

Screening, Modifying, Adapting: The Techniques of Censoring Japanese Manga Aims at Young Adults Published in Contemporary Vietnam

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Introduction

At the turn of the twentieth century, the printing industry in Vietnam had overcome several changes to transform itself from a subsidized economic format to one based on the market economy. However, the printed media controls remained in place, with specific supervisory functions divided into different official departments. The complex hierarchy of supervisory levels obscures the understanding of hegemonic control on the printed media as only those who work inside the system can differentiate the hidden rules and unspoken regulations. As Vietnam entered the twenty-first century, however, the call emerged for building a cultural industry that could create a Vietnamese cultural identity and contribute to soft power control. Thus, control over printed media in Vietnam has undergone number changes in recent decades, with an increase in flexibility.

Since the opening to the global market in the 1990s, foreign entertainment publications have flooded the Vietnamese book market due to high demand. Japanese manga was one of the earliest visual printed publications imported to Vietnam, along with American comics, French, and Belgian *bande dessinée* (BD)¹. When Vietnam entered the Berne convention in 2004, a new wave of foreign publications came to the Vietnamese market that gradually extinguished the older pirated books. In this latest wave, only Japanese manga not only maintained a local audience, it developed even more as other styles of visual

1 Nguyen, Hong Phuc, "Comics in Vietnam: A Newly Emerging Form of Storytelling." Accessed Jun 17, 2023. <https://kyotoreview.org/issue-16/comics-in-vietnam-a-newly-emerging-form-of-storytelling/>

publications faded away. At some point during the 2000s and 2010s, Japanese manga dominated the whole entertainment publication market in Vietnam despite being a foreign cultural product with a different reading format and cultural expectations². The success of Japanese manga could not have happened without the effort of the regional editors to import and adopt manga to suit the regulations and the tastes of local fans. Therefore, this paper selects Japanese manga as a case study to examine how local editors adapt a foreign visual publication to make it a product suitable for the Vietnamese market.

In the history of *censorship*, traditional perspectives emphasize its role in repressing “free speech” and its function as a tool for governments to shape public thought in their favor. Moreover, the practice of censorship also includes “spoken and printed words, photographs, paintings, and other types of visual art, as well as symbolic speech, such as armbands and flag burning”³. The main theoretical framework of this article borrows from the concepts of censorship from Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu’s works, which are considered a new approach to studying repression⁴. In his seminal work *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault does not explicitly use the term “censorship” when discussing the mechanisms of power. Instead, the writer employs the concept of “silence” to suggest that censorship is not merely an extreme form of suppression but a more subtle and pervasive tool of control: “Silence itself—the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies...There is not one but many silences, which are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses”⁵. From this notion, I contend that censorship plays a crucial role in shaping official discourse interpretations by raising certain voices while systematically marginalizing or silencing others.

Conversely, Bourdieu, in *Censorship and the Imposition of Form*, argues that “it

2 Y Nguyen. “The clash of culture: Reserving reading format of manga”. Access July 25, 2024 <https://thanhnien.vn/truyen-tranh-doc-nguoc-cu-va-cham-van-hoa-185190384.html>.

3 Gail Blasser. *Censorship*. (New York: Facts On File, 1998), 3.

4 Matthew Bunn, “Reimagining Repression: New Censorship Theory and after,” *History and Theory* 54, no. 1 (February 1, 2015), 26-27.

5 Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 27.

is the structure of the field itself which governs expression by governing both access to expression and the form of expression, and not some legal proceeding which has been specially adapted to designate and repress the transgression of a kind of linguistic code.”⁶ Structural censorship operates as a market-based system that regulates all “producers of symbolic goods.” In this framework, censorship is not limited to outright repression but involves a dynamic negotiation between authority and producers over production conditions, which can change according to the producers’ positions within the system.⁷ From the perspective of new censorship, I propose investigating the censorship mechanisms in Vietnam through the lens of market regulation. This approach highlights how local publishers adapt to generate profits while remaining compliant with regulatory boundaries, as well as the reception of manga fans toward the censored print version. The concept of censorship can be studied as “a negative, repressive force concerned only with prohibiting, silencing and erasing,” or as “a new productive force, that creates new forms of discourse, new forms of communication, and new genres of speech.”⁸ Hence, the new censorship theory inspires a more flexible approach to investigating censorship in the complex of state, social, and cultural production. In this manner, my research employs the new theoretical framework of censorship to study the aspect of repression in manga publication in Vietnam, including the role of the publishers as productive censors in place of simply extended arms of the government.

In previous research on the publication and distribution of manga in modern East Asia, scholars have noted that the governments of Korea and Taiwan closely monitor the importation of Japanese manga due to historical colonial concerns.⁹ Subsequently, the publishers in these countries have to censor Japanese manga according to government regulations. Recent Chinese scholars have highlighted that fandom and commercial platforms in the domestic market

6 Pierre Bourdieu, “Censorship and the Imposition of Form,” in *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 138.

7 Pierre Bourdieu, “Censorship and the Imposition of Form,” 139.

8 Matthew Bunn, “Reimagining Repression: New Censorship Theory and after,” *History and Theory* 54, no. 1 (February 1, 2015), 26.

9 John A. Lent (2010). “Manga in East Asia”. In T. Johnson-Woods (Ed.), *Manga: An anthology of global and cultural perspective*. (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group), 297.

both work as “content regulators”¹⁰ by practicing self-censoring to follow the guidelines of the authority while sustaining commercial profitability, as exemplified by the case of the Boys’ Love (BL) genre—a Japanese-origin subgenre portraying male homosexual romance, primarily targeting female readers in China. Previous studies suggest that participants in the censorship system do not always operate hierarchically; rather, in certain contexts, the responsibility for censorship can also be assumed by content creators, online platforms, and fan communities.¹¹

For that reason, I argue that in actual practice, the whole censorship process should be understood and relatively individualized and therefore flexible, because ultimately, individual censors, not robots, make all the changes. Building on the theoretical framework of new censorship, I propose the term “flexible censorship,” which conceptualizes censorship not as a rigid framework or inflexible discourse imposed solely by the government but as a dynamic process of modifying media products influenced by multiple factors, including censors, producers, and individual consumers. Therefore, this paper provides a new framework for identifying the human participants in the censorship system, along with their motivations to comply with or evade content regulations for their interests.

The Central Official System of Printed Media in Vietnam

To understand the Vietnamese government’s control over printed media, we must investigate the primary purpose of creating this system in the first place. The current government in Vietnam, led by the Communist Party of Vietnam, was established in 1930. Following Vietnam’s declaration of independence on September 2, 1945, under the leadership of the Communist Party in Hanoi, printed media was already regarded as a powerful instrument for promoting and transmitting Marxism-Leninism to shape public opinions during the brief coalition government. Thus, after the reunification of the country in 1975, the printed media was in complete control by the communist government.

10 Yiming Wang and Jia Tan. “Participatory Censorship and Digital Queer Fandom: The Commercialization of Boys’ Love Culture in China”. *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 17, (March, 2023).

11 Lin Zhang. “Boys’ love in the Chinese platformization of cultural production,” *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 42 (March 14, 2024).

Subsequently, the current system of printed media in Vietnam is created in order to protect and transmit doctrine and ideology following the line of the Communist Party.¹²

The central control of the printed media, in particular, and other forms of media in general, is relatively strict. Through various official departments and personnel, the government tightly regulates media contents. First and foremost, the ideological function of media is placed under the Department of Newspaper and Publication, directed under the Central Commission for Information and Education, which functions as the advisor for the Communist Party of Vietnam for political, social, cultural, and educational aspects¹³. Secondly, the control of media can also be seen in bureaucratic departments¹⁴ such as the Department of Publication, Print, and Distribution, under the Ministry of Information and Communications, which is responsible for granting permission to print and publish. Other departments at the same level, such as the Department of Publication, Print, and Distribution under the Ministry of Culture, and the Division of Security for Information under the Ministry of Public Affairs, also share the responsibility for content screening, focusing on identifying and removing anti-government and anti-communist ideas, as well as content deemed incompatible with Vietnamese cultural norms.

12 Duong, Vinh Suong. 2013. *Công tác xuất bản: Một số vấn đề lý luận và thực tiễn* [The Role of Publication: Some Issues of Theory and Practice]. Hanoi: Information and Communication Publisher, 131-133.

13 Le, Hong Quang. 2023. "The Issue of Human Resources Training in the Publishing Industry in Vietnam Nowadays." Phd Dissertation, Hanoi: Academy of Journalism and Communication, 43.

14 Le, *The Issue of Human Resources Training*, 44.

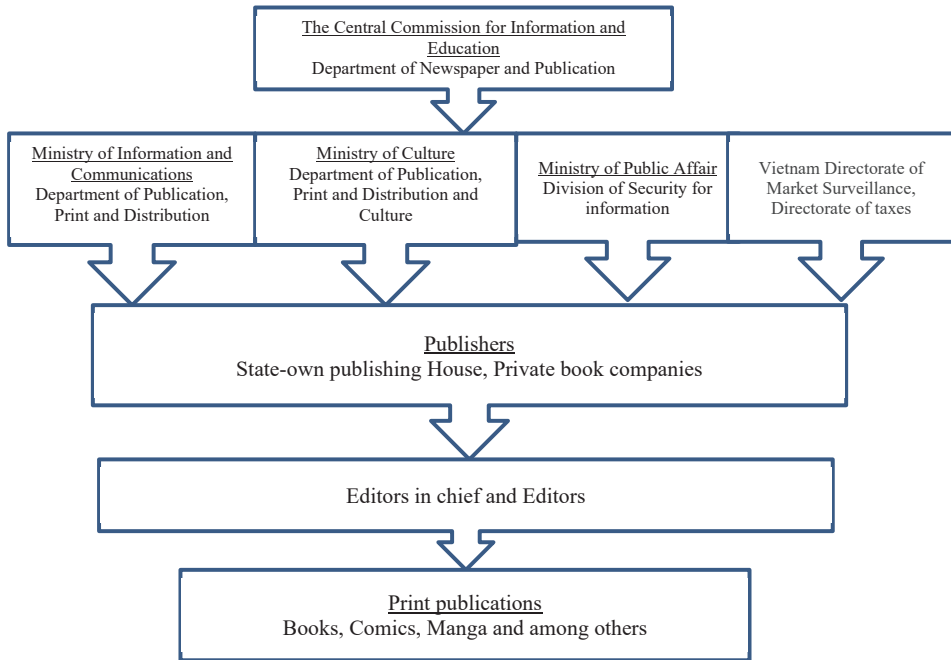


Figure 1. The top-down structure of government control implementation on print publication in Vietnam¹⁵

In addition, the economic side of printed media is also supervised via market surveillance and the directorate of taxes to ensure the price and quality of printed products. The workforce in the printing industry, which is part of state-owned publishers, must serve as a stronghold for the Communist Party. Hence, editors-in-chief are invariably party members and are appointed by the government. Editors responsible for manuscript screening and editing are expected to fully comply with the Party’s guidelines. Although these rules may not always be followed strictly in practice, particularly at private book companies, these private publishers are nevertheless required to submit their manuscripts to state-owned publishers for review and approval before printing. As a result, state-employed editors and editors-in-chief may require adjustment

15 This study produced the above diagram based on the study of Le Hong Quang in his PhD dissertation written in Vietnamese (2023) titled “*The Issue of Human Resources Training in the Publishing Industry in Vietnam nowadays*”, Academy of Journalism and Communication, 43-44.

if they find the content inappropriate. To sum up, printed media in Vietnam is controlled at all points through macro departments to micro personnel, which filter all contents available to the public.

Although the system is comprehensive and integral to the lifecycle of printed publications, its elements evolve periodically to align with the nation's changing political and social priorities. For instance, during the two Indochina wars and in the 1980s, the government ordered that only state-owned publishers could produce printed publications. Yet, in the 1990s when the Vietnamese changed to a free-market economy, state-owned publishers began to produce printed products based on the demands of the readers and the market. Later in the 2000s, private book companies were allowed to join the print industry as a public-private partnership with state-owned publishers. Nevertheless, implicit guidelines and formal legal regulations governing publications persist, requiring all publications to adhere to the principles of the Communist Party and the traditional cultural norms of Vietnam.

These tasks can vary from publisher to publisher, yet the core tasks focused on editing and proofreading are largely consistent. Given the weight of their responsibility for the content, only editors who have successfully earned a certificate from the Department of Publication, Print, and Distribution — granted after completing a formal one-week workshop on publishing regulations and editorial ethics — can have their names included on printed publications. A fundamental task for editors is to screen and edit content to fit the government's guidelines and to protect societal norms. Those editors who fail to do so can be prosecuted and sentenced to jail in the most extreme case.¹⁶ The lowest fine would be removal from the editorial jobs. Thus, a good editor must possess many qualities, the most essential of which is the ability to recognize boundaries and consistently follow established guidelines.

The Construction of Political Ideology through the Printed Media

In the early decades of the 21st century, Vietnam determined to build a cultural industry based on the guidance of the communist party and traditional

¹⁶ According to Article 11, Publishing Law No.19/2012/QH13, any individual who violates the law will be punished depending on the nature and seriousness of their violations.

cultural ethics. Therefore, printed media is perceived as a primary instrument for this crucial task. The government welcomed foreign ideas and publications as necessary to enhancing and strengthening Vietnam's own culture, but these were subjected to controls designed to keep the proactive elements and remove the harmful elements.

As Vietnam opened its domestic market to the world and thrived by tapping into global investments, the print industry also adapted to international standards, and imported foreign publications ranging from fiction novels and comics to non-fiction works of history, education, linguistics, science, economy, and politics. These foreign publications came from a variety of nations, including America, Britain, France, and Russia as well as Eastern countries such as China, Japan, Korea, Thailand, and India. The diversity of the print market in Vietnam during the early decades of the twenty-first century was thanks to the government's program to encourage the development of the domestic market as well as to the wave of private book companies allowed to join with the state-owned publishers to produce high-quality books for local readers. Yet, local publishers and editors also shouldered significant responsibility for reviewing and refining foreign works translated into Vietnamese to ensure their content adhered to official guidelines and fostered positive, peaceful, and harmonious values. Additionally, editors and editors-in-chief were also tasked with preventing the spread of anti-government sentiments, ethnic antagonism, and historical revisionist narrative forms. In particular, editors were required to remove or alter entire words, paragraphs, or chapters in books that harshly criticized communism and the communist government. For instance, the Vietnamese version of the famous book of Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari titled *Sapiens* had to remove the word "communism" from the paragraph criticism of its ideology as follows:

Capitalism has two answers to this criticism. First, capitalism has created a world that nobody but a capitalist can run. The only serious attempt to manage the world differently – [Communism] – was so much worse in almost every conceivable way that nobody has the stomach to try again.¹⁷

17 Yuval Noah Harari. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), 357.

Despite the altered parts in the books, the Vietnamese version of *Sapiens* won the Good Book Prize of Vietnam in 2019¹⁸ for young adult readers and also was one of the best-selling history book that year. The success in both the economic and educational aspects of *Sapiens* clearly demonstrates the government's adaptability in recognizing diverse influences of foreign ideas on communism, alongside its stance on capitalism¹⁹. Criticism can be considered a way of self-reflection and self-improvement as long as criticism can be contained and controlled constructively. This trend of toward publishing Western books in Vietnam with books has resulted in a range of book containing criticism toward capitalism, communism and socialism such as *Four Theories of the Press: The Authoritarian, Libertarian, Social Responsibility, and Soviet Communist Concepts of What the Press Should Be and Do* by Fred S. Siebert, and Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm (1984), *Capitalism Without Capital: The Rise of the Intangible Economy* by Jonathan Haskel and Stian Westlake (2017).

Inclusively, the construction of political ideology in Vietnam during the globalization age had become more subtle and flexible than before as the waves of foreign influences inevitably came to the nation. Thus, Vietnam's determination to become a strong nation with a distinguished cultural identity has catalyzed the country to open up and learn from the world. Moreover, the promotion of a reading culture among Vietnamese citizens has also contributed to diversifying the book genres in the local market, encouraging people to look for books aligned with their interests. Yet, the strict controls to navigate the public's consciousness and perception through printed publication are still in place, with particularly meticulous screening and modification applied to political, economic, and historical works. In the case of entertainment publications such as fiction novels, comics, or manga, the controls can be more lenient as long as the editors adhere to established boundaries and are mindful of permissible content. This flexible approach to censorship is exemplified by the importation and adaptation of Japanese manga in Vietnam, a topic this

18 Information about the prize for good books is displayed on the homepage of IRED – Institute of Education. Accessed on May 1, 2024, from: <https://sachhay.org/GiaiSachHay/DocTin/62/ket-qua-giai-sach-hay-lan-thu-ix-nam-2019>

19 Vien Minh. "Sapiens - Cuốn Sách Giải Mã Lịch Sử Loài Người Bán Chạy Hàng Đầu Thế Giới." [Sapiens - The world's bestseller historical book about human origins]. Accessed May 26, 2024. <https://dantri.com.vn/van-hoa/sapiens-cuon-sach-giai-ma-lich-su-loai-nguoi-ban-chay-hang-dau-the-gioi-20240416210813262.htm>.

study will examine in greater detail in later sections. Subsequently, this study would like to contribute insight into the art of censorship in Vietnam, which is used as an instrument to construct not only political ideology but also social norms in a way that reflects the distinctive cultural perspective of the contemporary Vietnamese national identity rooted in communist ideology and nationalism. Particular attention is given to media content targeting young adults, who are regarded as the key to shaping the nation's future.

The Initial Trends of Censorship in Vietnamese Adaption of Japanese Manga

This research focuses on the publication of Japanese manga aimed at young adults from 2015 to 2023. The reason I chose this period is that the first ever manga rating for adults, which is 18+, was established in 2015 with the promise of non-censored visual content from officially licensed publishers. Since then, the booming of manga rating higher for adults has started. This trend challenged the long-time prejudice against manga, which was deemed to be only for children. Furthermore, in 2017, the Vietnamese Ministry of Information and Communications issued Circular 09/2017/TT-TBTT addressing the rating and warning of media products aimed at children in which media producers must include a rating to clarify whether the products were for children or not²⁰. 6 years old and above as 16+; 17 years old and above as 17+; and finally 18 years old and above as 18+. As a result, the investigation of manga titles for young adults published from 2015 to 2023 was not only more distinctive as the age rating was very classified but also more diverse and more abundant thanks to the large number of manga titles released by several publishers in both state-owned and private publishers.

Based on the initial research framework, I conducted an online search to collect manga titles rated 16+ and above, first published between January 1, 2015, and December 31, 2023. This search excludes manga titles published in 2014 and continuing into 2015, as well as reprinted manga titles initially published in previous years through the online website of the National Library

20 Ministry of Media and Information. *Circular 09/2017/TT-BTTTT: Regulation on The Rationale of Contents, Timing, Duration for Children and Warning on Contents Unsuitable for Children in Voice Broadcasting, Television, Print Newspaper, Digital Paper and Print Publication.*

of Vietnam, which is assumed to have digital records of all printed publications in the country. Additionally, I excluded extra volumes and special editions, including follow-ups or spin-offs from the leading titles. I included only official sequels of manga titles, which feature separate storylines but run under the duplicate manga titles as long-running series with multiple seasons. As a result, the final collection of manga titles in this research includes 209 titles from two state-owned publishers and six private book companies.

Moreover, the research included both long-running manga series and one-shot manga titles that meet the requirement of being rated 16+ or above, as indicated on their covers or their official registration data in the National Library of Vietnam's archive. In addition, I cross-checked the official websites and fan pages of Vietnamese publishers to ensure the accuracy of the titles and ratings of the manga selected for this study. That being said, my focus is solely on selecting manga titles based on their ratings, specifically targeting young adults across all genres of manga.

Ultimately, the results of my data collection showed that in the span of eight years from 2015 to 2023, 98 manga were published with a rating 18+, followed by 76 manga rated 16+, and the 35 manga rated 17+. Given that 18+ is the highest rating for manga publication in Vietnam, it is surprising that there has been a trend towards publishing more titles aimed at young adults in recent years. This trend reflects a growing demand for manga with mature content, aligning with the age demographics of Vietnam, where the adult age group (15 to 59 years old) accounted for 62.2 % of the population in 2023.²¹

The study then compared these Vietnamese-adapted manga titles with their Japanese counterparts to detect which titles had been modified and which remained the same. However, due to the limitation of this study, I focus on the modification of cover images and visual aspects rather than the text and translation, which requires a separate study. In a comparison between 209

21 According to the Vietnamese official website of General Statistics Office in 2023, the total population in Vietnam is 100.3 million people. The young age from 0 to 14 years old accounted of 23.9% of the population. The old age group from 60 years old and above is 13.9% of the population. And the adult age group from 15 to 59 years old) accounted of 62.2 % of the population. Thus, Vietnam had a gold population structure at the moment until 2039. Retrieve on January 24, 2024 from: <https://www.gso.gov.vn/du-lieu-va-so-lieu-thong-ke/2023/12/thong-cao-bao-chi-ve-tinh-hinh-dan-so-lao-dong-viec-lam-quy-iv-vam-2023/>

Vietnamese-adapted manga titles and their Japanese original counterparts, this study detected that 24 manga series had their covers modified. In contrast, 41 manga adapted from their Japanese originals had their visual narratives modified. Considering this, 11.5% of manga covers were altered, and 19.2% of manga had their visual narratives censored. These initial results were lower than this study had expected since the Vietnamese censorship system established stringent regulations on printed publications.

Moreover, the 18+ rating category appears to be the most heavily censored among all the rating systems in Vietnam. The suggestion is that manga within this category, both in content and cover design, is considered particularly sensitive and undergoes the most modifications. Ironically, despite this heavy censorship, 18+ rated manga titles have seen the fastest growth in Vietnam in recent years, highlighting a solid demand among local young adult readers. While many 16+ and 17+ rated titles exist, these categories undergo comparatively less censorship. Although the number of titles in the 16+ and 17+ categories remains high, the extent of censorship affecting them is relatively minor. In other words, the content and covers of lower-rated manga are deemed more appropriate for their target readers. Conversely, the rise of 18+ rated manga highlights a rising demand among young adult readers for more mature and diverse content, making this category subject to the strictest level of censorship. In conclusion, the current scenario of the manga industry in Vietnam has been more developed in both genres and ratings. However, censorship remains an ongoing challenge, albeit with a degree of subtly and flexibility, as local publishers seek to balance profitability and reputation with regulatory requirements.

Troublesome Elements in The Public's Eyes and Strategies to Modify

In a detailed examination of 41 manga titles with covers or internal visual contents censored, it is clear that certain elements need to be removed from the Vietnamese adaptations of the original Japanese manga. I have categorized these troublesome elements as follows:

Human external sex organs	Disturbing scenes	Sexual behaviors
-Breasts -Nipples -Nudity -Pubic hair -Penis	-Posing with guns -Smoking cigarette -Inhuman facial image/ body -Headless corpses -Bloody killing	-Kissing -Heterosexual acts -Homosexual acts -Non-human sexual acts

Table 1. The list of inappropriate elements must be censored in Japanese manga published in Vietnam.

Among the 41 censored titles, the three elements most frequently removed are sexual acts (28.6%), breasts (24.5%), and revealing clothing (20.4%). These statistics clearly demonstrate that sexual themes and erotic behavior are heavily targeted for modification, while violent and disturbing scenes face comparatively less scrutiny. This stark contrast underscores that sexual implications are the primary concern for Vietnamese publishers when adapting Japanese manga for young adults. Such erotic visuals are undoubtedly seen as risks, likely to draw attention from authorities and the public due to fears of encouraging immoral or inappropriate desires and behavior.

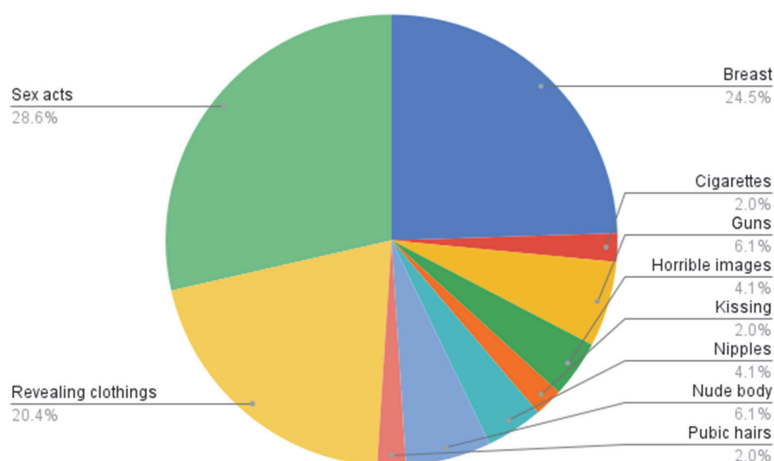


Figure 2. Percentages of Censored elements in both covers and contents of Japanese manga published in Vietnam from 2015-2023

For the techniques applied to modify these above elements in the visual contexts, I have named seven types frequently used to edit 41 censored manga titles in my data collection as follows:

Name of censoring technique	Purpose of the censoring techniques
Blurring	Erasing parts or full images
Zooming	Enlarging to exclude the parts of the sensitive image while still keeping a small part of the original.
Redrawing	Using safe elements to modify the original images to hide the troublesome elements
Swapping	Replacing the original covers with designs that are more appropriate for the local market
Inserting	Using box text to hide the troublesome elements
Wrapping	Creating monochrome gift paper covers to hide troublesome original covers
Excluding	Remove parts or entire pages of a chapter to censor troublesome elements

Table 2. The list of censoring techniques applied to modify Japanese manga published in Vietnam.

As the manga narrative typically uses both visuals and text to generate meaning, the editing techniques outlined above can be used separately or simultaneously to achieve the same effects for the censored Vietnamese adaptation. Nevertheless, censorship strategies vary from publisher to publisher, or more precisely, depending on the aesthetic sense of the editors in charge of the Vietnamese adaptation. The sensitivity of editors and editors-in-chief to legal and social expectations plays a vital role in deciding which elements are problematic and must be removed and which elements are safe to keep in the adapted manga. Only manga titles rated 16+, 17+, and 18+ are censored, while most are untouched. Later qualitative content analysis of the censored manga will uncover the reasons for limiting erotic and violent content in the

Vietnamese adaption of Japanese manga.

The Art of Manipulating Visual Contents in Vietnamese Adaptation of Manga

Based on the initial quantitative data, this study reveals the elements considered inappropriate in Vietnam, even if the contents are rated for adult readers. Thus, the analysis of the censored images and the techniques applied to modify them will provide deeper insight into the meaning constructed by the censorship. Here, this study will compare the original and censored images to determine whether censorship can change the meaning created by the original creation. Furthermore, the techniques employed in censorship may have led to the creation of a new aesthetic for the modified images, in a way that was unexpected to the readers and original authors.

As mentioned in the previous part about techniques used by the local editors to modify images, zooming is one of the techniques frequently used to enlarge images to exclude undesirable elements. This approach is often preferred as a convenient solution for editors as it does not require much manual alteration while preserving the overall impact of original images. Thus, the combination of zooming and other techniques is also seen in the Vietnamese adaptation of Japanese manga. For instance, the Vietnamese cover of volume 6 of *Fullmetal Alchemist (Perfect Edition)*²² altered the manga title to hide the breasts of the female character. The censored cover did have the effect of hiding the erotic allure of the female character named *Lust* in the manga, but by largely preserving the aesthetics and connotation of the original work the cover was not totally transformed. The Vietnamese version of *Fullmetal Alchemist*, categorized as a *shounen* manga aimed at young boys in Japan, is rated 16+ in Vietnam, indicating it is intended for readers above 16 years old. While the original image might have been appropriate for certain audiences, it could also raise concerns among educators and parents. To balance safety and fan satisfaction as well public opinion, the local state-owned Kim Dong Publisher opted to minimize changes to the cover as much as possible. Though fans might

22 Hiromu Arakawa. (2001). *Fullmetal Alchemist*, 18 vols. (Square Enix). This was also the Fullmetal Edition which was released officially by Kim Dong Publishing House with a Vietnamese title as *Fullmetal Alchemist – Càng Già Kim Thuật* in 2019.

notice slight differences in the cover compared to the Japanese originals available online, they still purchased the Vietnamese version. The censored elements are kept to a minimum, preserving for readers the aesthetic appeal of the original female character. Local fans generally accept these adaptations as long as the censorship remains subtle, which is why zooming is often employed in Vietnamese manga adaptations.

While the zooming technique can be used sparingly, excessive use can completely distort the original visual effects. An extreme example of this can be seen in the Vietnamese adaptation of the manga series *Ran to Haiiro Sekai*.²³ In the original Japanese version, there is a depiction of a nude girl emerging from a blanket in a bedroom.



Figure 3. Original image of *Ran to Haiiro Sekai* Vol 3, page 88. (Photo of the contents taken by the author)

In the Vietnamese version, this scene was altered by zooming in only on the girl's face and rearranging its features to create new visual effects. As a result, the modified image conveyed a dreamy and innocent portrayal of a young girl, in stark contrast to the sensual and attractive nude depiction in the original image. It is important to note that all modifications to images must be approved by the Japanese manga artist before a manga license can be obtained. Therefore, to ensure the artist's approval these changes have to be made carefully to preserve the original manga's aesthetics and storyline. This achievement requires significant effort; the editor must possess a strong sense of aesthetics and a deep understanding of manga. In this way, editors function

23 Akie Irie. (2009). *Ran to Haiiro sekai*, 7 vols. (Kadokawa Corporation).

as both state censors and individual creators, bringing their own aesthetic sensibilities to reinterpret and reconstruct new meanings and visual effects in the Vietnamese adaptation of foreign cultural products.

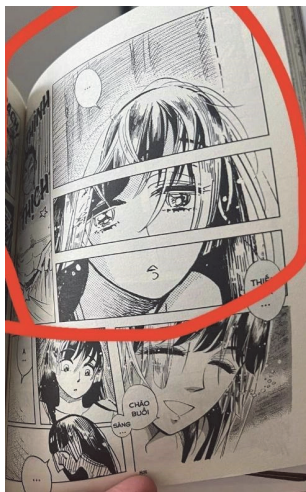


Figure 4. Vietnamese censored image of Ran to Haiiro Sekai Vol 3, page 88, published by Kim Dong Publishing House. (Photo of the contents taken by the author)

On the one hand, the editing skills and the aesthetic sense of individual editors play an essential role in the quality of the local adaptation both in visual and linguistic aspects. On the other hand, the standards and the goals determined by the local publishers or book companies to which the editors belong also heavily influence how visual content is edited and modified. Additionally, the rating of the Vietnamese version of the manga is a way to filter out some aspects of the original manga, as manga series published by the same publishers but rated differently could have different strategies for modifying troublesome elements. Even though local fans noticed these modifications, they reluctantly accept them within the context of Vietnamese cultural norms and publication regulations. As long as the changes reasonably preserve the essence and meaning of the original, fans continue to support official local publications of their favorite manga series.

In contrast to acceptable censorship, unacceptable censorship can occur even within the same publishing house. These instances happen when an editor intervenes excessively, altering the original images by removing prohibited

elements or by redrawing them poorly. When local readers notice such poor modifications, they may complain or, in the worst case, boycott the entire Vietnamese adaptations of a manga series. To be fair, the Vietnamese manga series rated as 18+ are also under censorship with both acceptable and unacceptable modification strategies. One of the techniques of censoring local fans particularly dislike is inserting boxes or text, as this technique blocks all the visual images that fans want to see, but which publishers want to hide. The examples below are censored images of the Vietnamese adaptation of *Chainsaw Man*²⁴ – a famous shounen manga originally published by Shueisha Publisher in 2018. The Vietnamese edition of *Chainsaw Man* was rated as 18+. It was released officially by Tre Publishing House, meaning this manga was aimed at adult readers above 18 years old (according to Vietnamese law, the age of majority is 18). Yet, local readers were massively disappointed because the official printed edition of *Chainsaw Man* was still heavily edited without the slightest sense of aesthetics. Instead, it clumsily censored the nude bodies of the characters by using text and boxes.

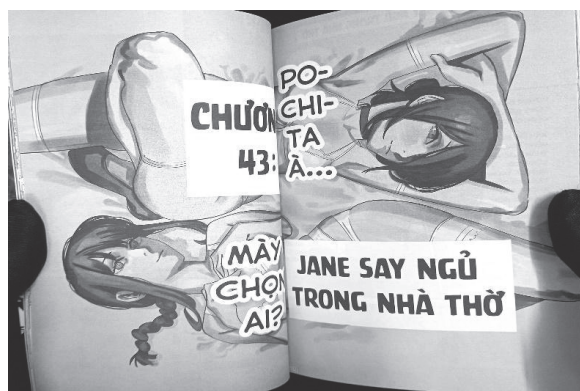


Figure 5. Vietnamese censored image of *Chainsaw Man*, Chapter 43, Volume 5 published by Tre Publishing House in 2023. (Photo of the contents taken by the author)

The paradoxical action of local publishers in rating and censoring has two main reasons. The first reason is the long-term prejudice of the local public toward manga, which considers manga to be only for children. Since the

²⁴ Tatsuki Fujimoto. (2018). *Chainsaw Man*, 17 Vols. (Shueisha).

inception of the manga industry in Vietnam with the publication of *Doraemon*, a well-known manga series for children, local publishers have increasingly expanded their offerings, producing a wide array of manga series targeted at children and later at teenagers. As these long-term young readers grow older and continue their interest in manga, they demand content suitable for adults. This shift in demand creates a dilemma for local publishers, particularly state-owned entities such as Kim Dong and Tre Publishing House, which are traditionally responsible for producing educational content to foster solid moral values and positive lifestyles in younger generations. The ongoing public skepticism toward manga continues to complicate the situation. Thus, state-owned publishers have no choice but to edit out all potentially troublesome elements, even in manga series intended for readers aged 18 and above. Additionally, the Vietnamese market is relatively lenient regarding purchasing publications, making it likely that underage readers may acquire adult-oriented manga. Due to that risk, local publishers often use extensive censorship to avoid public criticism.

Secondly, publication laws also regulate contents for adults to prevent subtle implications that suggest immoral and decadent lifestyles as well as hatred and violence²⁵. Due to the ambiguity in publication laws, local publishers are cautious when screening and editing visual content in adult-oriented manga. As a result, nudity and revealing clothing are rarely depicted, even in manga rated 18+. Violent or vulgar actions, such as shooting, slashing, or smoking, are also censored. Scenes involving kissing or lying naked in bed are often heavily modified, with the extent of these changes varying from publisher to publisher. Highly sexual scenes like making love to either heterosexual or homosexual partners are also removed.

However, the extent of censorship depends on the publishers' discretion in determining whether images or actions require significant modification or only minor adjustments. Indeed, more competition and innovation have recently occurred in the Vietnamese manga market. In the scope of this study, manga series published from 2015 to 2023 had been booming in both the public and private sectors, with more new genres than ever before, such as Boy's Love

25 According to Article 11, Publishing Law No.19/2012/QH13, any individual who violates the law will be punished depending on the nature and seriousness of their violations.

and Girl's Love. Along with the diversity in manga genres, new censoring strategies have also appeared with the motto "Less modification, Better reputation." As local fan readers have more manga publishers to choose from, they are more willing to support publishers who keep censorship to a minimum or who do not censor at all. For publishers in the public sector, such demands can be disastrous if authorities or mainstream media criticize them for failing to uphold their role as gatekeepers of public morality. Consequently, state-owned publishers have developed strategies to circumvent censorship requirements as much as possible, such as swapping and wrapping problematic manga covers. However, if the visual content remains potentially troublesome, these publishers have no choice but to modify it in the most aesthetically pleasing way possible to minimize backlash from local fans.

In general, the censorship strategies employed by local publishers are designed to achieve two main objectives: 1) to fulfill the responsibility—particularly for state-owned publishers—of shaping the political, social, and cultural consciousness of local readers in line with the guidelines of the Communist Party; and 2) to meet the expectations of local audiences by minimizing or avoiding alterations to visual content. These two goals are inherently paradoxical. Therefore, local publishers and editors in charge of manga publications must be creative in finding compromise solutions for the final products. Successful solutions enhance the publisher's reputation and lead to substantial profits, as local fans are more willing to pay for well-produced printed products.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that while the censorship over printed media in Vietnam is officially tightly controlled, there is in fact flexibility in the actual practice because of vague content regulations. The core personnel of the printed media system are editors and editors-in-chief who are in charge of screening and editing manuscripts to meet the guidelines of the state and the party. As editing tasks depend on an individual editor with a certain sense of aesthetics and knowledge, the choices and strategies of editing are varied. In other words, rather than a systematic and rigid process, censorship can be a flexible and innovative process due to personal decisions. Vietnamese publishers

can and do circumvent official regulations to reproduce foreign cultural products for domestic readers, which indicates a level of leniency from within the authoritarian government's publishing restrictions.

Moreover, the demand from domestic fans as well as internal market competition also motivate Vietnamese publishers to create various censoring techniques to aesthetically adapt Japanese manga to Vietnamese versions. These factors also indirectly contribute to the process of flexible censorship, in which the new meaning of media products can be shaped through the negotiation of various social agents, rather than being solely determined by a dominant authoritative voice. This dynamic helps to clarify how publishers consistently adapt and innovate censorship techniques over time, balancing the demands of manga enthusiasts with the necessity of complying with content regulations.

Along with this practice, flexible censorship reveals a passive cultural resistance of a local government to the global cultural trends in the age of the internet, where every country can share and exchange cultural products faster and almost simultaneously. Flexible censorship indicates that government regulations on imported culture products and their domestic counterparts may be seen as a way to resist cultural colonization and to uphold local and national cultural identity under the pressure of globalization. For this reason, domestic producers, individual censors, and even consumers can function as content regulators, to co-produce a media product that fits all the political and social expectations while still accommodating global cultural influences.

Overall, this article contributes a novel notion of censorship to understand the entanglement between government controls of media in general and the multiple participants not only in the economic sphere but also in the social network of censors, producers, and consumers in the internet age. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected through global political networks, economic organizations, and online social networks, the classic and conventional controls of nation-states have become increasingly persistent in their efforts to preserve national cultural norms and a distinct national identity. In this context, the notion of flexible censorship suggests a deeper insight into how ambiguous government regulations can both reinforce and empower economic and social forces to participate actively in the censorship process.

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26 Academy of Journalism and Communication (AJC) is actually a university in Vietnam, despite it is named as Academy (translated from its Vietnamese name "Học Viện Báo Chí và Tuyên Truyền"). This academy is established in 1962 with the main task to train bachelors and masters of Marxism – Leninism politics. More information about AJC can be found at its website: <https://ajc.hcma.vn/Pages/home.aspx>

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Abstract

Screening, Modifying, Adapting: The Techniques of Censoring Japanese Manga Aims at Young Adults Published in Contemporary Vietnam

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In the 21st century, Vietnam endeavors to establish a distinct national identity and enhance its soft power by developing its cultural industry. This strategic initiative results in evolving media control mechanisms and flexibility over time. The importation of Japanese manga since the 1990s serves as an excellent example. Therefore, analyzing censorship practices within manga provides valuable insights into the broader dynamics of control over both foreign and domestic cultural media. This study argues that the flexible censorship has been applied in the current content regulations in Vietnam in order to enforce the media control in a subtle way with the active participation of domestic publishers. In that manner, this study examines the structure of the official departments that had authority over printed media in Vietnam and explores the workforce in printed media to provide a comprehensive view of the controlling system. Additionally, the study conducts a mixed method research on Vietnamese versions of Japanese manga targeted at young adults to explore the techniques employed by the censorship system in regulating content permitted for public dissemination. Thus, the close analysis of manga publications in Vietnam found some specific elements, such as nudity, guns, and other behaviors considered to be vulgar and decadent, were modified to suit the publishing regulations and traditional morals. Nonetheless, both private and public sector Vietnamese publishers have developed innovative strategies to navigate these stringent regulations, striving to reproduce Japanese manga as faithfully as possible due to the strong demand from local fans. This study hopes to elucidate how a foreign media product can be imported and achieved increasing popularity in Vietnam, addressing both political and commercial dimensions. The concept of “flexible censorship,” which is also put forth in this

study, refers to the process of altering media products while taking into account a variety of variables, including the censors, the producers, and the individual consumers, rather than the strict framework and rigid discourse of the government.

