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**FAN FICTION THROUGH INTERCULTURAL  
THEORY**

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Prohlašuji, že jsem práci vypracovala samostatně s použitím uvedené literatury a zdrojů informací.

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Previous research has studied fan fiction in various fields such as creative writing, second language learning, education, therapy and culture. This thesis demonstrates how intercultural values are reflected in works of online fan fiction. All three works included in the thesis are written in English and feature an east Asian culture, namely Japanese and Chinese cultures. The thesis analyses each work in a separate chapter, examining the found intercultural phenomena and determining the work's possible contribution to the writer's and readers' intercultural education. As a result, the thesis reveals that fan fiction writing and reading may help the fans understand cultural practices that a foreign media might include but not fully explain. Furthermore, the thesis shows that the habit of integrating foreign words in an anglophone text poses an easy way to learn the words through the context and thus better understand their usage. Additionally, the thesis clarifies how fan fiction may serve as an authentic account of the experiences of the minority group members and this way may educate outsider readers. Presenting the evidence and explanation of the various ways fan fiction reflects intercultural values, the thesis concludes with a proposal for the inclusion and active use of fan fiction in the classroom to support students in the development of intercultural intelligence.

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## INTRODUCTION

Ever since the development of language, which was later supported by the invention of writing, stories have played an important role in the daily life of humankind. Not only are stories one of the most obvious manifestations of our imagination and creativity, but through them, we have also preserved our learnings, beliefs, histories and a vital part of our identity, our culture. Throughout our evolution, some of our tendencies vanished while others persisted to the present day, storytelling being one of the latter. Similarly to our ancestors, we use stories to indulge our curiosity, express ourselves and educate both ourselves and others. From this perspective, fan fiction, which we may describe as “fan-produced texts that derive from forms of media, literature, and popular culture” (Black, 2007, para. 3), is no different from the traditionally published literature we all are familiar with. The first notable emergence of fan fiction writing is usually associated with the science fiction magazines published in the 1920s and 1930s (Thomas, 2011) but it may be argued that the concept of fan fiction is as old as storytelling (Thomas, 2007). Regardless of its origins, today, fan fiction writing poses a widespread hobby among people of diverse backgrounds, which are one way or another reflected in the stories. While the popularisation of fan fiction in recent years may be attributed to various factors, the advance in modern technologies and their gradual accessibility to the wider public is considered to be a major one (Thomas, 2011). Other than more time to spend with one’s favourite fictional characters and worlds, the main appeal of today’s fan fiction seems to be the lack of restrictions. Fan fiction of any content and form may be uploaded online from anywhere in the world, at any time and by anyone with access to the internet. Correspondingly, very few limitations exist for the potential readers. They may consume the fan fiction immediately after its publication so long as they possess a suitable device and internet connection. Most websites designed for fan fiction posting, such as [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net), [www.wattpad.com](http://www.wattpad.com) or [www.archiveofourown.org](http://www.archiveofourown.org), categorise the works based on the source media, offer filtering, provide space for author’s notes and encourage readers to leave a review or a comment. This way, works of fan fiction online are easy and generally free to publish, find and read.

One might argue that stories that are not fan fiction may be self-published as e-books and then read online the same way. Of course, that is indisputably true. In fact, many aspiring authors choose to avoid traditional publishing and make use of the options the internet offers. Fan fiction, however, eases the pressure put on traditional authors to be creative,

precise and efficient in the characterisation, world-building and narration of their stories. Furthermore, fan fiction allows the fans to explore their favourite characters and worlds under different lenses than those of the original media. Thanks to fan fiction, fans may also interact with each other and bond over their shared interests and ideas.

Naturally, the popularisation of fan fiction has spread past fan communities as well. With the increase of academic interest in fan fiction, it is not unusual to come across studies of fan fiction in relation to the development of writing skills, acquisition and practice of a second language or educational and therapeutic potential. During the preliminary research for the thesis, I read articles such as “Writing in the Wild: Writers’ Motivation in Fan-Based Affinity Spaces”, which prompted teachers to use fan fiction writing practices in their classrooms (Curwood et al., 2013), and “Access and Affiliation: The Literacy and Composition Practices of English-Language Learners in an Online Fanfiction Community”, which analysed how fan fiction can be used for language learning (Black, 2005). I even encountered a book called *Using Superheroes and Villains in Counseling and Play Therapy: A Guide for Mental Health Professionals*, which dedicated one chapter to therapeutic fan fiction (Rubin, 2019). However, the connection that interested me and prompted this thesis was that of fan fiction and intercultural theory. Inspired by the findings of the above-listed research, this thesis proposes the following question: How are intercultural values reflected in works of online fan fiction?

To answer the question, each chapter of this thesis deals with one work of fan fiction published online on the website [www.archiveofourown.org](http://www.archiveofourown.org). All three works are written in English, feature Asian cultures and were published between the years 2017-2021. The first chapter explains how anime-based fan fictions are often a fusion of two or more cultural influences, demonstrates how fan fiction supports the development of intercultural knowledge and observes how culture-related information about Japan is presented in an anglophone text. The third chapter studies a work of fan fiction in which the author intentionally plays the role of a native informant of Chinese and Canadian cultures. In this story, the author not only educates the readers about the Chinese language and family dynamics but also draws attention to certain issues immigrants and their children often face in both the native and host country. After demonstrating how works of online fan fiction reflect intercultural values, in its conclusion, the thesis proposes the use of fan fiction in the classroom.



## **I. MANGA AND ANIME FAN FICTION AS A MEANS OF INTERCULTURAL FUSION**

In order to establish the grounds for the following analysis, let us first draw the vital connection between fan fiction and culture. As Coulby (2006) observed, a full understanding of a foreign culture might be impossible for most people. Due to the strong bond between language and culture, the understanding one can have of another culture without a firm grasp on the language is fairly limited (Coulby, 2006). In recent decades, however, more and more people have become familiar with a culture without first-hand experiencing it thanks to the modern technologies, which allowed popular media to reach audiences outside the borders of their country of origin. Such is the case of Japanese manga and anime, which continue to rapidly gain global popularity among people of diverse backgrounds in terms of gender, age and nationality. Despite the industry's strict priority to appeal to its domestic market, international fans seem to find their way to manga and anime on their own (Pellitteri, 2020). Given Japan's history and culture are well reflected in its best-known forms of media, the interest in the country beyond the scope of fiction is to be expected. Although not all manga and anime fans actively engage with Japanese culture, memorizing a few cliché phrases, learning the difference between individual honorific suffixes and adapting to the usage of the last name instead of the given name has become common practice within the community.

According to Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, this communal habit can be interpreted as the early stages of cultural adaptation and integration, for the fans are able to adapt to a new, culturally foreign worldview and incorporate it into their own (Sinicrope et al., 2007). A special case of it can be observed in manga and anime fan fiction written in English, in which fans tend to fuse Japanese culture and language with other – usually thought not always western – influences. Whether produced with an intention or not, these texts present an intercultural fusion typical for the genre. Their value in terms of intercultural intelligence may be labelled as internal and external, though the boundary between the two is definitely not iron-fenced. The former refers to the cultural knowledge an 'outsider' fan fiction author acquires or broadens during the writing process. Compared to the knowledge fans gain through the passive consumption of foreign media, the individuals involved in fan fiction writing are not only able to recall the new information but to feature it and build on it in their work. As they are prone to working with the newly gained knowledge in an active manner,

often expanding it through their own research, fan fiction writers display great prepositions to truly acculture themselves with the foreign culture and develop a profound connection to it. Correspondingly, the external value is essentially a reflection of the authors' intercultural knowledge as well as all that the readers of this type of fan fiction can take away from it. The stories may for example help the readers who are new to the media to better understand the Japanese levels of formality and addressing others based on this hierarchy. Additionally, even if the reading of fan fiction equals a somewhat passive activity, it is not unusual for the fan fiction readers to become inspired by the stories they read and try their hand at writing as well, thus transforming their passive knowledge into actively used skillset. To sum up, manga and anime fan fiction offers a spontaneous opportunity for outsider fans to nourish and grow the cultural knowledge rooted in the consumption of Japanese media. In order to demonstrate how such works can be read with an emphasis on intercultural values, this chapter analyses how culture-related information about Japan is integrated into an anglophone text. The main aim is to present, explain, and exemplify how the integration illustrates the author's understanding of the culture and may contribute to the readers' intercultural education.

The fan fiction in question, *The Lies That Break and Make Us*, was written by a user of the pseudonym HomeForImaginaryFriends and posted on Archive of Our Own in 2018 under the *Haikyuu!!* fandom tag. As the author no longer replies to the comments on the work and has not shared any other social media account, their nationality is unknown to us. Regardless, we are looking at a fan fiction about Japanese characters in a Japanese history-inspired setting that is written in English. The combination of these factors and the notes of the author's research serves as clear evidence of the above-mentioned intercultural values. To provide a necessary background of the original media, let us first briefly look at the Japanese manga series *Haikyuu!!*. Created by Furudate Haruichi<sup>1</sup>, the manga first came out in 2012 and due to its positive reception gained a same-named anime adaption in 2014. The story revolves around a modern-day Japanese high schooler Hinata Shoyo, a boy who dreams of becoming a professional volleyball player, and thus joins the Karasuno High boys' volleyball team, where he begins his journey of learning about volleyball, friendship and hardship. Throughout the series, the fans meet numerous other teams, such as Karasuno's rivalling school Nekoma High, and their players.

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<sup>1</sup> Written in the order of surname, then first name. This rule applies to all of the Japanese names included in the first chapter.

*The Lies That Break and Make Us* focuses on Sawamura Daichi and Kuroo Tetsuro – the captains of Karasuno and Nekoma respectively – and their aged-up, reimagined versions placed in an alternative universe of a 19th century Japan. What makes the setting itself thought-provoking is the fact it is heavily inspired by the real events surrounding the Japanese political revolution in 1868. More commonly known as *Meiji Restoration*, the revolution shifted the rule of the country from the military government back to the emperor Meiji and essentially led to the modernization and Westernization of Japan. While the author does not claim to be posting a strictly researched and crafted work of historical fiction, they do reveal to be a university student majoring in the field of history and share a fairly long list of the cultural and historical information gathered for the purposes of the fan fiction in the author’s note section. This list includes, among other both thoughtful and amusing peculiarities, the following: medicine in feudal Japan, Japanese horses and spices, and the difference between shogunate and emperor (HomeForImaginaryFriends, 2018). When we speak of a fusion – in our case an intercultural one – we speak of a blend where one component is no longer separable from the others as they form a single entity. The choice of the word fusion here is deliberate, for *The Lies That Break and Make Us* heavily relies on the integration of Japanese culture and language in the anglophone text to deliver a straightforward but complex, subtle character-driven story about betrayal, healing, finding oneself and forgiveness<sup>2</sup>.

The most prominent part of this integration, other than the use of transcribed Japanese words, is the usage of names and honorific suffixes for storytelling purposes. Readers new to the world of manga, anime or Japanese culture overall may be confused at first but the confusion is not likely to take away from the story, which provides enough context and description of the events and emotions. Generally, the ‘outsiders’ experience less trouble with the names, as the traditional Japanese name order is clearly defined. In a manner characteristic of East Asian countries, Japanese names consist of the family name first and the given name second (Power, 2008)<sup>3</sup>. In accordance with these customs, the narrator of *The Lies That Break and Make Us* introduces the readers to Sawamura Daichi, Japan’s emperor. Since the story follows the emperor as the main character through a third-person limited point of view, he is referred to as Sawamura. While this detail might appear

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<sup>2</sup> Character-driven stories focus primarily on character growth shown through the sequence of decisions of the main character; their plot is often less active or dynamic.

<sup>3</sup> However, Japanese people often give their names in reversed order when using Western languages or introducing themselves to foreigners. This practice was mostly established during the Meiji period (Power, 2008).

to be insignificant to discuss after explaining the Japanese ways of addressing people, we may be looking at the very first evidence of the author's deeper understanding of the Japanese culture. *Haikyuu!!* fans are likely to recall that in the original manga and anime, this character insists on others calling him by his given name instead of his family name. Given the themes of the story, the author is likely preparing the readers for Sawamura's high status initially distancing him from the rest of the characters. Of course, one could argue it is entirely possible that the author simply deemed following the surname custom more appropriate in the context of the story. However, bearing in mind the author's play with the honorific suffixes analysed further in this chapter, this choice seems to be more deliberate. Although the narrator refers to Sawamura as such, the opening scene states that the characters of the story avoid doing so. In this scene, Kuroo Tetsurou – a no-name samurai and the emperor's lover – addresses Sawamura as 'Sawamura-sama'. Ignoring the highly respectful honorific suffix, Sawamura's thoughts are quite joyful:

“Sawamura-sama,” Kuroo whined, chin digging into Sawamura's shoulder with every syllable. Sawamura resisted the urge to grin, though just barely. No one ever referred to Sawamura by his name, it was far too disrespectful and suggesting an even standing with the emperor of Japan, and no one had that sort of standing. Sawamura was not quite ready to tell Kuroo how much he enjoyed hearing his name and not a title come out of Kuroo's mouth. (HomeForImaginaryFriends, 2018, para. 13)

Later in the first part of the story, when the narrator is still describing the events through Sawamura's pink glasses of love, Kuroo slips up and calls Sawamura by his given name during an intimate moment:

“Daichi-san.” His name on Kuroo's tongue was new, and Sawamura could tell that Kuroo hadn't meant to say it by the startled look on his face. But Sawamura could do nothing but smile, using his arms to push himself up and hover over Kuroo's face. (HomeForImaginaryFriends, 2018, para. 45)

Had the author chosen to refer to Sawamura as Daichi in the narration, then this moment would not be nearly as impactful as it is. Unless agreed on otherwise, Japanese people address each other by the family name and a corresponding honorific suffix (Power, 2008). Even when we put aside Sawamura's status as an emperor, the usage of the given name between Japanese people is usually reserved for family, close friends, lovers and married

couples. Kuroo's slip-up indicates he sees Sawamura no longer as someone to respect because of duty but rather as someone he feels affection for.

The tone of the narration changes drastically with Kuroo's betrayal, during which a group of rebels overtakes the palace, kidnaps Sawamura and isolates the former emperor from everyone. No longer blinded by the love for the man, Sawamura revokes the privilege he previously bestowed upon Kuroo:

“Dai-” Something must have crossed Sawamura's face for Kuroo cut himself off sharply. (HomeForImaginaryFriends, 2018, para. 145)

After this scene, Kuroo either avoids addressing Sawamura or uses his family name paired with the most common polite honorific suffix:

“Sawamura-san.” Kuroo's voice was hoarse and Sawamura couldn't quite hide the flinch at the use of his name, though he was glad Kuroo hadn't used his given one. (HomeForImaginaryFriends, 2018, para. 203)

Similarly intricately thought-out seems to be the author's play with the honorific suffixes in the direct speech of the characters. Japan is classified as a high-power distance culture, meaning the social status of an individual affects all of their social interactions, the complex hierarchy system is naturally projected in the language as well (Eylon & Au, 1999). From the text, it is clear that the author understands the importance of the implicit meaning hidden in the honorific suffixes, which are deeply rooted in the Japanese culture and lack a direct translation into English. The most common ones, such as *-sama*, *-san*, *-kun* and *-chan*, are scattered throughout the story. Given the frequency of their appearance, this chapter will closely examine only those used for storytelling. Returning to the already talked about opening scene, let us have one more look at the first time Kuroo addresses Sawamura by the name:

“Sawamura-sama,” Kuroo whined, chin digging into Sawamura's shoulder with every syllable. Sawamura resisted the urge to grin, though just barely. No one ever referred to Sawamura by his name, it was far too disrespectful and suggesting an even standing with the emperor of Japan, and no one had that sort of standing. Sawamura was not quite ready to tell Kuroo how much he enjoyed hearing his name and not a title come out of Kuroo's mouth. (HomeForImaginaryFriends, 2018, para. 13)

Although the two are lovers at the time, Kuroo still uses the highly respectful - *sama* honorific, which is the most formal out of the four used throughout the story. Japanese people reserve this honorific for people of higher status – for example, customers – but also for their deities (Sama, San, Kun, Chan: The Many Japanese Honorifics, 2022). Whenever Kuroo is teasing Sawamura by using this honorific (for it can be used ironically to suggest one thinks too much of themselves) or is remembering the enormous gap between him and Sawamura in the social hierarchy is up to interpretation; the -*sama* honorific only appears once. On the other hand, the most common gender-neutral honorific suffix -*san*, loosely translated as Mr./ Mrs., is between the characters exchanged regularly. Both -*kun*, usually used for young men, and -*chan*, used for young women, make an appearance as well.

Another example of the author’s integration of the Japanese culture and language is the previously revealed inclusion of Japanese words in their transcribed forms. Since these terms are often hard or even impossible to translate directly, their appearance in the text can feel more natural than wordy translations or explanations. Furthermore, while not every reader might be familiar with them, their integration typically makes them easy to pick up in the context of the story. For example, the readers might not know the term for the Japanese sword that is shorter than katana and worn by the samurai, *wakizashi* (Oxford, n.d.). However, the integration of the word in the text helps them to understand that the term refers to some sort of a weapon:

Tanaka stepped fully in front of Sawamura, making him come to a sudden stop as Tanaka pulled out his wakizashi, the soft sound of metal sliding against wood made Sawamura’s senses heighten. (HomeForImaginaryFriends, 2018, para. 129)

Besides the already discussed clues of the historical events inspiring the story, we can identify other instances of cultural integration. In an effort to create a story that feels authentic, the author includes many details of Japanese cultural practices, such as making an offering to the deities:

Sawamura had asked Yachi to help him make an offering to take up to the shrine, but he had wanted to do all the work himself. Cooking was just following basic instructions and Sawamura was skilled at many things in his life so listening to Yachi’s easy to understand steps should have been simple. The supposedly simple food was nearly unrecognizable, some parts burnt black while others remained uncooked. It was a horrid looking thing but Sawamura had an important favor to ask

so he wanted to make the offering himself. (HomeForImaginaryFriends, 2018, para. 252)

To explain, it is a custom to present the deities with a food offering, which varies based on many factors, for example, the shrine, the deity or the occasion (Britannica, 1998). Such offerings are traditionally home-cooked but people of higher social status are not expected to do so themselves. As the author mentions, while the offering itself plays an important role, it is the intention behind it that matters:

“Sugawara-san once told me it was less about the offering itself and more about the meaning behind it.” Yachi saying Sugawara’s name felt like a blow to his chest but he shoved away the crippling feeling and turned to look down at the younger woman. “You put time and effort into making this when you could have asked someone else to do it, I think the gods will appreciate that.” (HomeForImaginaryFriends, 2018, para. 261)

If we return to the intercultural values introduced at the beginning of the chapter, we can now safely conclude that based on all this evidence the analysed work both reflects the intercultural knowledge of the author and presents a way for readers to further their intercultural intelligence. The text shows clear instances of the author’s understanding of the complex way of addressing people, being aware of major historical events and their impact, being able to combine two languages and more. A key point is that the author’s gained knowledge of Japanese culture appears to be born out of unprompted curiosity and a genuine liking of their hobby – fan fiction writing. In other words, it was fan fiction writing that led the author to do their already mentioned research and acquire the discussed cultural knowledge. Furthermore, the exhibited knowledge may be of benefit for the readers new to the world of Japanese manga and anime, helping them acclimatize to the cultural differences and intuitively adapt to Japanese ways, such as the “switching” of names or using the honorific suffixes to denote a relationship between individuals.

With this conclusion in mind, we can turn to the full argument of this thesis, which is that online fan fiction can be of intercultural value. We would do well to remember that while the manga and anime fan fiction written in English plays a big role in the overall argument, the genre stands in for only one side of interculturally valuable fan fiction – the side of outsider fans exploring a foreign culture. Naturally, the complementary opposite would be fan fiction written by authors who integrate their culture in works based

on media not originating in said culture. Exactly this type of fan fiction is to be analysed in the following chapter in order to reveal the other side of the coin and compare the two.



## II. AUTHENTIC REPRESENTATION AND PROJECTION IN FAN FICTION

In the second chapter, we travel from the Japanese isles to one of the most culturally diverse places on Earth, the United States of America. Nevertheless, the focus of the thesis is yet to shift from Japanese cultural identity. As the title suggests, this chapter observes the use of fan fiction as a tool for cultural representation and projection in works of fan fiction based on western media. For a clear illustration of the chapter's key points and their linkage to the main argument, we shall analyse a fan fiction in which the author projects her cultural identity onto fictional characters and delivers an authentic account of her experience as a young Japanese American. In the analysis, we will examine the fusion of the Japanese and American culture, two different portrayals of Japanese Americans embodied by the main characters and the author's projection of her cultural identity, the representation the work creates for Japanese American readers and the work's message for the outsider readers. Due to the author's agreement to a brief interview oriented primarily on her cultural background, the analysis is further enriched by additional information allowing us to map out the broader context of the work. This way, the second chapter intends to demonstrate the work's intercultural value to its full extent.

*The weight grew golden* was published on Archive of Our Own by the user uraa in 2017. The work is based on the American animated series *Voltron: Legendary Defender*, produced by DreamWorks Animation Television and World Events Production, that first aired on the streaming platform Netflix in 2016 and said goodbye with the eighth season in 2018. Throughout the eight seasons of the show, audiences find themselves drifting through the space and fighting a galactic war alongside the five main characters: Shiro, Keith, Lance, Pidge and Hunk. Essentially, the series is a reboot of the Voltron franchise<sup>4</sup>, which was based on the Japanese anime series *Beast King GoLion*<sup>5</sup> and *Armored Fleet Dairugger XV*<sup>6</sup>. For *Voltron: Legendary Defender*, several changes were made in the areas of characterization, the most obvious ones being in the characters' races and sexualities. The main cast consists of a Japanese American (Shiro), Cuban (Lance), Italian (Pidge) and Samoan (Hunk), whereas Keith is only defined as a part human and part Galra<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> The Voltron franchise consists of comics (*Voltron & Voltron: Legendary Defender*), animated series (*Voltron*, *Voltron: The Third Dimension & Voltron Force*) and video games (*Voltron: Defender of the Universe*) owned by World Event Productions.

<sup>5</sup> The series was created by the Toei Animation Studio and ran from 1981 to 1982.

<sup>6</sup> The series was created by the Toei Animation and Daiwon Animation studios, running from 1982 to 1983.

<sup>7</sup> Galra is a fictional species of an alien race in the Voltron series.

Though the characters' heritages are far from a focal point of the show, the diversity of the cast led countless fans to feel seen and finally represented in the popular media. A fan article *What Makes Voltron Worth It* listed diversity as the number one reason to watch the show (LeggyBoiLance, 2017). Similarly, the author of the article *VOLTRON Season 2: Still A Leader in Representation!* reasoned that thanks to the diverse cast, "viewers and fans that usually don't get represented can connect more with these characters" (Pyun, 2017). In the mentioned interview about her cultural background, uraa said:

Shiro was the first Japanese character I saw in such a clear leader/hero archetype role, which previously I had seen almost exclusively white characters in. Shiro is renowned not for his intelligence in math or science but his piloting skill, he serves as a clear mentor for most of the paladins, and he's tall and buff and physically really strong as well. AND on top of that he's disabled and mentally ill, and we see him struggle with this. And he's also gay! VLD was the first time I had seen a Japanese character be any of the things I just listed. So Shiro became enormously important to me as a character because he was so complex and human and broke out of nearly every Asian stereotype I knew of, and in doing so he was really personally relatable to me as well. (uraa, personal communication, June 5, 2022).

Despite this, with the airing of the later seasons, the series became criticized for its portrayal of some of the characters and the waste of its potential. Among many average and negative user ratings of the series on the IMDb website, one of the user reviews rated the show one star out of ten, saying:

It does nothing with the potential it had in season one. Voltron queerbaited and killed off any good representation they had in addition to being increasingly derivative with the final season being basically a rom com with so many clichés that I lost count. Overall a massive disappointment. (sarcastic\_otaku, 18-12-18)

A Tumblr user backupblogforjg published a post titled *The racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism and cruel tropes in Voltron*, in which they list all the different reasons the show failed its audiences, such as:

The brown Cuban kid who dreamed of being a pilot, and never once in 78 episodes ever expressed anything but sheer love for an exciting life, in the final two minutes of the final episode ends up realizing that the place for him is a farm. (backupblogforjg, 2019)

In the article *Why the “Space Racist” Trope Is Bad for Women of Color*, the author analyses the way the show’s writers handled the racism of one of the non-white characters Allura, concluding the analysis with:

When I see characters like Bill and Allura being branded as “racist” for actions their white counterparts are never chastised for, it feels like these creators are laughing at us—like they’re sneering at me and every other black person out there who so desperately want to see ourselves reflected in our favourite shows and characters, saying “See, you’d be racist, too, if given the chance.” (Saffron, 2017)

*The weight grew golden* was written in 2017, before the show's finale. The fan fiction tells a story of a bittersweet holiday narrated by Takashi Shirogane, in the original show known as Shiro. Counting down the days before his expedition into space, the eighteen years old Japanese American Takashi befriends the new neighbour Keith, who is the only other Japanese teen around. During the heat waves of a Virginian summer, the two navigate through their perspective internal struggles and bond over their shared heritage. To no surprise, Takashi becomes Keith's brotherly figure and a mentor.

Similarly to the first chapter, we begin by observing a fusion of two different cultures in a single work of fan fiction. Unlike the case of the first work, however, we are no longer working with general information or suppositions regarding the author’s cultural background and experience. Before the eager readers may dive into the story, they are met with the author’s announcement: “this is a pretty personal fic and was based on a lot of real life experiences, so before any of u yell at me know that im a japanese american kid too :>” (uraa, 2017). Many might skip this note or not think much of it; for others, this declaration might change the way they perceive the story, which we will discuss. In the online text-based interview conducted for the purposes of the thesis, the author publishing under the pseudonym uraa revealed to be a child of a second and a third-generation Japanese Americans. Uraa’s bicultural background in the narration is reflected mainly in the actions and emotions of the characters and separating one cultural influence from the other presents a difficult task. However, a keen eye might find at least two instances in which we can speak of clear American or clear Japanese influence. In the first chapter, we familiarized ourselves with the Japanese customs of addressing others – the “reversed” name order and the rarity of Japanese people using given names. *The weight grew golden* does not obey any of these rules. Despite the main character being addressed as Shiro in the original show,

arguably to retain a sense of his Japanese heritage, in the fan fiction he is introduced by his first name, Takashi. Admittedly, we do not know the true reason behind this change. Yet we might consider the two most probable ones. Acknowledging fan fiction as a form of literary art, the change could have been made deliberately in order to lessen the distance between the readers and the narrator. After all, the fans associate Shiro with a strong leader figure and know him to be older than the rest of the teen team while in uraa's story, we experience his younger, more vulnerable and uncertain side. However, it is a fact that the usage of given names rather than last names is a common western custom. Keeping in mind uraa's heritage, the alternation could suggest an American influence. On the opposite side, we observe a detail many might not even consider being culturally driven. When Keith is visiting Takashi to be tutored for the first time, we catch an echo of a custom unlikely to be American:

“Thanks,” said Keith, and slipped his shoes off at the door without being prompted.  
(uraa, 2017, para. 47)

As is generally known, Americans tend to wear their shoes even inside their homes, whereas countless other cultures, Asian ones included, adhere to a strict “no shoes indoors” policy. Seeing this scene precedes the one revealing Keith's Japanese American heritage, we may deem the line to be either a method of foreshadowing or inclusion of the author's household ways in the story. Regardless of the notion behind the line, it prepares the readers for the bicultural theme of the story manifesting in the later scenes.

Another similarity to the first fan fiction we can find is the integration of Japanese words into the English text. In *the weight grew golden*, we encounter less of them and their usage is more intentional, usually appearing in direct speech between Takashi and Keith. The included Japanese vocabulary revolves mostly around food. To list a few examples, the readers come across *arare* (rice crackers), *shoyu* (soy sauce) or *ika* (squid). Other than the food, we learn that chopsticks are called *hashi* and *omiage* expresses the Japanese custom of gift bringing when visiting someone. Given the foreign words are used in dialogues in which Takashi is attempting to educate Keith, the terms are easy for the audience to understand and even remember.

*The weight grew golden* is the sole work of fan fiction in which uraa included her cultural identity and rather than celebrating it, the story is filled with her struggles. Navigating between two cultures can prove to be difficult, especially for individuals

belonging to two groups but witnessing a clear dominance of one over the other. Such seems to be the case of uraa and many other Asian Americans subjected to the lack of representation and misrepresentation of Asians in American media. Though the matter appears to be an easily prevented scenario, most of the minority groups of the US population are either severely underrepresented or portrayed in a limited, stereotypical way in the US media (Mastro, 2017). In the case of Asian representation in the US media, the ever-occurring stereotypes frequently reduce characters of Asian origin to either technology-obsessed geeks, model minority students and business owners or submissive women needed to be rescued and protected (Mastro, 2017; Dixon et al., 2019). The list of the common Asian stereotypes includes several more single-dimensional labels; those vary depending on age, gender and sometimes country. However, more often than not, Asian characters end up clustered into a single homogenous group in which cultural differences between the individual Asian countries play no role (Mastro, 2017). In 2016, *Voltron: Legendary Defender* seemingly strayed away from the typical and presented the leader of the young group, perceived as a strong hero and reliable mentor, as an Asian. However, while Takashi Shirogane is canonically a Japanese American character and does break many of the Asian stereotypes, the show put little effort into working with his cultural background beyond confirming this fact. This is where uraa turned to fan fiction writing, where she could explore the Japanese diaspora potential she wished to see fulfilled. This context is crucial to mention and remember because in uraa's story, she manages to represent two different kinds of Japanese Americans many might seek or relate to – Takashi as a native informant and a messenger and Keith as an unacquainted member of the group.

Upon the first read of *the weight grew golden*, Takashi appears to be a fairly straightforward narrator dealing with homesickness before even leaving, enjoying his last warm days and tutoring the new teen in the neighbourhood. At the second look, we notice a heavy weight placed on his shoulders. Becoming a native informant for the Japanese American teen his neighbours adopted is Takashi's own decision. He tasks himself with the role for he had the opportunity to be raised connected to his Japanese heritage, as he later admits to Keith:

I grew up with these things, I figured I could share the experience with another kid like me. (uraa, 2017, para. 162)

The way Takashi functions as a native informant is a fascinating aspect of the story. While his persistence in educating Keith is undoubtedly well-intended, not all of his reasons can be deemed entirely selfless. Other than the avoidance of dealing with his uncertainty related to his nearing departure, Takashi might be motivated to take Keith under his wing by something far more deep-rooted. As we will discuss in the second part of the chapter, the author projects most of her identity struggles onto Keith. Takashi – a projection of the guide uraa lacked and wished for – acts like an older brother and tries to assist in resolving those issues. However, we must remember that Takashi was not spared the specific loneliness of growing up as the only Japanese American child he knew:

“Oh, sorry, I just— not a lot of Asians around here, I guess you’ve noticed; I don’t think I’ve ever met another Japanese kid before—“ (uraa, 2017, para. 113)

With his neighbours adopting Keith, Takashi spots a chance. Although Takashi suspects Keith to be Japanese American the very first time he sees the new boy, only well into their studying sessions does he confirm this fact. His reaction to Keith’s reveal is naturally ecstatic:

If Takashi would describe any moment in his life as being the mental equivalent of being hit by an anvil of happiness, that was it. There was a tiny voice in his head chanting *Japanese kid, Japanese kid, Japanese kid* over and over.

“Seriously?” he said. “Me too! I’ve literally never met— that’s so cool. That’s awesome, man. That’s great.” (uraa, 2017, paras. 111-112)

Considering Takashi’s loneliness, one could say that he unconsciously begins to shape Keith into a Japanese American teen like himself to have a company of equal cultural standing. Ironically, that is precisely what uraa did when writing Takashi to be Keith’s mentor. Needless to say, Takashi’s loneliness too is a projection of the author. Throughout the story, Takashi uses several occasions to nudge Keith into learning more about their shared culture and embracing the yet unknown part of himself. The first culture-related conversation between the two is prompted by Takashi offering Keith a bag of rice crackers and Keith recognizing them:

“I think I had them when I was little.” Keith took another handful contemplatively.

“My dad would get them all the time.”

“Is...your dad Japanese by any chance?” Takashi tried not to let the excitement show through his voice.

Keith blinked at him like he’d missed something obvious. “I mean, yeah. My original last name is Kogane. You didn’t know?” (uraa, 2017, paras. 108-110)

This confession precedes the already analysed reaction from Takashi, after which he immediately begins reminding Keith of the Japanese terms of foods:

“The crackers, though.” Takashi handed him another handful. “Arare.”

“That’s the word.” Keith’s eyes flew open. “Yeah. Arare.” His tongue tripped a little over the r’s, but he smiled, finally a light, genuine smile. (uraa, 2017, paras. 117-118)

Towards the end of the scene, Takashi also offers to accompany Keith to the local Asian market, a place that for many Asian Americans poses a significant way to remain connected to their roots. The two visit a supermarket there twice, with the only description of the place being:

It smelled weird inside, like it always did, a combination of produce and fish and something else that was impossible to describe. He glanced back at Keith, looking curiously at pastel pudding packages stacked by the entrance and the characters stamped over their plastic. (uraa, 2017, para. 156)

In the fan fiction, Takashi and Keith’s bond is strengthened, if not created, due to their shared heritage. However, some might recall the mention that in *Voltron: Legendary Defender*, Keith’s “human heritage” was never specified. The brotherly bond of the two is undoubtedly inspired by the canonical friendship of the two, which may be the reason uraa chose Keith as “the other Japanese American”. Despite the fact all we learn about Keith is through Takashi, Keith represents many struggles of the author, such as lacking a sense of belonging and security in her identity. This experience is best articulated in a scene describing a conflict between Takashi and Keith. The near argument is triggered by Takashi pushing the label of Japanese American onto Keith, who feels like he does not fit it nor does he deserve it. In the line posing as the initial trigger, we see a clear example of Takashi’s desperate want for someone like him:

“Round two of Japanese snacks for the coolest Japanese American kid I know.” He paused, and smiled. “Well, the only Japanese American kid I know.” (uraa, 2017, para. 192)

Keith, to this point silent about his true feelings, is nowhere near as confident in his heritage as Takashi is:

“Yeah.” Somehow there wasn’t as much excitement in his voice as Takashi would have liked. “I mean. Not like I’m really Japanese, but.” (uraa, 2017, para.193)

However, Takashi insists:

Takashi paused. “Well, yeah, you’re Japanese American. Like me? We’re not really either, right?”

“I guess.” Keith shoved a cookie into his mouth and chewed doggedly. “Yeah.” (uraa, 2017, paras. 194-195)

Seeing Keith’s lack of confidence, Takashi corners Keith by mentioning Keith’s father, about whom we know very little:

“Isn’t your dad Japanese? So you’re Japanese American.” Takashi didn’t know why he couldn’t let this go. Keith was Japanese American. Like him. (uraa, 2017, para. 198)

The root of the conflict lies in Takashi’s blindness to Keith’s torn position and the inability to understand Keith’s standing as the unacquainted member of the group, as well as the emotions with it connected. As Takashi continues his attempts to convince Keith of their equality, Keith rightfully points out:

You know all these things, about the food, and the language, and how you have to bring gifts to people when you visit and you can use chopsticks and all that. You’re Japanese like that. I don’t know shit. (uraa, 2017, para. 201)

Only at this moment does Takashi realise the difference between the two of them. While based on all the evidence in the story we can assume Takashi grew up surrounded by both Japanese and American culture, Keith had not been that lucky. For this reason, Takashi decides to become a native informant for Keith and offers to teach Keith. Naturally dubious, Keith rejects the offer at first:

“But I don’t just— you can’t just teach me to be a certain ethnicity.” (uraa, 2017, para. 209)



Takashi refutes this argument with a valid point:

“Yeah, I can’t,” said Takashi, “because you already are. You’re literally Japanese American. You just don’t think so.” (uraa, 2017, para. 210)

Here we observe the origin of Keith’s problem:

“I know I’m physically Japanese,” said Keith, “just not— you know what I mean. I’m not one of you.” (uraa, 2017, para. 211)

While Keith looks like a Japanese American, he does not speak the language, does not know the customs and other than Takashi, has no one to guide him through the confusing waters of being bicultural. He refuses Takashi’s offer out of the belief it is too late for him to learn. Takashi reminds him that is not true and eventually, Keith surrenders the fight. The scene ends with Keith acknowledging and subtly accepting Takashi’s offer:

There was silence for a few more long seconds before it was broken by a long, shaky breath. Keith scowled, looking up, but didn’t make a move to shrug off Takashi’s hand. “Pass me the shoyu,” he said. (uraa, 2017, para. 219)

We may think this scene to be the climax of Keith’s character arc, for he seems to have begun the journey to come to terms with his cultural identity. However, in the scene following the argument, we spend more time with the duo, this time at an Asian market. During this scene, we witness Keith participating in his cultural education more actively:

They wander the store separately for a few minutes, Takashi getting groceries, Keith studying the packages and trying to pick out characters of hiragana. (uraa, 2017, para. 238)

Furthermore, Keith puts an obvious effort into the process of acculturation:

Keith opens the door of the case and pulls out a package seemingly at random. “Do we have time to get... uh...” He sweeps a hand through his hair frustratedly. “You literally said the word five minutes ago. Squid.”

“Ika?”

“Yeah.” (uraa, 2017, paras. 242-244)

Instead of simply repeating after Takashi, in this instance Keith is actively trying to recall a word he had heard in order to use and memorise it. In terms of character development,

Keith has made major progress under Takashi's mentorship. The readers might find Keith's shining moment to be his usage of the Japanese term for older brother when addressing Takashi:

“Okay, niichan,” says Keith sarcastically, smiling. “I’ll text you with all my chemistry problems.” (uraa, 2017, para. 265)

All things considered, Takashi and Keith present two very different but also deeply intertwined characterizations of Asian Americans that may reflect the experience of more than one Asian American.

The intercultural value of this work depends on our point of view. If we focus on what writing this fan fiction gave uraa, then we speak of the opportunity to project and represent her bicultural experiences as a young Japanese American. When asked about the reason for the inclusion of her identity in the work, she said:

I was 16 when I wrote it and I was really struggling to come to terms with my cultural identity as a Japanese American, especially with a sense of belonging and security in my identity. I didn't know any other Japanese Americans close to my own age and I desperately wanted someone like Shiro in my life who could tell me that my struggle was valid. (uraa, personal communication, June 5, 2022)

To explain the characterization of Takashi and Keith, she added:

At the same time, I was also projecting really intensely onto Shiro and Keith, so much so that the fic is almost autobiographical! But I was also aware of this as I was writing it, and so to some extent I definitely hoped that other diaspora, especially Japanese diaspora, might read it and feel less alone. It definitely made me feel less alone to imagine that the characters that I loved so much were going through the same thing that I was. (uraa, personal communication, June 5, 2022)

This leads to us to another point of view, one of the Japanese American fans. Thanks to uraa's story, fans relating to the same issues may find representation in the sphere of fan fiction. Upon opening the comments section of the story, we are met with some of these fans expressing their understanding of the struggles included in *the weight grew golden* and their gratitude to read it described, addressed and portrayed realistically. Takashi is a character that may validate their struggles, guide them through questioning their identity and assist in connecting to their roots.

The last point of view would be the one considering the fans who do not belong to the Japanese American group. The notion behind the feeling of “not being Japanese enough”, as well as the rest of the bicultural issues described, may be familiar to other immigrant groups in the US. Many may relate to the odd detachment from one part of their cultural heritage and thus find the story comforting despite not being Japanese American. That said, the concept may be entirely new to the rest of the audience, which allows the author to familiarise their readers with it in an unforced, authentic way. Without having to ask awkward, personal or too sensitive questions, the readers may learn a thing or two about what it is like to be an immigrant or a child of immigrants. In this perspective, just as Takashi is a messenger for Keith, uraa becomes a messenger for the outsider fans. With this conclusion, we may move to the third chapter of the thesis, in which we will analyse a work of fan fiction crafted with the intention to be interculturally educating. In the work, the author becomes the native informant and messenger in order to share their knowledge and introduce the readers to the intricate ways of the Chinese language, culture and families.

### III. INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION THROUGH FAN FICTION

In the previous chapters, we analysed two works of fan fiction and demonstrated their various intercultural values. During these examinations, we also exemplified the works' possible contribution to the intercultural intelligence and education of the readers while overusing the modals verbs can, may and might. That is because the works introduced so far were not created with the primary intention to educate their audiences. The first out of the three, *The lies That Break and Make Us*, was written for a fandom even and although rich in the integrated Japanese vocabulary, historical clues and cultural customs, it is unlikely the readers choose to read the work of its educational potential. As was shown in the second chapter, *the weight grew golden* succeeded in its intended mission to provide an authentic representation of young bicultural individuals struggling with their cultural identity. The work's themes considered, we can argue the work raises awareness of the portrayed issues and can be said to have educational features for outsider readers. However, we have not yet encountered a work of fan fiction in which the author deliberately educated the readers about their culture or matters to it connected. To fill this void and support the argument of the wide range of interculturally valuable works of online fan fiction, the third chapter presents the last work to be analysed. The fan fiction illustrates the importance of language in immigrant families and how the language barrier can exist even between family members. Furthermore, in just a little over three thousand words, the story gives the readers the opportunity to learn several Chinese familial terms and dishes and gain an insight into the Chinese family dynamics. The author not only explains the foreign words and culture-related information through the context of the story but also provides footnotes for the readers to refer to, fundamentally crafting a short story ideal for intercultural studies. As we will discuss in this chapter, the third story combines the intercultural values of the first two works, further stressing the main points of the thesis as we near its conclusion.

*拔根补种* || *Uprooted, Replanted* by the user merakily has been appealing to readers on Archive of Our Own since the story's publication in 2021. The work is based on a Chinese fantasy novel by the author Mo Xiang Tong Xiu called *Mó Dào Zǔ Shī*, translated as *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, and the TV series adaption, *The Untamed*. In summary, the story follows two cultivators, Wei Wuxian/Wei Ying

and Lan Wangji/Lan Zhan<sup>8</sup>, as they attempt to solve a string of mysteries rooted in the past. Instead of focusing on the two main characters living in a fantasy version of ancient China, however, *拔根补种* // *Uprooted, Replanted* takes a completely different turn. In modern-day China, the readers accompany the young narrator Lan Jingyi while he struggles to communicate with his great uncle, Lan Qiren, during his first visit to the native land of his parents. Said parents, referred to as father and dad, are no other than Lan Zhan and Wei Ying, though the two only appear in flashback scenes. Similarly to the second work of fan fiction we analysed, *拔根种* // *Uprooted, Replanted* features a bicultural child of immigrant parents, this time a Chinese Canadian, and provides an authentic account of the experience immigrant children may relate to.

So far, we have examined the integration of foreign words in English text, observed how the words may be understood and learnt by the readers and established what value they carry in the area of cultural enrichment and fusion of the story. In this chapter, we are going to shift our point of view and deal with language as one of the major themes of the story, not just a means of delivery. The issue we are going to discuss is best introduced by the narrator in the opening paragraph of the story:

The problem is, Lan Jingyi thinks as he sits across from a great uncle on a street he doesn't recognize in Suzhou, his rudimentary Mandarin skills that have gotten him through Chinese dinner parties back at home in Canada are woefully inadequate when it comes to trying to converse with people who don't actually speak any English. He likes his great uncle, but he has no idea how to talk to his great uncle. (merakily, 2021, para. 1)

It is entirely possible that to some readers, the described problem – not being able to properly communicate with one's own family – may sound unimaginable. However, a growing number of second-generation children face this issue when interacting with their extended family. Research shows that although Chinese parents tend to insist on their children learning their native language, it is not unusual for second-generation children to lack the vocabulary necessary for holding deeper, more sophisticated conversations (Zhang & Slaughter-

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<sup>8</sup> A) The first names listed are Chinese courtesy names. These names used to be given to men at the age of 20, which was considered a coming-of-age moment in their lives (Wilkinson, 2017). In the novel and the TV series, the characters are usually addressed by courtesy names because of the historical/fantasy element of the story. In modern China, the practice is rarely used anymore.

B) The names are in the following order: family name, given name.

Defoe, 2009). We may identify several factors conceivably causing this issue, ranging from the host culture's overall acceptance of immigrants to the attitude towards language learning of an individual. One of the most probable reasons may be rooted in the frequently negative responses from the members of the host culture when the first-generation immigrants use primarily their native language (Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009). The immigrant children, subjected to the negativity from a young age, can then grow to internalize the negative feelings such as dislike, shame or even fear towards their heritage language and prefer to use the language of the dominant culture to express themselves. Another factor to consider is the parents' attitude towards the acculturation of their children. In order to fit in and not be viewed as outsiders in the community, second-generation children are often urged to learn the host culture's language as fast as possible. While initially being led to bilingualism, the focus on the dominant culture's language may result in the neglect of the study and use of the heritage language (Luo & Wiseman, 2000). Naturally, this may later create an issue for the families in which the parents speak only a limited amount of the dominant culture's language (Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009). To list other factors, we can also mention the children's daily surroundings, where they usually use the dominant culture's language: schools, playgrounds, shops or even the internet. Then there is the difficulty level of the individual languages. Immigrant children in English-speaking countries often claim English is easier for them to learn and use than their heritage language. Regardless of the reason, in a collective culture such as the Chinese one, a language barrier of any extent presents a problem (Xu et al., 2007). The family plays a significant role for the Chinese and maintaining good familial relationships is of uttermost importance (Xu et al., 2007). However, forming meaningful family relationships, especially with family members who only speak Mandarin, can be hindered by the inability of the immigrant children to properly converse in their heritage language. *拔根补种* || *Uprooted, Replanted* allows us both to observe how this problem manifests in an intergenerational relationship and how the family-oriented Chinese are able to overcome the obstacle of a language barrier.

On several occasions, Jingyi informs the readers about the hardship his basic knowledge of Mandarin causes him during his visit to China:

Jingyi has spent more than his fair share of time on this trip wishing his older brother were here to commiserate with him — and to translate for him — but Sizhui is busy

back at home, working in his lab and taking care of their rabbits. (merakily, 2021, para. 7)

In one instance, he even compares the experience to what he imagines his parents' acculturation in Canada must have been like:

Now, feeling out of place even with his family, Jingyi is developing a new appreciation for what his parents must have gone through. (merakily, 2021, para. 11)

Despite the obvious difficulties, however, he continues to try and keep up with his great uncle:

"There are a lot of people here," Jingyi says to his shugong, wishing he had the vocabulary to say something less juvenile. (merakily, 2021, para. 12)

Throughout the conversation, the above-explained sort of a language barrier is crystal clear in both the narration and the content of the dialogue. If we were to take away all the description and thus the context of the story, the bare dialogue would look very primitive and seem meaningless for both parties. However, it is because we are reading about this primitive dialogue and not about a complete awkward silence, that we can observe the effort of the two family members to bond despite the language barrier.

Jingyi's great uncle Lan Qiren, whom Jingyi addresses as shugong, embodies a patient and kind native informant in the area of language. He guides Jingyi through the conversation and in a way, he may remind us of a second language teacher in his techniques. During their talk, Jingyi appears to be embarrassed by how narrow his Chinese vocabulary is and how he must sound to his Chinese uncle:

"Shugong," Jingyi says, internally wincing at just how white his accent sounds. His tongue doesn't curl the right way when it comes to the *ong* sound, and he's only mostly sure that this is his shugong and not his bogong. (merakily, 2021, para. 2)

However, Lan Qiren never comments on Jingyi's accent. On the contrary, the man encourages Jingyi to speak despite the mistakes he is bound to make, suggests the words Jingyi is searching for and supports Jingyi in his efforts at continuing the dialogue. The best example of Lan Qiren's qualities as a native language teacher can be seen when Jingyi forgets a word for cousin while explaining the reason behind the sudden visit to China:

“He’s my...” Jingyi blinks, wracking his brain for the right word for *cousin*. There are eight different terms for cousin, none of which he can remember, and he desperately wishes he could whip out his phone to look up *cousin* in Google translate. (merakily, 2021, para. 56)

Seeing Jingyi is struggling, Lan Qiren offers him a different route:

“How is Jin Ling related to you?” Shugong prompts, finding a roundabout way for Jingyi to explain his family relations. (merakily, 2021, para. 60)

This is where Jingyi, however, encounters another issue he has never had to deal with in English:

“Jin Ling is baba’s—” Jingyi cuts himself off, not knowing how to differentiate his parents in Chinese. In English, one is Dad while the other is Father, and it works just fine. But the only Chinese word Jingyi knows for a male parent is baba, and that is a problem. Jingyi strains his mind, trying to remember that time when he and Sizhui — mostly Sizhui — made small talk with the Chinese grandmother in the T&T parking lot a year ago. He’s still struggling to recall how Sizhui made the distinction between their fathers in Chinese, when Shugong pulls him out of his thoughts again.

“I don’t know Jin Ling, so he must be from Wei Ying’s side,” Shugong says smoothly, patiently, solving Jingyi’s crisis. (merakily, 2021, paras. 61-62)

After this, Jingyi finally manages to explain his relationship to his cousin. Lan Qiren, seeing a chance, tells Jingyi:

“You should practice your Chinese with your tang-ge,” he says, casually slipping the correct Chinese term for *cousin* into their conversation. (merakily, 2021, para. 67)

Though the dialogue between the two might look to be of little value for Jingyi, the opposite is true. As they are visiting a store, Jingyi notices a difference between the dialects his great uncle uses:

“Your voice changed just now, with that person,” Jingyi gestures vaguely towards the shop as he speaks, not knowing what a shopkeeper or a cashier is in Chinese. (merakily, 2021, para. 74)



Lan Qiren confirms this by explaining:

“Suzhou dialect is different from Standard Mandarin.” Shugong keeps a leisurely pace so Jingyi can comfortably keep up. “That’s what the store’s *laoban*” — once again, Shugong smoothly slips the right word into his speech — “and I were speaking in.” (merakily, 2021, para. 75)

Only after a few lines, while Jingyi is pondering the various dialects of the Chinese cities, he actively recalls the word for shopkeeper:

Looking over his shoulder to give Jingyi an amused look, Shugong strokes his beard as he says something in the same soft tone as earlier with the shopkeeper — *laoban*. (merakily, 2021, para. 79)

This detail demonstrates how Lan Qiren, in a matter of a few minutes, has managed to teach his great-nephew a new word by simply conversing with him in the target language and using the word in a context Jingyi would understand. Similarly, as the story is written in English but includes transcribed versions of the foreign words integrated into the text, the readers can learn along with Jingyi. Each time a new word is introduced in the text, the author also marks it and offers either a translation or explanation in the footnotes under the story. The majority of the terms refer to family members, such as *shugong*, explained by the author as a paternal grandfather’s younger brother, and *tang-ge*, a male cousin on the father’s side who is older than the speaker.

In relation to language and the issue of second-generation children not having sufficient language skills, the author also references a term which is often a topic of debate among intercultural theorists and linguists. When Lan Qiren tells Jingyi he should practice his Chinese with his cousin and at home, Jingyi retorts:

“We speak Chinese at home,” Jingyi is quick to defend, even though the eclectic mixture of Chinglish they use at home is most definitely not what Shugong means by “speaking Chinese.” (merakily, 2021, para. 68)

Chinglish has been labelled as a pidgin, interlanguage and hybrid language among others by professionals from different fields (Xu & Deterding, 2017). Nevertheless, for the general public, the term often carries a negative collocation with broken English spoken by Chinese people. Xu and Deterding pointed out that most Chinese English speakers try to avoid this term, feeling embarrassed by its popularized negative implications (2017).

Yet in Jingyi's case, he seems to use the term to imply his family speaks a mixture of Chinese and English at home. The combination of two languages at the same time is a common practice for bilingual individuals and this might be the hint why Jingyi struggles with more complex Chinese.

While we analysed language as one of the major themes of the work, the author states food as the second one. We learn about many traditional Chinese dishes, the key one being Yuxiang eggplant. In the story, the dish mostly symbolizes the homesickness Jingyi's dad, in the fan fiction coming from Sichuan, experiences in Canada:

However, his dad always frowns at the yuxiang eggplant. He's always disappointed by it, but he always orders it despite knowing that he will not enjoy it. Sizhui always says that the dish is good — the serving size is very reasonable for the price they paid, the eggplant is flavourful, and the sauce is very sweet. His dad simply smiles wistfully and says, "it's not supposed to be sweet," as he shakes his head and eats it anyway. (merakily, 2021, para. 34)

Only during their journey to China and the visit to his dad's home region, does Jingyi understand the described disappointment:

Instead, when the waiter walks into their private dining room with a massive platter of yuxiang eggplant, his dad looks genuinely excited and beams after his first bite, declaring that, "this is the best eggplant I've had in years!"

Curious, Jingyi picks a slice of eggplant for himself and promptly chokes on the first bite.

It is spicy.

So extremely spicy. (merakily, 2021, paras. 37-40)

The dish originates in the Sichuan region, where it is prepared to be rather spicy, and has been adapted into Guangdong cuisine as well. The author clarifies that the Guangdong version lacks spiciness, and for the Chinese restaurants in North America usually gravitate toward the Southern Chinese cuisine, the spicy Sichuan version is hard to come by overseas.

With the major themes of the work discussed, we may now focus on the information the author reveals mostly through flashbacks and the thoughts of the young narrator.

The individual relationships in his family are intricate, portrayed subtly and relying on small details in the narration. We observe the family dynamics through Jingyi, who only knows his parents in the Canadian setting. During his pondering, Jingyi notes:

Jingyi learned more about his parents in one fiery dinner argument than he had in his entire life. (merakily, 2021, para. 14)

The argument refers to a scene caused by Jingyi's adoptive grandmother, who blames his dad for immigrating, building an entire family of his own and then not coming to visit the family which raised him until thirty years later. The statement also appears to be hinting at the usually formal relationships Chinese parents, especially those born in China, tend to have with their children. Research revealed that the children of Chinese immigrant parents often worry about the lack of affection they receive compared to their western peers (Sung, 1985). However, while the Chinese do not show affection in the same way westerners are used to, we can find obvious care and love in their sometimes overlooked gestures. Throughout the story, we see various ways Jingyi's family members show him affection. As he and Lan Qiren sit outside in the summer heat, Lan Qiren notices Jingyi's difficulty with bearing it:

"Take your time," Shugong says, slowly fanning himself. When the breeze hits his face, Jingyi suddenly realizes that Shugong shifted the angle of his wrist so that he could help Jingyi cool down too.

It feels a little disrespectful to have his elderly great uncle fanning him, Jingyi thinks. But he doesn't tell Shugong to stop, because he is drenched in sweat, and even the slightest breeze is a much needed reprieve from the relentless heat. (merakily, 2021, paras. 57-58)

Most young Chinese people would not allow this, for it is the young that should take care of the respected elderly, not the other way around. Lan Qiren, who likely grew up with this mindset as well, however, shows no sign of being offended and does not draw any attention to his actions. At the family dinner where Jingyi meets his grandmother and witnesses her displeasure with his dad's actions, he is treated with obvious care. Despite the conflict, Jingyi's grandmother notices his intolerance to spicy food and makes sure he eats:

For this dinner, Jingyi sticks to his plain fried rice and the pumpkin tarts Yu-popo orders just for him, after she notices how he doesn't touch any of the other dishes. (merakily, 2021, para. 49)

These scenes show the readers that the cultural differences affect not only language or values but also the demonstrations of affection. Although the Chinese may appear reserved, the distance they maintain between themselves and others does not equal unfriendliness, lack of care or dislike.

Lastly, the story allows us a brief insight into the life of Chinese immigrants and their children. When Jingyi recalls their life in Canada, the readers are informed about the seemingly only tradition the family maintains:

They have no other family to celebrate with in Canada, so Chinese New Year is the one day they eat out at the nearest Chinese restaurant which is...fine.<sup>5</sup>

They never order drinks; tea is free, as is ice water.

Since his parents are creatures of habit, they only go to that one Chinese restaurant that is two blocks away from their house. (merakily, 2021, paras. 31-33)

Another difference he notices is the way people pay for food in China:

Which isn't to say his parents have suddenly become big spenders, because it's not like they're paying for any of their meals. In his two months of observing middle-aged Chinese parents in their natural environment, Jingyi has come to realize that class reunions are funded by whoever the richest person is (or whoever is pretending to be the richest person) and that his dad will always pretend to fight for the bill that he isn't expected to pay. Family meals are the same, other than that one notable exception when an aunt put a down payment on their dinner before anyone could notice. (merakily, 2021, para. 30)

Together, the little details spread through the story spur the readers to develop a multidimensional view of the culture. Reading the story narrated by a second-generation Chinese immigrant may help many to understand the difficulties immigrants face and through analogy compare them to their own experiences.

At the beginning of the chapter, it was stated that the last work combines the intercultural values discussed in the previous chapters. With the analysis of the third

work complete, we may once again remind ourselves of these values and establish the last work's contribution to the overall argument. When printed, *拔根补种* // *Uprooted, Replanted* covers only six pages of the format A4. However, that is enough for the readers to learn something new each time they return to the story, be it a familial term, a traditional dish, a hint of the power roles within the culture or the fact that strawberry milk is a must-have for the visitors of China. The story demonstrates how fan fiction can be written for educational purposes and how its readers may educate themselves through it. Narrated by a second-generation immigrant, the story also serves as an authentic account of the experience not all know first-hand and a form of representation for those who do. Considering these factors, it is not arbitrary to suggest the use of fan fiction in a classroom for it may aid students in the development of intercultural intelligence. To summarise the grounds for this suggestion and acknowledge its implications, we conclude the third chapter and turn to the conclusion of the thesis.

## CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this thesis, we defined fan fiction, identified its main characteristics and asked ourselves this question: How are intercultural values reflected in works of online fan fiction? Analysing three different works of fan fiction has provided us with multiple answers that we now need to recapitulate, compile and place into a broader context. The first major finding of this thesis is that while writing their stories, fan fiction authors may use the cultural information learnt from the original media as well as from their own culture-oriented research. By integrating foreign words, cultural customs and other culture-specific details into their works, they are working with the gained cultural knowledge actively. This results in a faster, more profound familiarisation and possible acculturation with the foreign culture. In addition to utilizing the apparent advantages of intercultural knowledge, the individuals possessing it may be less prone to cultural prejudice and may find intercultural interactions less stressful. Another common occurrence within the world of fan fiction the thesis introduces is the projection of a minority group members' cultural identity onto a fictional character. On top of their therapeutic properties for the writers, these works also offer validation and representation to other group members within the fan community. Furthermore, they pose an insight into a group that might be foreign to some readers, allowing them to explore the culture and educate themselves through the story. In the third chapter, we have analysed a work of fan fiction which combines the already mentioned intercultural values. This work of fan fiction was created with the intention to educate its readers. Other than teaching the readers new vocabulary and traditional dishes, the work does a great job at pointing out the importance of language for immigrant families and drawing attention to the cultural clash bicultural individuals might experience. The readers are presented with a multidimensional look at the culture and through the narrator may better understand the experiences specific to immigrants and their children. Seeing the results of the conducted analyses summarized, I trust this thesis has answered the proposed question through satisfactory explanation and exemplification. Intercultural values are reflected in works of online fan fiction in various ways; likewise, works of online fan fiction can be intercultural in many aspects.

This conclusion prompts a suggestion for the pedagogy professionals, especially those in the field of intercultural studies. The idea of the active inclusion of fan fiction in the classroom is far from recent. As Magnifico et al. (2015) stated, fan fiction writers frequently use literary practices – reading, writing and editing – that schools aim

to teach and thus highly value in their students. Different activities, such as writing a short story of fan fiction based on the student's favourite TV show rather than a traditionally assigned original story, may be introduced by literature teachers. Moreover, fan fiction has been indicated as a motivation for English-language learners to practise and cultivate their language skills (Black, 2005). Second and even third language teachers may take advantage of this knowledge and, for example, have the students agree on a topic and write collaborative fan fiction about it. As was demonstrated in this thesis, fan fiction may also be used to support the students in the development of intercultural intelligence. To present an example of the potential use of fan fiction in a classroom, let us imagine a class of Czech university students who are learning English and are entirely new to intercultural studies. The students are asked to choose their favourite character from an English-speaking country and write a story about what the character's visit to the Czech Republic might look like. To stimulate the imagination of the students, they could be asked to answer a few questions in their stories. Would the fictional character struggle to communicate in the Czech Republic? Would they encounter difficulties related to the cultural differences between the Czech Republic and anglophone countries? What would be the biggest cultural shock for them upon arrival? To complete the assignment, the students would not only have to research the country of origin of their chosen character but also step outside their current position as a Czech person and identify what is peculiar to the Czech culture. It is my sincere belief that the works produced for this assignment would be of great benefit to all parties included.

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## SHRNUTÍ

Předchozí výzkum studoval fanfikci v oblastech jako je kreativní psaní, stádium druhého jazyka, obecné vzdělávání, terapie a kultura. Tato bakalářská práce prezentuje, jak se interkulturní hodnoty odrážejí v online fanficcích. Tři práce, které jsou v této práci zkoumané, jsou napsány v anglickém jazyce a obsahují východoasijskou kulturu, konkrétně japonskou a čínskou. Práce každou tuto fanfikci analyzuje v samostatné kapitole. V těchto kapitolách studuje interkulturní fenomény a zjišťuje možný přínos analyzovaných děl pro interkulturní vzdělávání autorů a čtenářů fanfikce. Jako výsledek tato práce odhaluje, že psaní a čtení fanfikce může fanouškům pomoci porozumět kulturním zvykům, které zahraniční média často zobrazují ale nevysvětlují. Dále práce ukazuje, že integrace cizích slov do anglofonního textu představuje snadnou cestu, jak se daná slova naučit prostřednictvím kontextu a lépe tak pochopit pravidla jejich použití. Poté práce objasňuje fakt, že fanfikce může sloužit jako autentická výpověď o zkušenostech příslušníků menšinových skupin a jak může vzdělávat čtenáře, kteří nejsou členy těchto skupin. Po předložení důkazů a vysvětlení různých způsobů odrazu interkulturních hodnot ve fanficcích, je práce zakončena návrhem na začlenění a aktivní použití fanfikce ve výuce jako podpory studentů při rozvoji interkulturní inteligence.