Nature or nurture? Perspectives of Japanese manga on an age-old debate

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For centuries, the question of whether heredity or the environment plays a more significant role in determining individual identity has been hotly contested. Studies suggest that 50 percent of who we are psychologically is genetic, but in the world of manga, that proportion may be higher. This analysis will examine undertones of the “nature versus nurture” debate in three of the most widely circulated manga series – Dragon Ball, Naruto, and The Prince of Tennis – by highlighting connections between each series and its implied perspective on personal growth and development, and drawing upon direct quotations and key plot points as evidence of genetic and external factors. Finally, the results are applied to the context of manga as a developmental force and identify potential implications on the next generation of global readers.

Manga: a pop culture pandemic

Manga, the Japanese phrase for “humorous pictures,” typically consists of highly stylized comics or print cartoons that tell dramatic tales. In Japan, the concept of illustrating these character-centered narratives dates back to as early as the 12th century; today, manga in Japan represents a thriving $3.6 billion industry. No longer isolated to East Asia, the popularity of this art form has spread throughout the world, reaching virtually all races and age demographics. Despite only gaining attention in North America starting in the 1970s, manga publications already command an impressive market, generating roughly $175 million of annual sales in the United States and Canada alone. With a continuously growing online readership, it is no surprise that more business leaders and politicians are recognizing manga’s expanding role in economics, entertainment, and international affairs. Even Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso, a self-confessed “Otaku” (a Japanese term for a person obsessed with manga) and addict, geared his 2009 stimulus measures to exporting his nation’s “pop culture influence” overseas, creating an estimated half a million jobs for his struggling economy. Manga’s potential impact on its readership, particularly young, developing children who comprise the largest audience segment, should not be underestimated.

Dragon Ball: power through inheritance

Originally introduced in 1984 as part of a weekly magazine, Dragon Ball follows the adventures and battles of Goku, a martial arts enthusiast born from a legendary alien race, the “Saiyans.” In the manga’s multi-planetary universe, Goku continuously faces challenges from elite and malevolent fighters threatening to destroy Earth, forcing him to constantly seek greater power in order to protect the people around him. Each chapter of the storyline progresses in this similar manner: the protagonist encounters allies to assist him on his journey against even stronger enemies whom he must defeat to defend the planet.

Even though he is assisted in his conflicts by a team of incredibly competent “Z warriors,” it is eventually Goku, and not one of his comrades, who fights and wins the majority of the 187 battles that take place in the series. In fact, the superhuman character is responsible for saving the world from almost every major Dragon Ball villain, triumphing over evil when his teammates fail. This impels the question: why, out of all of Earth’s fighters, can only Goku carry the fate of the world on his shoulders?

In determining the origin of Goku’s strength, there are two primary candidates: the hero’s external training environment and his internal “Saiyan blood.” In support for the former, the most commonly cited example is the protagonist’s combat preparation in the “100G” Gravity Machine, conditions which nearly triple his recorded power level and openly demonstrate a case of experience-triggered improvement. Yet contrary to this pro-nurture argument, according to the manga, none of the other characters utilize this training device despite the availability of the machine and each of their desires to become stronger fighters. This brings up the likelihood that out of the Z warriors, the alien Goku is the only one genetically capable of enduring a hundred Earth gravities, a force far exceeding the limits of normal human beings. The nature-favoring perspective is further boosted by multiple references to the Saiyans as an “invincible warrior race,” thus explaining his invulnerability on the battlefield through a likely hereditary transcendence of mankind. Moreover, Goku is quoted to possess the innate advantage of a “Saiyan zenkai,” defined by the manga as a genetic trait that allows his power to increase substantially after recovering from near fatal injuries. Together, these observations validate that individual development in the series is based more on descent than environmental influences.

The instances in which Goku is defeated also provide convincing evidence for heredity as the ultimate source of fighting prowess. The most notable instance of this is the protagonist’s duel against the computer-generated experiment of Cell, a genetically enhanced warrior created partially from collections of Goku’s DNA: “Long ago, he began gathering the cells of fighting experts, and combined those cells. His artificial human research began, but since it was taking too much time, he abandoned it mid-way. However, his computer continued the work without rest. Son Goku’s... cells were harvested at the battle”

The entire character of Cell rests on the assumption that power originates from strong genetic material; this proposes that in Dragon Ball, individual combat skill is determined primarily by inherited nature. Following this thought, it makes logical sense that among the remaining Z warriors, the only one with the potential to subdue Cell is Gohan, the son and closest genetic equivalent of Goku. If heredity is the most critical factor in assessing overall strength, then the best fighters theoretically should be those with the most superior genes, regardless of extrinsic factors. In accordance with this hypothesis, it is not a coincidence that Goku, Gohan, and Cell, who share much of the same genetic code,
represent the top three “power levels” during the saga. From their rankings, it is clear that training is not the most important attribute in determining an individual’s fighting proficiency. Instead, an upper limit exists that can only be surpassed by heredity greatness.

**Naruto: genius trumps hard work**

One of the best selling manga of all time, *Naruto* narrates the story of a rambunctious adolescent ninja, Naruto Uzumaki, and his dream to become the village leader, or “Hokage.” In a fantasy parallel world of historic Japan, the title character and his ninja academy classmates embark on various missions to promote the welfare of their village, often fighting bandits and rogue criminals who pose threats to public safety. Additionally, the young warriors compete amongst themselves while training, pushing each other to improve their techniques and surpass prior limits to become more capable on the battlefield.

A central theme from the early *Naruto* chapters is the idea that “Hard work can beat genius,” a phrase frequently uttered by one of the main supporting characters of the series, the workaholic Rock Lee. When the academy students and their combat styles are first introduced in the series, it is apparent that nearly all of them were born with “bloodline limit jutsus,” supernatural fighting abilities genetically passed from parent to offspring. Unlike most of his classmates, however, Lee possesses none of these heritable powers. Instead, the well-nurtured warrior relies solely on physical training and tenacity to keep up with his “genius” peers:

“You know what? Here is what I believe. There are two different kinds of ninja. Those like you who are born with a natural talent and do not have to work at it. And those like me! The ones that have to train every day of our lives!”

Initially, Lee’s assertion that dedication can triumph over natural talent holds true when he defeats an alleged genius, Sasuke Uchiha, in a brief hand-to-hand skirmish. At this point in the manga, the hardworking ninja is clearly much faster than his gifted opponent, whose body cannot even react to the agility of the attacks. Yet only a month after their confrontation, Sasuke acquires the speed that Lee trained a lifetime to reach through his inherited “Sharingan” ability. Grudgingly, Lee acknowledges the superiority of the genius.

The debate is sustained by the mysterious lineage of the main character, Naruto Uzumaki. Orphaned from infancy, Naruto grows up without knowing the identity of either parent. Subsequently, he develops the reputation of a delinquent child, favoring vandalism over his ninja schoolwork and barely graduating from the academy at the bottom of his class. During this early portion of the storyline, the title character’s external training is still minimal compared to that of the other students; in fact, he has yet to achieve the lowest ninja rank of a foot soldier, or “genin.” Despite his relative lack of practice and dedication, Naruto demonstrates signs of a natural gift when he flawlessly executes an extremely difficult “A-rank” technique to rescue his injured instructor. If we take into account the limitations of his formal ninja education, there appears to be no reasonable justification for Naruto’s sudden talent, implying a pro-nature explanation. Confirming these predictions, it is later revealed in the series that Naruto’s father was the former “Hokage,” or village leader, while his mother was a legendary “Jinchuuriki,” or ninja of unparalleled strength and stamina, thereby exposing two inherited sources of the character’s latent potential. Because of his blessed ancestry, the protagonist carries an innate fate to be the “child of prophecy” and in time lead the ninja world.

Naruto develops into a tireless and hardworking hero; however, the key to his supremacy over his equally or more diligent classmates remains his genetic disposition. After analyzing Naruto’s background in addition to those of Lee and Sasuke, it is evident that a poor heredity accompanied by continuous environmental training can match or even temporarily surpass the levels of intrinsic genius. However, although both hard work and natural talent may appear necessary for success, the required latter component plays a substantially larger role in forming the ultimate individual. Therefore, based on the growth and maturation of the village’s strongest ninjas, analysis concludes that in *Naruto*, the predetermined genetics of genius trump all outside influences on development.

**The Prince of Tennis: gifted by birth**

Considered perhaps the most popular sports manga, *The Prince of Tennis* details the life of Ryoma Echizen, a junior tennis prodigy attending Seigaku Academy in Japan. During his first year on the school’s competitive tennis club, Ryoma engages in dozens of matches against older and more experienced opponents, each with their own signature shots and abilities that pose new challenges for the young athlete. With support from his coach, father, and extraordinarily skilled teammates, the gifted “Prince” eventually leads Seigaku through multiple tournaments all the way to a national championship, emerging victorious after kindling his unconditional love for the game.

As the series title suggests, Ryoma is blessed with royal blood, giving him a genetic basis for success at the sport. According to the plotline, the protagonist is the son of Nanjiro Echizen, a former professional tennis player who remained undefeated for his entire career. Not surprisingly, many of Ryoma’s winning techniques can be attributed to this hereditary advantage, such as his ambidexterity or “nītōryū,” which he reportedly inherited from his father. Thus, from the manga’s very name to its frequent parallelisms of playing styles between father and son, there seems to be a clear emphasis on the theme of inborn talent.

While Ryoma improves significantly faster than most of the other tennis players, there is no tangible evidence that he practices any harder than they do. For example, even though all members of the Seigaku team undergo the same drills and training regimens, the Prince alone is able to maintain an official record of zero defeats, illustrating the lack of connection between training and playing ability. In addition, his gradual advancement during matches from the lowest position of Singles 3 at the season’s beginning to the top ranking of Singles 1 by the national competition confirms the idea that Ryoma progresses at the highest rate. To further dispel any notions about exterior sources of tennis ability, the manga implicitly states that Sadaharu Inui, a Seigaku upperclassman whom Ryoma easily defeats, actually subjects himself to the most rigorous form of training, taking on a supplementary workload totaling to 2.25 times more than that of his teammates. In relation to the nature versus nurture debate, the scenario presents a testable hypothesis for the influence of the environment on individual development. If in *The Prince of Tennis* external experiences are the main contributor to a player’s tennis skill, then Sadaharu should have the
fastest improvement of any team member. However, as demonstrated by his imperfect match results and the exception of Ryoma, this is not a satisfactory explanation.

Of all the possible remaining candidates, innate and inherited factors appear the most likely, especially after considering explicit evidence from the manga’s pro-nature naming conventions. According to the ending chapters of the series, Ryoma’s final opponent is repeatedly addressed as the “Child of God,” implying that truly mastering tennis requires some type of divine birth. Even if these collectively perceived notions of genetic favoritism are all a coincidence, it is unquestionable that to its readers, The Prince of Tennis conveys an impression of the world in which sporting prowess is hereditarily predetermined. In agreement with this mindset, analysis deduces that Toward a reverence of intrinsic and natural talent.

Conclusions
After analyzing character development in three of the most widely read manga, a noticeable trend has emerged, one that extends well beyond the contexts of Dragon Ball, Naruto, and The Prince of Tennis.

What are the implications of all of these pro-nature perspectives on manga readers? For casual readers of Weekly Shōnen Jump or any other source manga publication, the impacts may be largely subconscious, ranging from unintended sensitivity concerning one’s genetic makeup to self-limiting mentalities during childhood and adolescence. Particularly among younger audience segments, there is the possibility that manga restricts potential for growth by downplaying the importance of environmental factors such as education and routine practice in their daily lives, an effect additionally damaging for those perceived to be of humble birth. Although many of these anticipated side effects pose clear hazards to the work ethics of the younger readers, series authors cannot and should not be blamed for how their works are interpreted. Readers must instead learn to recognize that manga, along with all other forms of addictive yet fictional entertainment, are simply stories of human invention, fabricated for our enjoyment and not an accurate portrayal of reality.

References

Sean Wang is a freshman and prospective biology major from South Pasadena, CA who secretly enjoys reading manga when time allows. Although considering a future in medicine, he wishes to explore all the opportunities that Stanford has to offer and embody the spirit of entrepreneurship through organizations such as Social-E Capital and the Compass Fellowship.