04 February 2002, 11.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 28 January 2002, 10.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

In 2002, WWE aired on Japanese cable, which has very limited subscription in the country, as well as a one-hour show airing after midnight on TV-Tokyo. They were drawing less than half the ratings of Japanese wrestling shows that come on late night as well, but the audience at the show seemed to know all the personalities and even brought signs to hold up for their favorite wrestlers, written in English, and other fans came dressed in costume.<sup>36</sup> When a popular Japanese professional wrestler came out before the show started to do announcing for the event, people ignored him, as they seemed intent on seeing an American pro wrestling show come to Tokyo, rather than Americans blending into a Japanese wrestling show, as they could from the Japanese promotions. The WWE tour continued on to Singapore, drawing 11,023, and Kuala Lumpur, drawing approximately 14,000.

Rumors after the show began circulating that WWE would partner up with Japanese wrestling promotions in the future for shows, but most of these were either spread by Japanese publications or Japanese promoters themselves, hoping to capitalize on the popularity of the American wrestling show. Instead, WWE made it clear that they planned on doing one WWE-only tour in 2003.<sup>37</sup> Further, WWE created a Japanese fan club after the success of this first show to capitalize on Japanese WWE fans, as opposed to Japanese pro wrestling fans in general. With WWE's success in Asia, rumors even began to circulate that there were plans to create an Asian office for the company.<sup>38</sup>

### **WWE in Japan: 2003**

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<sup>36</sup> A report in the 12 May 2003 of the *Wrestling Observer* revealed that the Smackdown show that launched on Fuji Network, while giving more exposure to WWE, was commentated by a Japanese comedian who didn't know anything about wrestling and a play-by-play announcer who didn't even know the wrestlers' names most of the time. See p. 16.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 10 June 2002, 15.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 16 December 2002, 16.

WWE planned that tour for Jan. 24-25, 2003, at the Yoyogi Gym in Tokyo, with a trip to Seoul, South Korea the day before. The Yoyogi Gym, with a 13,000-seat capacity, sold out for the first show and came close to a sellout with the second, with 16,000 of the seats being sold to the WWE Japan Fan Club for the two shows combined before ever going to sale to the public, with several thousand more selling in the two hours they were made available.<sup>39</sup> While the WWE had seen major decline in its domestic popularity in 2002, and Japanese wrestling organizations were struggling as well,<sup>40</sup> the WWE's popularity in Japan continued to be astounding for this second tour, playing on the scarcity of being about to attend WWE live events. In the States, the WWE had split its roster in two after buying out rival WCW, creating a Raw and a Smackdown division (the names of its two shows).

The January 2003 Japanese tour featured the Raw tour, as well as Smackdown wrestler Yoshihiro Tajiri. The tour also sold out in Seoul, with 10,000 fans at the Jamil Basketball Stadium and appearing as the lead sports item in ever major South Korean newspaper. The Japanese fans bought approximately \$15 in merchandise per person.<sup>41</sup> The second show ended up with 2,000 tickets left unsold, attributed at the time to the Smackdown brand being more popular than the Raw brand in Japan. Firsthand reports stated that Japanese fans were yelling American phrases like "asshole" or "you suck" at wrestlers. While still presenting an Americanized show, the WWE tried to play up the Japanese ethnicity of several of its characters

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 09 December 2002, 10.

<sup>40</sup> For more information, see Meltzer, Dave. *The Wrestling Observer Newsletter*. 17 February 2003, 4-5. According to 2003 polls, wrestling had fallen to the tenth most popular sport position in Japan, after being as high as number three in the 1980s. Meanwhile, a summer 2003 poll of American sports fans found wrestling to be the second most hated of more than 100 sports, with only dog fighting ranked lower. See issues 21 June 2003, 2, and 06 October 2003, 4.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 03 February 2003, 7.

and even allowed Tajiri, not normally a major character on the American broadcasts, to get a shot at the championship.<sup>42</sup>

While the WWE originally announced plans for only one tour a year, with the “brand division” into Raw and Smackdown, they announced that the Smackdown crew would come to Japan in 2003 as well, with a planned tour in July.<sup>43</sup> In fact, given the lack of enthusiasm for the WWE product at home, the company announced it planned to expand its number of international dates from 19 to 31, including the tour of Japan and Thailand in mid-July and several other planned Asian tours.<sup>44</sup> WWE continually, however, emphasized its philosophy to continue running shows on its own.<sup>45</sup>

The company also made another significant decision, to start creating storylines on WWE television that might help sell more tickets and make the fans more enthusiastic while on tour in Japan. While Japanese WWE wrestlers like Tajiri, Sho Funaki, and The Ultimo Dragon never received significant pushes as main event talent, while being placed higher on the card in Japan, a storyline launched on Smackdown in July, with wrestler Eddie Guerrero turning on partner Tajiri, was done to create a high-profile match for the Japanese tour.<sup>46</sup>

The WWE ran shows on 17 July and 18 July at the Yokohama Arena and on 19 July in Kobe. The last two shows sold out well in advance, with the second Yokohama show drawing 15,500 and \$1.3 million and 8,998 fans in Kobe. The 17 July show, added after the first show

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 03 February 2003, 11.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 21 June 2003, 2.

<sup>45</sup> WWE VP Jim Ross’ philosophy was reported to be that, since every company wanted to do business with WWE, the best plan was to do shows on their own, without getting involved in the political battles of the Japanese pro wrestling industry. “He felt it was better not to send any talent to Japanese groups” to keep from “diluting the WWE events as the only place to see WWE talent.” Ibid. 26 April 2004, 3.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 14 July 2003, 11.

sold out, was not anywhere as close to full, with about 10,000 or so fans, announced as 11,600.<sup>47</sup> Big shows from Japanese wrestling organizations that same weekend also did decently well, with All Japan at Budokan Hall drawing 15,800 fans (about 4,000 or so giveaways), WJ drawing about 6,000, and New Japan drawing about 6,500. Interest in the WWE shows were reported to have been driven by the first appearance of Olympic-gold-medalist-turned-pro-wrestler Kurt Angle and women's wrestler Sable, neither of whom had wrestled in Japan before. Japanese wrestlers were placed prominently on the card, and rumors started circulating that WWE might eventually bring a big pay-per-view event to the Tokyo Dome.

### **WWE in Japan: 2004**

Based on its popularity, the company decided to create a book release solely for the Japanese market, a memoir of wrestler Yoshihiro Tajiri, and also translated the books of two of its prominent historical wrestling figures, Hulk Hogan and Freddie Blassie, into Japanese as well.<sup>48</sup> Otherwise, the company announced its philosophy as continuing to have one Raw and one Smackdown tour per year in Japan, for fear that any more than that would dilute the success of their shows.<sup>49</sup> For its February 2004 Raw tour, WWE announced in late January that the \$1.6 million advance for the Saitama Super Arena on Feb. 07 was already the largest gate in company history for a non-televised show, making it seventh place at the time for the largest gate in WWE history.<sup>50</sup> When the Fuji Network gave WWE a chance to promote their shows in a ten-minute spot on 01 February, Vince McMahon made Japanese wrestling promoters furious by playing up the entertainment aspects of his shows and even showing backstage footage that demonstrated

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 28 July 2003, 1.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 19 January 2004, 19. A history of Vince McMahon and American wrestling called *Sex, Lies, and Headlocks*, was translated into Japanese as well, called *The Dictator of WWE*. Ibid. 29 March 2004, 10.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 26 January 2004, 9.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 02 February 2004, 15.

how this was, indeed, a “show.”<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, WWE was also announcing plans to continue its drive into India, despite an unsuccessful 2003 tour, by expanding its marketing deals there.<sup>52</sup>

The February 2004 tour grossed more than \$3 million in ticket sales, with 20,002 fans at the Saitama Super Arena drawing almost \$2 million. The show, which lasted four hours, drew a lot of people on their mid-20s, many of whom appeared to be on dates, “described as more like a rock concert crowd than the more wrestling educated crowd” at Japanese pro wrestling events.<sup>53</sup> WWE made several Japanese concessions in the show, including not having any outside interferences and clean endings to matches, as an attempt to balance between fans who want to see the American product and the traditional Japanese pro wrestling product. Further, WWE star “Stone Cold” Steve Austin appeared on the show, trading in his trademark American beers for Asahi.<sup>54</sup> The WWE, however, only drew 2,117 in Hiroshima, with a gate of only \$290,000, and 7,012 fans in Osaka, paying about \$800,000, showing that “the fanaticism of the Japanese fans toward WWE is starting to fade outside Tokyo.” However, the company announced plans for an upcoming tour for the Smackdown brand. Further, WWE kept rumors alive that they would eventually like to have a Japanese PPV super event.<sup>55</sup>

The July tour at Budokan Hall for Smackdown concerned many for the oversaturation of the Tokyo market in particular.<sup>56</sup> The two-day tour, however, called “Return of the Deadman” and highlighted by an appearance from WWE wrestler The Undertaker, did more than \$1 million each night and was a major success. WWE played on Japanese wrestling history in matches, showing that they expected to draw traditional wrestling fans to some extent, but they also had a

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 09 February 2004, 16.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 16 February 2004, 1.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 12 July 2004, 11.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 31 May 2004, 7.

“cheap” finish in the main event the first night, angering traditional fans and causing accusations of American wrestling promoters who do not care about the local product from those fans.<sup>57</sup> However, the show definitely drew a much different audience than the Japanese wrestling product, many of whom were either couples or whole families and not the predominately young adult male audience of Japanese wrestling shows. According to Meltzer, “From reports from the building, lots of people that came were attending the first live show they had ever seen.”<sup>58</sup> The first show drew 9,614 fans, and the second—a sellout a week before the show—drew 12,525, making it the 14<sup>th</sup> most financially successful show in WWE history at the time.

By the end of the year, WWE announced plans to shift its philosophy to do overseas tapings of television shows while on tour, both to make the tours last longer—since the wrestlers would not have to come back to the States as quickly for television tapings—as well as to give an even bigger incentive for attending to international fans. With international fans still more excited about seeing WWE live than domestic fans, the question became how to balance these tours with maintaining the feeling of scarcity for the WWE product in markets like Japan.<sup>59</sup>

### **WWE in Japan: 2005**

The WWE planned its first TV events from Japan for 04 February and 05 February at the Saitama Super Arena, with both Raw and Smackdown rosters being in Japan for the tour, while still playing up rumors that they eventually planned to run a major PPV event in Japan,<sup>60</sup> and the company even spread the rumor that they could eventually hold WWE Wrestlemania—the company’s major annual event—in Tokyo.<sup>61</sup> The previous year’s Wrestlemania, in 2004, had

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 26 July 2004, 7.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 11 October 2004, 1.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 17 January 2005, 15.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 07 February 2005, 18.

sold to 21,000 homes on PPV in Japan, the highest number for any foreign event in Japanese history.<sup>62</sup>

The Smackdown show sold out well in advance,<sup>63</sup> and the Raw event ended up selling out by the event as well, making the two days the most successful television tapings in WWE history financially. The Raw show drew 16,657, while the Smackdown show drew 18,757, and a combined \$3.5 million gate. According to Meltzer, for the WWE's first television shows from Japan, "The company tried to both present its usual product, and tweak it a little with a Japanese flavor in the arena."<sup>64</sup> Those tweaks included more wrestling than the average WWE television show, and a WWE Tag Team Title victory for British wrestler William Regal and Yosahiro Tajiri, in front of Tajiri's native crowd.

The WWE also used sumo Yokozuna Akebono on both shows. Meltzer wrote, "It was smart business for WWE, because Akebono is such a major cultural figure that his being part of the shows gave the company far more mainstream publicity."<sup>65</sup> While traditional Japanese crowds were known to be silent, Meltzer pointed out that the WWE crowd on the live TV event was "far more wild than any Smackdown crowd in months."<sup>66</sup> WWE decided to capitalize on this Japanese publicity by scheduling a sumo match for its annual Wrestlemania event, pitting Akebono against American WWE star The Big Show. The announcement made the front page of *Tokyo Sports*,<sup>67</sup> although it drew protests from The Japanese Sumo Association for a "worked" sumo match.<sup>68</sup> While the crowd in California for Wrestlemania were not excited by

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 28 February 2005, 12.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 24 January 2005, 23.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 14 February 2005, 4.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 21 February 2005, 11.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 21 March 2005, 10.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 04 April 2005, 16.

the sumo event, the sumo match made Wrestlemania XXI a high-profile event among Japanese sports fan, with the Japanese media giving it more coverage than American media. Every Japanese sports paper had front-page coverage of Wrestlemania following the event, which followed traditional sumo traditions and involved no Americanized wrestling.<sup>69</sup>

While the Fuji Network cancelled all WWE programming, WWE planned to follow up its successful February television tapings with another Japanese tour in July from the Saitama Super Arena,<sup>70</sup> along with plans for shows in Nagoya and Kobe.<sup>71</sup> To play up on his Wrestlemania involvement, Akebono was planned to wrestle on one of the Saitama shows.<sup>72</sup>

The July 2005 tour, following a Seoul, South Korea show, was a joint tour that drew 9,500 on 01 July and 12,500 on 02 July, for a total gate of \$2 million. Reports were that the second show drew a more traditional Japanese audience, in that the crowd was often quiet, even when interested, and only built toward big reactions from time-to-time.<sup>73</sup> Fans were reportedly initially upset at Akebono's involvement, feeling that it was diluting the American product, but did give him some cheers.

### **WWE in Japan: 2006**

A February 2006 tour showed signs of WWE's popularity in Japan waning, perhaps due to the two tours a year giving people such regular access to the WWE product, as well as a dearth of television coverage in the country. The Smackdown tour, playing to two dates at the Yokohama Arena, drew 8,530 fans the first night and 7,090 the second night (with reports that the 7,090 was more like 4,000, the number the WWE drew in the mid-1990s), being labeled "the smallest

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 11 April 2005, 3. Of course, Akebono won the "contest."

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 8, 17.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 18 April 2005, 11.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 16 May 2005, 11.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 11 July 2005, 12.

crowd WWE has ever drawn for a show in the Tokyo metropolitan area.”<sup>74</sup> Of course, being that WWE did significantly better the night before, the key indicator was that there was no longer enough interest to sustain back-to-back shows in the same arena, made worse for WWE’s spirits because the Smackdown tours were historically the more popular. A show in Bangkok during the Asian tour drew approximately 5,000.<sup>75</sup>

In October, the Raw crew ran two shows at Budokan Hall, drawing 5,633 fans the first night, for \$515,000, and 6,579 fans the second night, for \$520,000.<sup>76</sup> Because ticket prices are significantly higher in Japan, the show was still profitable but certainly down from WWE popularity a couple of years ago. According to Meltzer, “What has happened with WWE in Japan is since they got dropped from the Fuji Network, the fan who might tape the shows or watch them late at night (they were on past midnight) could follow the storylines. Now, just on cable, which isn’t as developed as in the U.S., you have a lot less people following the product. Those that do are just as into it as before.”<sup>77</sup> Beliefs are that the WWE in 2006 is drawing more heavily on the hardcore wrestling audience, who is more likely to still be seeking out the product, as opposed to the more casual fans who were filling up the arenas in the past few years.

### **WWE’s Television Product and Japanese Stereotypes**

As Brendan Maguire and John F. Wozniak point out, pro wrestling has long played heavily on racial and ethnic stereotypes.<sup>78</sup> From the German and Japanese villains of the Post-World War II era to the Russians of the 60s and 70s, wrestling has a long background of playing

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 13 February 2006, 6.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. 30 October 2006, 17.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 25 October 2006, 11.

<sup>78</sup> Maguire, Brendan, and John F. Wozniak. “Racial and Ethnic Stereotypes in Pro Wrestling.” *The Social Science Journal* 24.3 (1987), 261-273.

up current events with villainous foreign heels.<sup>79</sup> The WWE has continued that tradition, whether it be the Iron Sheik when American/Iranian hostilities were at a peak in the 1980s or La Resistance, a French team who drew the ire of American fans post-9/11. Yet, when the company is attempting to draw a massive international audience, some of these business practices have to be rethought.

In 2004, WWE made plans to bring in Japanese wrestler Kenzo Suzuki, running a promo on its *RAW* broadcast for his new character, named Hirohito. The character was introduced amid old war footage, and the obvious plan was to try and create an evil Japanese villain of the post-World War II type.<sup>80</sup> Why the WWE thought this would draw well among current American fans, most of whom do not have memories of strong Japanese hostilities, much less how they thought Japanese fans would react to such a narrow-minded storyline, much less bearing the name of a beloved leader from recent Japanese history, has been debated.

However, after word got out in Japan as to plans for the gimmick, the fear was that WWE would ruin its Japanese business.<sup>81</sup> The original plan was to make Hirohito a major character, wrestling at the top of the card against the WWE Champion.<sup>82</sup> However, he was eventually debuted under his real name and languished on the mid-card, aside from a run as one-half of the tag team champions. The character still demonstrated many Japanese stereotypes, even without being called Hirohito,<sup>83</sup> but was widely regarded as a terrible wrestler, above all else.<sup>84</sup> By the end of the year, the writer who proposed the Hirohito gimmick had been fired, with some

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<sup>79</sup> Of course, with its roots in Rikidozan battling the evil gaijin, there are similar uses of racial stereotypes in traditional Japanese wrestling storylines as well.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 26 April 2004, 14.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 03 May 2004, 16.

<sup>82</sup> Ironically, the WWE Champion at the time was Canadian, but they had changed his hometown to “now residing in Atlanta, Georgia, perhaps to capitalize on a Japanese vs. American dynamic.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. 14 June 2004, 1.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 21 June 2004, 17.

speculating that his plans for that character may have been among the reasons for his termination.<sup>85</sup> Current debate continues around a WWE character named Jimmy Wang Yang, a Japanese-American redneck character currently on Smackdown and playing with various Japanese stereotypes.<sup>86</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The WWE has continually attempted to balance its domestic product with an attempt to maintain and foster an international appeal, especially at a time in which numbers are down from a late 1990s popularity boom for the company in the U.S. However, taking an international audience in mind raises new questions about the business dangers of relying on old stereotypes, as the WWE's change of heart regarding the Hirohito character demonstrates. Meanwhile, the Japanese audience has to balance its desire for an authentic American product with a desire to see that product tweaked in some ways for the interests of a Japanese audience. Should matches be conducted in the colorful "American" style or the more traditional serious athletic Japanese style? Fans seem to expect an authentic American product that nevertheless acknowledges the "Japanese-ness" of its audience at points, and WWE has tried to find ways to balance the American stereotypes of U.S. pro wrestling's past with a transnational audience.

To return to the quandary posed at the beginning of this study, that moment when fans asked Shane McMahon to kick the Japanese interpreter from the ring, one inclination might be to say that it proves the cultural imperialism of the WWE, internalizing a desire for another culture's language. However, as James L. Watson points out, the outward appearance of

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid. 15 November 2004, 11.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. 20 November 2006, 17.

globalization must be distinguished from the meaning that people attribute to that product.<sup>87</sup> The WWE's rise in popularity may well be ascribed to its very Americanness and the Japanese desire to learn more about the "meat" of American culture and a product not attuned to their interests but presented as authentically American, as the concept of pop cosmopolitanism might indicate. In this case, while the fans enjoy winks at their culture, they desire a product that does not attempt to replace WWE legends with Japanese pro wrestlers or sumo stars—they want to see an American wrestling show as if they were an American audience, to experience some aspect of "American-ness" through an American media product. The idea here is one of "cultural fragrance," not "cultural odor," where the authentic American product is what is sought out, not a desire to make the show more Japanese.<sup>88</sup> While this cannot be substantiated without the ability for ethnographic evidence to back this claim up, the pop cosmopolitan theory does seem to help explain the Japanese fervor for an American wrestling product.

The pop cosmopolitan approach to understanding Japanese fandom of the WWE may also serve to explain its waning in popularity with more regular shows in Japan. The uniqueness of attending an American wrestling show wears off when fans have the chance to see it more and more often. Further, with the loss of a major media outlet in the country distributing their product, the WWE is at a disadvantage in reaching less hardcore wrestling fans and fostering a desire from pop cosmopolitans for American entertainment.<sup>89</sup> As Dave Meltzer said, "Two tours

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<sup>87</sup> Watson, James L. "McDonald's as Political Target: Globalization and Anti-globalization in the Twenty-First Century." *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia*, Revised Edition. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford UP, 183-197.

<sup>88</sup> Iwabuchi, Koichi. "How 'Japanese' is Pokemon?" *Pikachu's Global Adventure*. Ed: Joseph Tobin. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004, 53-71.

<sup>89</sup> As Iderpal Grewal points out, "the influence of global media, made possible by the presence of media conglomerates and their local affiliates," are key in providing the channels by which fans become connected with this content. With the chance to reach casual fans stripped away, the WWE is left with only the hardcore Japanese wrestling fans who seek out WWE programming

a year is too much. People want to see it once a year or every two years. It's an American novelty."<sup>90</sup>

Understanding the way the WWE and Japanese fans have fostered this arrangement answers the call of anthropologist Ian Condry to find a way to understand “how the forces driving new cultural styles emerge from the interaction among diverse actors—media industries, artists, fans, writers, and so on—in a way that requires grasping the connections (rather than oppositions) between culture industries on one hand, and creative artists and active fans on the other.”<sup>91</sup> This process of pop cosmopolitanism and examining these cultural flows through the financial success of these shows helps flesh out the active ways in which Japanese fans and the WWE have constructed this transnational relationship and how it has evolved in a four-year period. What this process shows is that globalization, for all parties concerned, is far from a passive enterprise and that Japanese fans are very discerning consumers of American pro wrestling, desiring authenticity yet respect, novelty yet familiarity, and, above all, an entertaining show.

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as part of their interest in pro wrestling in general, as opposed to the pop cosmopolitans who make the difference between six-figure and seven-figure gates. Grewal, Iderpal. “Traveling Barbie: Indian Transnationality and New Consumer Subjects.” *Positions* 7.3 (199), 799-826.

<sup>90</sup> Meltzer, Dave. Personal Interview. 06 December 2006.

<sup>91</sup> Condry, Ian. *Hip-Hop Japan: Rap and the Paths of Cultural Globalization*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2.