Seiyū: the art of voice acting
the Japanese voice acting industry and its relation to the anime market

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1. Introduction

Japan's cultural framework allows for many things that Western cultures are unfamiliar with, specifically a large number of subcultures and local trends. Subcultures are here defined as groups or communities of specified interests, deviating from larger mainstream social and cultural groups. Haenfler (2014) associates subcultures rather drastically with 'youth' and 'deviating from the mainstream in terms of forming guild-like bonds with fellow outcasts'[1]. In reality however, subcultures do not seem to be inseparably linked to 'youth', since they refer to a widespread variety of categories supporting different styles of music, fashion and sports without an indication of age or generation. Nowadays subcultures are everywhere and they have been accepted as a part of society, unlike in the 1980s when some of them -mainly new trends in alternative music and style among youngsters- were looked down upon as dangerous[2].

Among the vast variety of cultural categories in Japan, the entertainment culture and the anime culture are likely to score high in the rankings. Naturally, both are rather broad and, for their part, include many other subcultures. This thesis will research a subculture that, one could say, fits in both the entertainment and the anime framework, one that has been growing in strength and popularity since the 1970s and is now one of the most sought-after professions among teenagers in Japan.

Seiyū 声優 is the Japanese word for 'voice actor' and defines people, usually former stage actors, who lend their voices to characters mainly in animated features or series.

Voice acting does not only occur in Japan; around the globe people are narrating commercials and dubbing animations and foreign films. However, there is a significant difference in status between Japan and other countries when it comes to voice acting. In Japan, voice actors are celebrities with a status close to pop idols, people who are known by voice, face and name. Besides voicing radio and television shows, voice actors appear on variety shows and live events, hold concerts and appear in advertisements. Most of them are active as solo artists as well.

The concept of *seiyū* has become a subculture of its own. Marc Steinberg, associate professor at the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema in Canada who specializes in media theory and Japanese digital culture, refers to *seiyū* as a 'secondary star system'[3]; besides the issue of their

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[1] Haenfler 2014, p2-3
[2] Haenfler 2014, p2
[3] Steinberg 2009, p113

visual recognition there are also anime merchandise stores that especially target *seiyū* fans: in most of these stores there are separate sections dedicated to *seiyū* products such as photobooks, magazines and drama CDs.

While this research started from a simple curiosity regarding the popularity of the occupation of voice acting, it turns out that there is much more to it than meets the eye. Even though the popularity of *seiyū* in Japan is undeniable and there is a whole industry behind it, as of yet there has not been much academic research about it. This thesis will be an attempt to open the discussion on this topic by sharing new findings and creating a gateway for future research regarding this specific field of Japanese popular culture.

The question this research will strive to answer is: 'How is the *seiyū* industry structured and how does it work in relation to the anime market in Japan?'

It is important to clarify that, while this research pinpoints anime *seiyū,* there are many more different categories of voice actors. There are narrators, people who provide voice-overs for documentaries and host radio programs, people who specialize in dubbing foreign movies and dramas, etcetera. The main focus of this research will be on the nature of the *seiyū* industry and how anime *seiyū* are involved in activities promoting anime series and merchandise products that emerge from the popularity of those series.

There are a lot of opportunities for training and education to become a voice actor, and many young people seem to be attracted to the idea of being able to contribute to the world of anime, something they grew up with and something many people still watch today. As attractive and entertaining the profession might sound, one must not think that everything about it is rosy and ideal. When searching for information on becoming a voice actor in Japan, either on the Internet or in academic sources, there is much to be found on the toughness of the occupation and its instability when it comes to financial circumstances.

Besides the fact that it does not pay much, work opportunities in general are scarce and especially with many new talents graduating from *seiyū* schools every single year, there is no guarantee that everyone will get a job as it is a competitive field.

In 2015, veteran voice actor Otsuka Akio[4] wrote a controversial book about the *seiyū* business. The book is considered controversial because of the way Otsuka highlights the problematic aspects of the industry and, rather than motivating them, emphasizes why aspiring voice actors should not pursue this career. In this book, *Seiyū Tamashii* 声優魂

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[4] In this thesis, Japanese names are written according to the Japanese way, with last name followed by first name.

(which literally translates as 'the soul/spirit of *seiyū*'), the industry is described as an aggressive game of musical chairs. When in the 1960s there were fifty chairs and fifty actors to occupy the seats without leaving a position, currently there would be three hundred chairs and more than ten thousand people fighting over them.[5] Even though the number of chairs might have increased, it is still not enough to provide for the consistently growing number of voice actors entering the industry every single year.

The number of young people aspiring to become voice actors is indeed increasing with the years. In 2014, Hiramitsu Takuya wrote a book in which he argued that the profession of voice acting is currently in the top 10 of children's future dreams in Japan and with that it exceeds the ambition of becoming a stage actor. Hiramitsu says that children's dreams usually include the condition of 'doing something cool', which would suggest that becoming a voice actor is perceived as being 'cooler' than becoming a regular actor[6]. Although this outcome relies heavily on people's personal opinion, it does reflect the undeniable popularity of voice actors in Japan.

One can wonder why people choose to become a voice actor in response to the before-mentioned critical points regarding one, financial instability and scarce job opportunities, and two, the amount of stress a job in this industry is known to entail. Despite this fact, the question remains why hundreds of students still apply for voice acting schools every year. Although this thesis will not focus on that specific question, it is still something that plays a significant role while exploring this particular research field. The financial aspect will be discussed later on – the main goal for now is to clarify the structuring of the industry and how it is linked to the larger related market.

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[5] Otsuka 2015, p18
[6] Hiramitsu 2014, p2

1a. Framework

This thesis is an extension of earlier research on the role of voice actors within the Japanese idol culture and general society, and will focus more on the voice acting industry as a whole and how it collaborates with the anime market in Japan.

There is more than one framework in which this research might fit. The original plan was to either take a sociological perspective or discuss voice acting from an economical point of view as another way of contributing to the Japanese consumption market. In the end it turned out to be a more systematical overview of how the industry is structured and how voice acting contributes to the anime market, mainly in terms of merchandising.

In the West, 'pop culture studies' is not a fully established field of research yet, so it could be complicated to try and fit it in that field, even though that might be the most suitable. Besides this, there is also the educational aspect, the role of training schools and how students are groomed into potential voice actors. In the end, this research might fit best within the broad framework of cultural studies and area studies since there are different frameworks that are applicable to this topic.

1b. Methodology

The data for the present research was partly gathered during a year-long stay in Japan, enrolled as a student in Meiji University in Tokyo. During this period, the main goal was to experience Japanese voice acting culture first-hand. This included multiple activities that gave more insight into how the voice acting industry is presented to the public and especially to youths aspiring to become voice actors.

First, following courses at Meiji University that focused specifically on Japanese popular culture, providing academic attention to subcultures such as anime, manga and game culture. Besides that, it included visiting voice acting schools and events, gathering information through magazines and other media, and interviewing several people who are -or used to be- directly involved in the industry.

Data was acquired through visits to three schools in the Tokyo vicinity: Toho Academy (東京放送学院 *Tōkyō Hōsō Gakuin*) located in Nishi-Shinjuku, TSA (東京声優アカデミー *Tōkyō Seiyū* Academy) located in Ebisu and YoAni (代々木アニメーション *Yoyogi* Animation) located in Suidobashi. All schools were visited multiple times, sometimes for free lesson trials and sometimes for *setsumeikai* 説明会, explanatory meetings. Often these two parts were combined within a one-day experience.

There were four interviews conducted in total: with Adelaide Amissah, stage-named Reina, a woman from the United Kingdom who came to Japan to become a voice actress, Koike Marumi, a friend and former classmate of Reina who is currently busy on furthering her career as a *seiyū*, Kataoka Ichiro, a professional *benshi* or traditional movie narrator, and Murata Satoshi, a former employee at the Tokyo School of Anime (ToAni for short) who was in charge of guiding the foreign students who applied there.

As for the bibliography, this research hinges on information acquired through both Japanese and English language literature within the relevant fieldwork and those sources will be referred to and discussed in order to create a multisided overview of *seiyū* and its relation to the anime industry. The before-mentioned books by Hiramitsu (2014) and Otsuka (2015) talk about the world of *seiyū* from a professional perspective. Both authors have been directly involved in the business themselves and share their insight on the industry. With these two sources, we can already see a certain friction, two sides of the same coin. While Otsuka criticizes the industry and rather discourages aspirants to become voice actors, Hiramitsu is less judgmental and gives a more objective overview of do's and don'ts and things to know when aspiring to enter the industry. Besides these two books, there are two more Japanese articles written by Morimoto (2009) and Hatakeyama (2011), which have proven to be very informative with regard to both technical and systematic aspects of being a *seiyū*. While Morimoto talks about voice acting as a type of storytelling belonging to the Japanese image culture, Hatakeyama managed to write a sociological essay on *seiyū* in which he addresses both systematical and physical aspects of the occupation.

In terms of anime marketing, there are more English sources available, for example by Leonard (2005) a former law student who gives a structural insight in anime fandom and copyrighting. Steinberg and Condry (2009), both professors specializing in Japanese popular culture, talk about anime production and merchandising. Daliot-Bul (2014), who researches late modernity in Japan and developments in media and culture practices, talks about how the anime boom has helped develop animation culture as a global concept, and this will contribute to the section of historical background in which the anime culture needs to be partly analyzed.

Besides the introduction and conclusion, this thesis is structured into two main chapters.

For the first part, articles by Leonard and Daliot-Bul will be referred to as well as the interview that was conducted with professional silent movie narrator Kataoka Ichiro in order to give an explanation of the *seiyū* phenomenon. This part will describe how voice acting in Japan rose to its current status, including a brief historical background.

The second part consists of an analysis of the *seiyū* industry, in which both educational and marketing aspects are discussed. Here, Japanese sources by Morimoto, Hatakeyama, Hiramitsu and Otsuka will be referred to in order to look at different aspects of the occupation of voice acting. As for research regarding schools and agencies, the interviews with Reina, Marumi and Murata Satoshi will be used as a reference.

The main goal of this thesis research is to show how the voice acting industry of Japan is structured and to prove that research on this part of Japanese society and popular culture will offer relevant insights.

2. Voice acting

This chapter consists of three subchapters, dealing with the development of both voice actors and the profession itself up until now. First a historical background shall be presented, linking the earliest appearance of voice acting to the anime booms which consequently led to a rise in popularity of voice actors. After that, the development of *seiyū* as celebrities will be discussed and how, as a result of that, their activities and behavior have changed. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the phenomenon of *seiyū* and to provide an overview of how they have come to their current status and position in contemporary Japanese popular culture.

2a. Historical background

Seiyū is the Japanese word for 'voice actor', written with the characters for 'voice' 声 (*sei*) and 'actor' 優 (*yū*). Even though this literal translation might suggest a person, the word is also used for the occupation of voice acting, and for the actual action of voice acting in terms of performance.

As different articles and interviews provided similar statements about the emergence of voice acting, the general consensus seems to be that it originates from radio plays.

Voice actors in Japan have existed ever since the 1920s. In the earliest period of their traceable appearance they were called 'radio actors' rather than 'voice actors', as they were usually stage actors who did voice acting work for radio dramas as a side job. Back then, the art of voice acting was not an established profession yet; people were not aware that it was considered a profession at all and voice actors were even looked down upon.

According to Morikawa and Tsujitani (2003), referred to in Hatakeyama's essay and also noted by Ishihara (2013), the 'birth' of voice actors occurred in 1925 when film narrator Kumaoka Tendou performed a narrative explanation of 'Les Misérables' on the radio[7]. Morikawa and Tsujitani's definition of voice actors describes "people who use media to express art through words (sometimes including song) and based on their own unique creativity"[8]. They distinguish three major differences between radio voice actors from that time and *seiyū* from today, one difference thus being that voice acting was not an officially acknowledged profession yet: there were no professionals who specialized in voice acting. Another difference had to do with the limited number of radio broadcasts. Radio dramas only

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[7] Ishihara 2013, p11
[8] Hatakeyama 2011, p16

occurred once and usually involved a live broadcast. The last difference they discuss is the lack of techniques and systematic devices at that time, which have greatly developed by now[9].

According to both Morimoto (2009) and Hatakeyama (2011), the earliest form of *seiyū* can be traced back to *benshi* 弁士, traditional movie narrators from the silent cinema era. The occupation of *benshi* normally includes narrating a full movie, providing voices for all the characters (both male and female) and presenting the main storyline in-between scenes. After the introduction of television in the 1940s, *benshi* eventually lost a large part of their work opportunities due to the upcoming use of subtitling and, consequently, dubbing[10]. Nowadays, there are around ten people left who still practice the profession of *benshi*.

To test Morimoto's claim, I asked Kataoka Ichiro, a *benshi* currently professionally active for at least fifteen years, if he also saw the connection between narration for film and contemporary voice acting. According to Kataoka, it is possible to see a connection in the sense of putting voices to images, but not necessarily in the two professions both being forms of art[11]. He distinguishes the two occupations by differentiating between synchronizing (*seiyū*) and explaining (*benshi*): he considers voice acting more as a way to synchronize image and sound while *benshi* have a more explanatory and narrative function.

Another big difference between *seiyū* and *benshi* lies in training opportunities. Although there are a lot of educational institutions to become a voice actor, *benshi* are completely self-taught. Kataoka says that because there was no real education for traditional arts in his days, he learned everything by himself through *minarai* 見習い, literally 'watch-and-learn'. Disciples initially learn the basics from a *shishō* 師匠, a master or teacher figure who guides them, but the ultimate learning process is individual and personal. Since there are many voice arts involved, the best way to do it is to learn through first imitating and then applying one's own interpretation, one's uniqueness, says Kataoka[12].

It is a fact that currently the number of active professional *benshi* is small, but according to Kataoka there are still about 2000 people in Japan who have an interest in silent movies, including a growing number of youngsters, so there is still room for them to expand their

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[9] Hatakeyama 2011, p16
[10] Morimoto 2009, p119
[11] Interview with Mr. Kataoka Ichiro, August 25, 2016
[12] Interview with Mr. Kataoka Ichiro, August 25, 2016

audience[13]. Besides traditional Japanese movies, Kataoka also narrates European and Chinese films and is currently traveling a lot to perform in different parts of the world.

Besides the extended *seiyū* and idol culture we can also find traces of voice acting as an art in several forms of traditional Japanese theatre. Kataoka himself says that his fascination for traditional arts and eventually *benshi* started as he watched a lot of *rakugo* 落語, a type of Japanese one-man comedy in which one man, typically sitting on a pillow with a microphone in front of him, performs a skit in which he plays all the roles, demonstrating for example dialogues between different characters on his own. Another example may be found in *bunraku* 文楽, a form of sophisticated puppet theatre. The story is narrated by a *tayū* 太夫, a highly-trained narrator who is accompanied by a *shamisen* 三味線, a traditional Japanese snare instrument. The training for this type of narration, called *gidayū* 義太夫, is very intensive as the performers have to give life to the emotionless puppets through their chanting. As with *benshi*, it is usually one person providing both the storyline and the characters' lines all by himself. Kataoka may claim there is not necessarily a connection in the sense that *benshi* and contemporary voice acting are both forms of artistic narration, but one can still distinguish common traits in both types of performance and the way in which the art of narrative performance is valued by both performers and audiences.

2b. The rise of voice acting for animation

As mentioned in chapter 2a, *seiyū* were originally radio actors who were not necessarily known by face or name. They were typically people who provided voices for radio plays as a side job, next to being active in regular acting or other kinds of entertainment. The period in which these radio plays were common was around the early 1920s. In 1926, the NHK (short for *Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai* 日本放送協会, 'Japanese Broadcasting Corporation') was established and until today it still is the national state broadcasting company of Japan. The NHK, originally known as Radio Japan, started radio broadcasting in the 1930s, which by then had already broadcasted programs in English, aimed at people living in Hawaii and the west coast of North-America. Following Japan's defeat in World War II, the NHK was the company that broadcasted the Emperor's surrender speech on August 15, 1945. During the American Occupation (1945-1952), the NHK was temporarily forced to stop its international broadcasting, but it was able to resume in 1952. By this time, foreign movies and dramas were

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[13] Interview with Mr. Kataoka Ichiro, August 25, 2016

already being imported to Japan in large numbers. They were initially shown on television with subtitles, but were sometimes hard to follow that way, especially for children. This is when an increasing need arose for narrators and voice actors to lend their voices to dub these television broadcasts[14]. The people who, in this period, were employed to act as voice actors usually came from theatre troupes and were preferably people who had knowledge of vocal techniques and experience with performing on stage as well[15].

In the early 1960s, the number of foreign dramas decreased, and the shift towards anime started. The first complete anime was released in 1963, based on manga artist Tezuka Osamu's *Tetsuwan Atomu* 鉄腕アトム, globally known as 'Astro Boy'. From this moment, voice acting for anime became high in demand, and the profession started expanding slowly but surely[16].

Within the development of the popularity of *seiyū*, there are three major *seiyū* booms that can be distinguished, differing slightly from the established anime booms.

As argued by both Morimoto (2009) and Hatakeyama (2011), the first anime boom started with Astro Boy. Before the anime, Tezuka's story was already popular as a manga and so the people already knew the story and shared an emotional attachment to the characters. When the anime series came out, it was the first time the characters came to life with voice and movement, and this resulted in enthusiastic support from the audience. The series rapidly became very popular.

The first *seiyū* boom and the second anime boom both occurred in the late 1970s, when the popular science-fiction anime *Uchū Senkan Yamato* 宇宙戦艦ヤマト, globally known as 'Space Battleship Yamato', was broadcasted. When it was first broadcasted on television station Yomiuri TV, it was shown in the same time slot as *Arupusu no Shōjo Haidī* アルプスの少女ハイジ, 'Heidi, Girl of the Alps' on Fuji TV and there had to be a showdown to see which one had the most viewer ratings; the other one would have to go. Heidi won, and Yamato was cancelled. In reaction to this, the surprisingly widespread fan base of the sci-fi series came into action to save their favorite show from disappearing from the screen for good and as a result the second anime boom occurred. With this boom, the fan group known as *otaku* appeared clearly for the first time. The originally negative term *otaku* refers to groups of people who can be described as dedicated and occasionally obsessed fans.

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[14] Otsuka 2015, p17
[15] Hatakeyama 2011, p16-17
[16] Hatakeyama 2011, p16-17

Due to this 'Space Battleship Yamato hype' the *seiyū* acting in the series were also heavily promoted and magazines that specifically featured voice actors appeared in multitudes, causing the first *seiyū* boom period.

The third anime boom took place as a result of the popularity acquired through Yamato, and it manifested itself in many ways to promote the new subculture, especially through magazines. From the early 1980s on, the number of newly launched magazines featuring and promoting anime skyrocketed. They were specifically targeting *otaku*, and as such deviated from the mainstream into new subcultures.

The second *seiyū* boom period occurred in Japan's bubble economy in the late 1980s and the third at the beginning of the 21st century because of the emergence of more media forms that allowed people to be better informed about voice actors. From this period on, the status of voice actors started to change from simply voices on the radio to people whose face and name were known to the public[17]. Their status and image evolved more into one similar to that of pop idols. At the same time, it was also an economically good period for the anime market. Because of the increase in new anime series being released every season, more young adults grew an interest in voice acting. Perhaps this is where the origins lie for the aspiration to become a 'cool' voice actor.

2c. Development of the image and status of *seiyū*

Within a period of 40 years, anime, *seiyū*, and *otaku* all had their breakthrough points. These three terms started to get associated with each other more frequently as anime became more commercial and the status of voice actors more apparent. Their status was not the only thing that had changed – their activities also became more varied. According to veteran voice actress Yukino Satsuki (1970–), in the twenty years that she has now been active in the industry, the attention has shifted towards visual appearances of voice actors, with activities such as live events and stage performances increasing remarkably[18]. According to Yukino, simply providing a character with a voice is not all there is to the job anymore, and that in order to become a voice actor these days the whole package is required. The whole package here means that it is not sufficient anymore to just have the vocal techniques, but that it is also essential for aspirants to have visuals and the ability to perform live, which includes dancing and acting as well as singing.

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[17] Morimoto 2009, p120

[18] Mini-talk show with Yukino Satsuki at Toho Academy on December 11, 2016

Besides an increase in the variety of performed activities, there has also been a development in terms of behavior. This is closely linked to fan perspectives, so the role of fans – and particularly *otaku* – needs to be taken into account here. Just like with pop idols, fans have a very big influence on the *seiyū* industry itself, and on the *seiyū* artists in particular. After all, they are the ones supporting their favorite voice actors by entering their fan clubs and buying their merchandise.

In some extreme cases fans are not able to accept that a voice actor is someone different in real life than the character he or she plays in an anime. As such, they expect voice actors to act a certain way. For example, there have been cases of voice actors getting involved in a scandal or some other kind of unexpected happening, which then led to shocked reactions from fans. Cases of voice actors who were revealed to have married in secret or who have had some notorious incident happen to them in their past usually gain a lot of negative responses among fans. According to the rules of the Japanese agency system, involved parties are expected to offer an official apology to their fans through radio and social media. This is the case with any type of celebrity in Japan. However, with voice actors there is the issue of fans not being able to distinguish them from the fictional characters they represent. Through these kinds of events fans are confronted with the fact that *seiyū* too are just ordinary people and that they are expected to abide by strict regulations regarding behavior standards. This might sound logical since they are considered to be the same status as regular artists, but it is interesting to see how responses to their behavior in real life are automatically associated with their careers within the anime industry and the characters they represent.

In her essay written in 2007, Rebecca Starr talks about fan perception with regard to *seiyū*. Her essay mainly focuses on a particular kind of female voice which she calls the 'sweet voice'. Voice actors and actresses with a certain type of voice are expected to exhibit a similar behavior in real life[19]. For example, Yukino Satsuki is best known for her characteristic *oneesan* お姉さん voice, indicating a young woman or older sister type of voice. There are a lot of female *seiyū* who are famous for their cute, high-pitched young girl type of voice and performance, and consequently fans expect them to behave in a similar manner in their daily lives. The example that Starr gives in her essay is that of Inoue Kikuko who, according to her, seems to embody the concept of *yamato nadeshiko* 大和撫子 (an expression used to describe

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[19] Starr 2007, p16-17

the ultimate traditional Japanese beauty) in her voice and who can be seen as the perfect example of a *seiyū* who, when appearing in public, dresses and acts according to this image[20]. Overall, character types play a large role in voice acting. Hiramitsu also addresses this in his book by saying that it is crucial for aspirant voice actors to decide on a certain character type voice they want to be known for before they start promoting themselves to agencies. Managers need to know what kind of product they need to sell, so even if a *seiyū* is able to produce a variety of voices, they need to choose one they excel in, otherwise they will find it difficult to become successful[21]. This causes some friction with Hatakeyama's claim that being a voice actor entails being able to perform a variety of voices rather than just one. He states that, in order to be recognized as a voice actor rather than a certain single anime character, it is essential that a *seiyū* is able to perform at least two different voices. That way, it is easier for audiences to start remembering them by name, instead of 'the person that voices that specific character'[22]. At the same time, there is an apparent shift happening in which voice actors are becoming recognized by face and name rather than just voices of anime characters.

The following chapter will deal with the systematical and educational aspects of voice acting, including a section on what Hatakeyama implies to be a sociological aspect but is more of an economical aspect: the way in which voice actors become a consumption product on the anime market. Furthermore, the focus will be on answering the research question and determine how exactly voice actors contribute to the anime industry in Japan.

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[20] Starr 2007, p21
[21] Hiramitsu 2014, p40-41
[22] Hatakeyama 2011, p18

3. The *seiyū* industry

This chapter will describe the process stretching from entering a training school to entering an agency and finally, setting foot inside the industry. It will look at how educational institutions for voice acting are structured and how they prepare students for their desired career as a voice actor, looking specifically at ways of recruitment and the offered curriculum. The focus will be on the two sides of the voice acting industry, both the appealing side and the more practical side, and on how specialized schools deal with these perspectives. Here, data acquired through school visits will be discussed, as well as information gathered from people who are or have been involved with these schools and are still active in the field.

Following that, a section about anime marketing will provide information on how *seiyū* become a sellable product and start contributing to the anime market. The focus there will be on the way in which voice actors promote anime products.

3a. *Senmon gakkō* and *yōseijo*

In Japan, there is a difference between *senmon gakkō* 専門学校 (vocational schools) and *yōseijo* 養成所 (training schools). Vocational schools are a part of the higher education system and offer a two-year program on a specialized field of work. The vocational schools provide possibilities for enrollment to students who have at least a senior high school degree. There are around 130 voice acting vocational schools in Japan, of which about 70 in the Tokyo region[23].

Training schools are usually part of a voice acting production agency and focus on actual employment opportunities. A *seiyū* training school's program officially lasts one year, at the end of which an audition or evaluation test is held to see if the student is deemed capable enough to proceed within the agency. If one fails this evaluation, they may get the opportunity to repeat the same year and either try for the evaluation again a year later, or quit. Educational institutions for *seiyū* are mostly private, not necessarily sponsored by the government. The main funding comes from their school fees and anime enterprises and studios, which will provide financial support for projects organized by the schools[24]. It does seem logical for anime studios to give their support to institutions educating voice actors, as they are people who, one day, might come to work directly in their studio.

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[23] Interview with Murata Satoshi, January 26, 2017
[24] Interview with Murata Satoshi, January 26, 2017

Vocational schools and training schools are quite expensive institutions; one year usually costs at least one million yen (approximately 8000 euros). For some schools, this includes teaching materials and training expenses, other schools charge extra costs for this on top of the enrollment fee. All use of technological equipment present at the school and the guidance and classes from professional lecturers and veterans who are active in the industry at that moment are included in the school fee.

Recruitment

Both vocational schools and training schools offer so-called 'open campuses'; days where interested students can come and take a tour of the school. During these days, they get the opportunity to try out several example lessons for free. Applying for these try out lessons is possible through the schools' websites. At the schools visited for this research, applicants were able to choose from a small number of electives focusing on different aspects of voice acting such as singing, dubbing, pronunciation and basic warming-up exercises. Usually, open campus days offer whole-day try out sessions, consisting mostly of one or two lessons and one explanatory meeting at the end. During the explanatory meetings visitors are presented with several booklets and informational handouts which highlight the school's reputation and provide practical information about the curriculum and school fees. One can apply for these information packages through the websites as well. Interested students are encouraged to visit the open campus of a school more than once to try out all the lessons that are offered. Students who are currently studying at the school are there to accompany and advise and answer questions about their daily school life.

The contents of the open campus days at these schools are not much different from orientation days at regular educational institutions. The only difference is that Japan stands apart for its vocational and training schools specializing in *seiyū* education. Offering trial lessons and giving people the opportunity to make use of the special equipment for a whole day and giving them chances to attend exclusive talk-shows with former graduates without having to pay for it seems to be something that is particular to *seiyū* schools' open campus days. Its main goal is to attract as many new students as possible, and thus a lot of work goes into highlighting the promotional features of the school. Famous graduates are an important asset in this. In all three of the visited schools, the walls were covered with posters and magazine features of famous *seiyū* graduates. Videos showing encouraging messages from graduates

and previous years' graduation performances help promote the school's program as attractive and fun.

Another tactic that is used by many vocational schools is the organization of mini talk-shows with special guests who are active in the anime industry or are involved with voice actors through their work.

To give an example: in December 2016, Toho Academy organized a mini talk-show with veteran voice actress and former student Yukino Satsuki. This mini talk-show was included in the open campus day program and completely free to attend, provided that the guests applied for it beforehand. People present could ask questions about the interviewee's experience as a voice actor and get advice on how to practice and prepare for auditions and such.

I would not go as far as to say that every aspirant chooses a school solely based on its famous graduates. However, many young aspiring voice actors have *seiyū* who they see as their role model and who they idolize. Schools are aware of this and try to play upon these sentiments. While famous graduates can be a motivational factor for deciding which voice acting school to join, there are many other aspects that also play a role, such as the location, the recording equipment, the school's reputation and the experienced teachers.

One other remarkable thing about schools trying to reel in new students is the way in which they tend to romanticize the occupation. When interviewing Murata Satoshi, a former employee of the Tokyo School of Anime, he said that 'people do not really think about the industry until they enter it, but focus more on the idealistic part of the occupation'. He also stated that 'schools do not always tell the whole truth when they try to lure students in'[25]. Otsuka also discusses this idealization in his book; he writes that he often hears people say things such as, 'I want to become a *seiyū* and bring dreams to children', and he criticizes the idea that many still think that being a *seiyū* is a dream job[26].

In many cases schools focus on highlighting the positive sides rather than giving a realistic overview of the industry right off the bat. When asking currently enrolled students about the economic downside of the profession, their overall answers mostly indicated having to work part-time on the side, but the essentiality of the financial instability of the profession did not seem particularly worrisome to them. Most likely this has to do with the fact that students at voice acting schools are informed about the industry up to a certain level, but only discover the reality when they enter the business in practice. Again, attracting new students is the main goal here and assuming that the awareness of the occupation being unstable is widespread, it

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[25] Interview with Murata Satoshi, January 26, 2017
[26] Otsuka 2015, p37

can be expected that aspirants have an idea of what they are getting themselves into. Still, the overall impression one gets is a relatively idealized one.

Curriculum

To give an example of the contents of a two-year education at a voice acting vocational school, a reference will be made here to the enrollment guidebook magazine provided by Yoyogi Animation. Typically, this magazine is styled like an anime magazine, including colorful manga drawings to emphasize the affiliation with the anime industry. The magazine gives an overview of many different departments that exist within the school. At YoAni, there are three departments that prepare students for a career as a voice actor: the *seiyū* talent department, the *seiyū* anime song department and the *seiyū* idol department. In all cases, each year normally consists of eight to nine courses, varying from lessons that focus on vocal exercise and dubbing to different styles of dance, stage performance and preparing for auditions[27].

What seems remarkable is that, even though Yoyogi Animation has several courses with titles such as 'Industry Guidance' and 'Audition Explanatory', no such courses appear in the curricula of for instance Toho Academy and TSA. The overall message that is given, both through explanatory meetings and talks with students, is that one can only discover the industry after actually entering it. Yoyogi Animation might devote an actual class to it and other schools might not, but this does not necessarily mean that they do not address the subject at all.

As someone who has been active within an agency for three years now, 24-year old Koike Marumi offered her personal insight into the experience of commuting to a *yōseijo*. She passed the first year of her training school program and has had the opportunity to do some small voice acting roles provided by her agency, but she is still waiting for a chance to make her breakthrough. The program Koike followed at her training school consisted of lessons only once a week, with a fixed curriculum which focused on learning about being a *seiyū* from different perspectives: basics, recording, anime, narration and even Shakespeare[28]. She said that being in an agency basically entails going for auditions and receiving voice acting jobs. This is likely to be the most unstable part, since there can be long periods without work, and this is the main reason why trainees usually have one or more part-time jobs besides their agency activities.

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[27] 'Yoyogi Animage', Yoyogi Animation Academy Enrolment Guidebook 2017, p15-21
[28] Interview with Koike Marumi, January 10, 2017

3b. From practice to economical contribution

According to Ishihara (2013), based on a chart[29] from Yanagiya Yukihiro's book *Seiyū ni naru! Saikyō* BOOK 声優になる!最強 BOOK ('To become a voice actor! The strongest book') published in 2010, the general route one should follow in order to become a *seiyū* is depicted as follows: first, assure yourself of a basic training at a vocational school. With a basic training background, you can start auditioning for training schools which are either independent or managed by a certain voice acting production company. Once the agency acknowledges your talent and you pass the end-of-year evaluation, you will be able to work as a so-called *azukari* 預かり or junior apprentice with the agency through auditions and scoutings[30]. This is when you may get work, as your agency will direct you towards job opportunities. However, even if you find yourself in the small group of people who persevered until the end, it still does not mean you will be able to acquire work at once. According to Ishihara's estimated figures, he states that in 2013 there were about 3000 people active in the *seiyū* industry with voice acting registered as their main occupation, more than half of them originating from the *Nippon Haiyū Rengō* 日本俳優連合, the Japan Actor's Union[31]. This means that, even if a new voice actor manages to debut, they have at least that many professionals as their opponents, many of them already established actors.

Besides the limited chances of acquiring work, lately there have also been developments regarding the visual image of voice actors, making it even harder for trained and specialized *seiyū* to make it through. Since *seiyū* are now considered to be on the same level as idols and other celebrities, outward appearance is becoming increasingly important.

According to Koike Marumi, the current *seiyū* industry has a high prioritization towards commerce. Managers and agencies are looking largely for people who are sellable, rather than people who have the actual skilled techniques. As a possible result of this, although this differs between agencies, lately there has been an increase in idols appearing in anime voice casting[32]. Vocational schools also started incorporating more stage acting and dance classes into their curriculum, along with classes on visual appearance and performance next to the usual classes that focus on pronunciation and singing. Nevertheless, Murata Satoshi stated that even with a certain level of visual charm, attraction, and an age advantage, the percentage

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[29] See Appendix 1.
[30] Ishihara 2013, p11
[31] Ishihara 2013, p11
[32] Interview with Koike Marumi, January 10, 2017

of people who can solely work as specialized voice actors is still extremely low, about 5%, and there is still no guarantee for success[33].

Popularity and skills

A voice actor's success depends highly on popularity. Although nothing seems to serve as a guarantee for doing well in the industry, when a voice actor is popular they will get more work. Besides visual appearance and fan base, the popularity of a *seiyū* is also largely determined by their skills and talent and how frequently they appear in different anime. When getting into the *seiyū* world as a fan, one is likely to encounter the same voice actors in many different anime series. These people are considered mainstream, as they are widely recognized by voice, face and name. Names such as Kamiya Hiroshi, Fukuyama Jun, Ono Daisuke, Horie Yui, Tamura Yukari can be counted as part of this core group.

What is interesting here is that there seems to be an ambiguity as to what makes a *seiyū* popular. Overall, these above-mentioned voice actors are people with quite distinct characteristic voices that are easy to recognize in whichever role they are playing. Most of them are also active as idols, releasing solo albums and holding concerts.

However, Hatakeyama (2011) distinguishes the uniqueness of a voice as one of the technical factors that make a voice actor. He talks about *datsukoyūka* 脱固有化, literally 'de-particularization' or isolation of the voice. He claims that voice actors should possess the ability to 'detach' their voice and adapt it to each character they have to play[34]. Realistically, this tends to be difficult as there are a lot of *seiyū* who are famous and popular especially because they have such a characteristic and recognizable voice. For all voice actors to be able to make their voice sound slightly different for each and every character they have to portray seems to be a more idealistic than a realistic idea. Weighing these two perspectives against each other, it seems that determining popularity mostly lies with the fans, and not necessarily with technical skills.

Payment

seiyū usually get paid for their work based on their experience and the length of the anime episode. The length of the final product counts more than the actual work hours. In other words, the payment remains fixed whether the voice actor has been in the studio all day or

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[33] Interview with Murata Satoshi, January 26, 2017
[34] Hatakeyama 2011, p18

just for several hours. Even the amount of lines does not matter. A voice actor will get paid a fixed amount according to their rank, usually starting with a minimum of 15,000 yen (approximately 120 euros) per episode for a rank 15, which is the lowest. This rank is called *junia* ジュニア (literally 'junior') and applies mainly to voice actors who are in their first few years of training school. After at least three years, their rank changes to *rankaa* ランカー (literally 'ranker') and their payment tends to go up with each level. Otsuka emphasizes the instability of the monthly income by stating that there are times when a *seiyū* can receive 15,000 yen one month and zero the next. He also states that the majority of voice actors cannot apply for loans, and that banks will only lend a large amount of money to people who are sure to maintain income for five to ten years more'[35].

When a series is remade, brought out on DVD or broadcasted on TV and the Internet, the income increases from roughly two to four times as much.

According to Litten (2008), the DVD market is one of the biggest platforms for anime merchandise, since it occupies about 40% of the income of anime producers[36]. However, when it comes to selling and licensing anime merchandise such as DVDs, copyright laws are to be seriously taken into account.

In 2013 Sean Thordsen, a practice attorney specializing in intellectual property and entertainment law, wrote a detailed article on anime encyclopedia platform Anime News Network called 'The Law of Anime', in which he speaks about copyright issues within the context of anime licensing and consequential merchandising. Japan has strict laws regarding copyrights in general, and the anime industry is no exception. When it comes to the distribution of merchandise such as DVDs, Thordsen writes that 'the responsibility lies with the licensee to make certain their rights do not conflict with someone else's and they should contact the original copyright holder to make certain that the party they are dealing with has the appropriate right to sublicense the property'[37].

3c. The promotional function of voice actors in terms of merchandising

This subchapter will focus on the aspect of anime marketing and how voice actors contribute to this process and influence it. Focusing particularly on the time when voice actors started to get involved in the anime industry, this chapter will look at concrete ways in which *seiyū*

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[35] Otsuka 2015, p28
[36] Litten 2008, p91
[37] http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/feature/2013-02-15/, accessed on 9-5-2017

promote anime series and their representative characters and it will serve as a direct gateway to the concluding statement of this research.

One characteristic that Japan picked up from the American system of merchandising is that the consumer stands at the center of it, rather than the product itself.

Today, characters still remain essential tools used in order to make products look attractive to customers. According to Leonard (2005), at a certain point the total of global sales from anime character-related goods even rose to 2 trillion yen (almost 15 billion euros) within 10 years[38].

First, a definition of the term 'character merchandising'. Steinberg uses the term multiple times and refers to it as 'the licensing, production, marketing and consumption of goods and media based around the image of a character'[39]. In other words, the basic foundation of character merchandising could be described as taking the image of an anime character and associating it with a product to make it more attractive to customers. He writes that there are two different movements through which character merchandising works: the attraction of the character as an immaterial appearance, and the materialization of the character by converting it to material products that intensify people's attraction towards the character[40]. He also states that there are multiple dimensions needed to establish a bond between the character and the audience. In an anime series, every character has a persona, a life, and a background story that the audience needs to be able to sympathize with[41]. So much, in fact, that even after the anime series has ended, the fans will still want to buy merchandise of the characters they like because of the sentimental attachment they have established with them, almost as if they were real people.

It is considered relatively simple to commoditize anime characters, as images of fictional characters are easily distributed. Steinberg makes an interesting statement on this as well, saying that products carrying images of characters from a certain anime were made and promoted in accordance to the following popularity of the series[42]. This process works both ways: in the earliest case of character merchandising, the case of Astro Boy, there was a two-way relation between the series (the characters) and its main sponsor, a confectionary company called Meiji Seika. Besides candy, other products like stickers were being sold

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[38] Leonard 2005, p281-2
[39] Steinberg 2009, p79
[40] Steinberg 2012, p122
[41] Steinberg 2012, p122
[42] Steinberg 2012, p42

carrying the image of characters from the anime series. The sponsoring goes as far as that Meiji Seika's icon and marble chocolates even appeared in episodes of the series. This way, the anime promoted the products, and the products promoted the anime. This is perhaps the best-known example of early character merchandising and it can be assumed that it largely influenced the merchandising market that is active this present day.

Steinberg mainly uses cases of character merchandising that were successful within Japan. Examples of successful Japanese franchises that made it both nationally as well as internationally are Hello Kitty and Pokémon. When thinking about Western character merchandising, Disney would be the first to come to mind. However, it is also important to distinguish between 'character' and 'brand'. Hello Kitty, Pokémon and Disney can be seen as brands as much as they refer to characters. The main difference between character and brand, as also argued by Condry (2009), is that a character cannot be seen without its world-setting and story, and a brand has more to do with business support[43]. Condry refers to manga artist Otsuka Eiji's manual on character making in which he claims that there are many cases in which characters cannot be seen as independent from their stories. An exception is Vocaloid, a software that enables the user to create a synthesized singing voice to lyrics and music they input themselves. Its most popular character, Hatsune Miku, was originally designed as a synthesized voice without a designated storyline, and is now a worldwide famous virtual idol. There seems to be some friction between what is considered to be more important for a character: its story or its design[44]. Developments in character design seem to be increasing, especially in order to sell products. Characters with unique hairstyles, colorful eyes and striking costumes usually gain more visual attention from audiences than characters in plain school uniforms and non-remarkable features.

Voice actors are supposed to 'breathe life' into a character. That is the main condition of their job as anime *seiyū*. But for a character to 'come alive' they do not simply need to create a voice for the character – they also need to create a striking personality so that audiences will empathize with it. Naturally, the bond that the voice actors themselves have with their characters is crucial to the way they portray it. Sugoi Japan, a Japanese platform that holds annual voting opportunities to decide which works (manga, anime, light novels etcetera) will be given a chance to be published outside of Japan, interviewed voice actress Komatsu Mikako after the 2016 voting selections. In this interview about grasping her characters,

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[43] Condry 2009, p148
[44] Condry 2009, p149

Komatsu said that she was given the advice by her seniors to always concentrate on her character and what it was doing, even if that character was not in the scene they were recording. According to her, the consistent empathy that the voice actor needs to have with the characters they play is one of the most important things in order to bring more to their personalities[45]. Of course, every voice actor has his or her own approach to making their character come alive, but the more realistic their emotions are portrayed, the easier it is for audiences to become sympathetic.

The result of the popularity of character merchandising appears clearest when looking at sections in stores like Animate which are devoted to products dedicated to individual characters. Characters with unique designs have increased, which makes the audiences become more aware of them, how they look and what their personalities are. And as can be seen from the many advertising tools used in these kinds of stores, the voices of the characters are becoming more important as well in determining their popularity.

Whenever a new anime is promoted, be it either on television in the form of a trailer or as large advertisement posters in before-mentioned stores, the names of the voice actors are hardly ever missing. The announcement stating which voice actors will appear in a new series is shown even before the whole series is launched, suggesting the growing influence of the voice acting cast on peoples' decision to watch the series.

Besides merchandise promoting a certain character – especially the character's visual appearance – there is also merchandise through which *seiyū* are sold as products. A main example would be the distribution of character and drama CDs.

Character CDs contribute to the individualism of a specific character from a series and it usually includes a 'character song'. Sung by the character's voice actor, this song provides more insight into the character's mind through the song's lyrics. It seems as if the character itself is singing the song. Besides the song, there are usually a few complimentary tracks which include a message from the *seiyū* with his or her personal thoughts on the character and the song. Drama CDs function mostly as an extension of an anime series, featuring a new short story only through audio material. As there are no visuals provided, the voice actors have to create the story solely based on their voices.

Long-running series often have more than one character or drama CD, or it could be a combination of the two, a 'character drama CD' so to say. For example, anime series *Hayate*

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[45] Sugoi Japan interview with Komatsu Mikako, http://sugoi-japan.jp/2016/en/sugoi/07.html accessed on 18-4-2017

no Gotoku ハヤテのごとく! (the English title being 'Hayate the Combat Butler'), produced twelve character CDs after the first season and eight after the second season, each focusing on a specific character and also including one or two short audio drama chapters. Apart from that, six separate drama/radio albums were published, also featuring the main voice acting cast from the anime.

In the case of harem anime – a genre in which the male lead character is surrounded by a group of potential love interests to choose from – often various drama CDs are made that feature multiple different couple options in order to satisfy fans who are rooting for a different pairing than the one the anime officially ends with.

Besides these CDs, a *seiyū* appearing in a certain series is often put in charge of the *shudaika* 主題歌, the opening and/or ending theme song of that anime. The song or the single featuring that song is promoted through the anime, leading to more personal promotion for the performing voice actor.

Another way of promoting individual voice actors apart from the anime context is through letting them appear on variety and other television shows. In 2014, Marine Entertainment produced a live game television show titled *Jinrō Batoru* 人狼バトル ('Werewolf Battle'). Marine Entertainment is a corporation that manages voice acting products. According to the main website, it is responsible for planning, producing and promoting voice actor products, from drama CDs to solo albums, games, radio and television programs, etcetera[46]. It released four 'episodes' of this gameshow, three featuring only male *seiyū* and the remaining one featuring only female *seiyū*. The game itself is based on the existing game known in English as 'The Werewolves of Miller's Hollow', a card game in which the participants must find out which of them hold the 'werewolf' cards before they are all 'eaten' by them. The main goal of this particular program seems to be promoting voice actors by having them play a game as themselves, not even as characters. When asking Murata Satoshi about the choice of picking voice actors for this program, he said that this purely had to do with raising television ratings: a fun game show with popular *seiyū* attracts viewers[47]. This serves as yet another underpinning piece of proof that voice actors nowadays, besides being active in anime-related events where they appear live, are taken out of the anime context and are deployed to improve general television ratings as well as the next idol or celebrity.

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[46] http://www.marine-e.net/company
[47] Interview with Murata Satoshi, January 26, 2017

This chapter has described the promoting business factor of both anime and *seiyū*, resulting in some examples of the contribution voice actors make to the anime merchandise market.

4. Conclusion

The question asked in the beginning of this research was: 'How is the *seiyū* industry structured and how does it work in relation to the anime market in Japan?'

In order to give an assessment of how the voice acting industry in Japan works, this thesis has looked at the general development of voice acting. It depicts the chronological order in which voice actors emerged, the way in which they developed into a subcategory of Japan's idol culture, and ultimately how the voice acting industry became integrated within Japan's popular culture.

Additionally, this thesis discussed the aspect of specialized vocational schools, and the way in which both material products and media platforms promote voice actors and vice versa. I acquired data through first-hand experience and through written sources by both Japanese and English scholars on topics stretching from voice acting systematics to anime marketing.

The *seiyū* industry is structured through educational institutions and anime-related companies and agencies that support them. Many voice acting agencies are established by veteran voice actors, such as the talent management and production company Air Agency established by Fujiwara Keiji (which is also the agency interviewee Koike Marumi belongs to). Currently, becoming a voice actor is one of the most popular career choices within the entertainment industry amongst teenagers, exceeding the occupation of stage actor. Even though it may not be a financially stable job, there are currently thousands of trained voice actors active in the industry. According to the chart provided by Yanagiya (2010), the set route to follow in order to become a voice actor is succinctly described as joining and graduating from a vocational school, passing an audition for a training school of a production agency, passing an audition for a voice acting agency, and then making a debut and keep auditioning. It is also possible to stream in from an actor's agency. An important point is that a vocational school is considered to be essential, since one cannot learn everything there is to know about *seiyū* from books.

Voice actors contribute to the anime market through promoting their characters and thus the anime series they appear in, especially if they are popular *seiyū* and have a vast fan base. A lot of people base their choice of anime on the voice acting cast and whether their favorite voice actors appear in them or not. When a movie sequel of an anime is brought to cinemas, it is not unusual for the main voice acting cast to be present for the premiere to give a short presentation before the movie is shown. During such events, visitors often receive a special poster or photo card signed by all the *seiyū,* as additional promotion.

Even though promotions for voice actors as individual artists are increasing, their main popularity still stems from their performances in anime series. One main point is their portrayal of an anime character and consequentially the influence their popularity as a *seiyū* has on the popularity of that character. The more popular, the more merchandise of that character will be sold. Besides that, complimentary products associated with the series such as drama CDs and character song singles add to the merchandising of the voice actors themselves by creating a platform for them to deliver what they were initially trained to do: telling a story by solely using their voice.

When a voice actor lands a role in a series, it depends on the length of the anime and the episodes to determine their payment, besides their rank and experience within their respective agencies. Especially now that short-cycle anime series are increasing, one job usually lasts three months before they have to start auditioning for new roles again.

In the past ten years or so, *seiyū* smoothly developed into celebrities, not only famous for their voices but also known by face and name. They occasionally even step out of their anime context by appearing on live variety and game shows as themselves.

As for further developments, projects in which actors and idols are cast to voice characters have been appearing more frequently as well, for example with the 2016 animation film hit *Kimi no Na wa.* 君の名は. ('Your Name.'), in which young drama and movie actor Kamiki Ryunosuke was cast to voice the male protagonist.

I have come a long way since my initial curiosity and through experiencing Japan's *seiyū* culture first-hand during my year abroad I have discovered much about the Japanese voice acting industry. The reason why I decided to research this particular topic stems from a profound interest in the Japanese voice acting culture and especially the difference with voice acting cultures in other countries, starting with my own. In The Netherlands, voice actors are people recognized by their voices on television but are generally not known by name or face. One may recognize the voice from another series -because just like in Japan, there is a small core of established voice actors that is deployed in almost every single project because of small budgets- but does not associate these voices with a face or a person. However, it seems to have changed a little bit nowadays. There are more advertisements for voice acting workshops (at studios, since there are no real educational institutions for it), names of the Dutch voice actors are shown at the end of a series or movie, and there are Facebook pages such as 'Stemmen van Toen' (literally 'Voices from Then') which highlight and interview

veteran Dutch voice actors who provided voices for animation shows from the 90s. Even so, the difference when compared to the Japanese voice acting industry is still tremendous.

With this research I hope to show that 'pop culture studies' can also be accepted as an academic research field within the framework of Japanstudies. In my opinion there is definitely room for more research, since many controversies exist within this part of the Japanese contemporary entertainment industry and there is a lot more to look at than just the seemingly fun aspects. For instance, more research could be done regarding the issue of intellectual property rights and legal protection of *seiyū* within the official actor's union in Japan.

It will be very interesting to keep following the course of this unique Japanese industry in the coming years, to see how it will develop and grow, if it will last, and if it will eventually even influence Western cultures.

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Appendix 1.
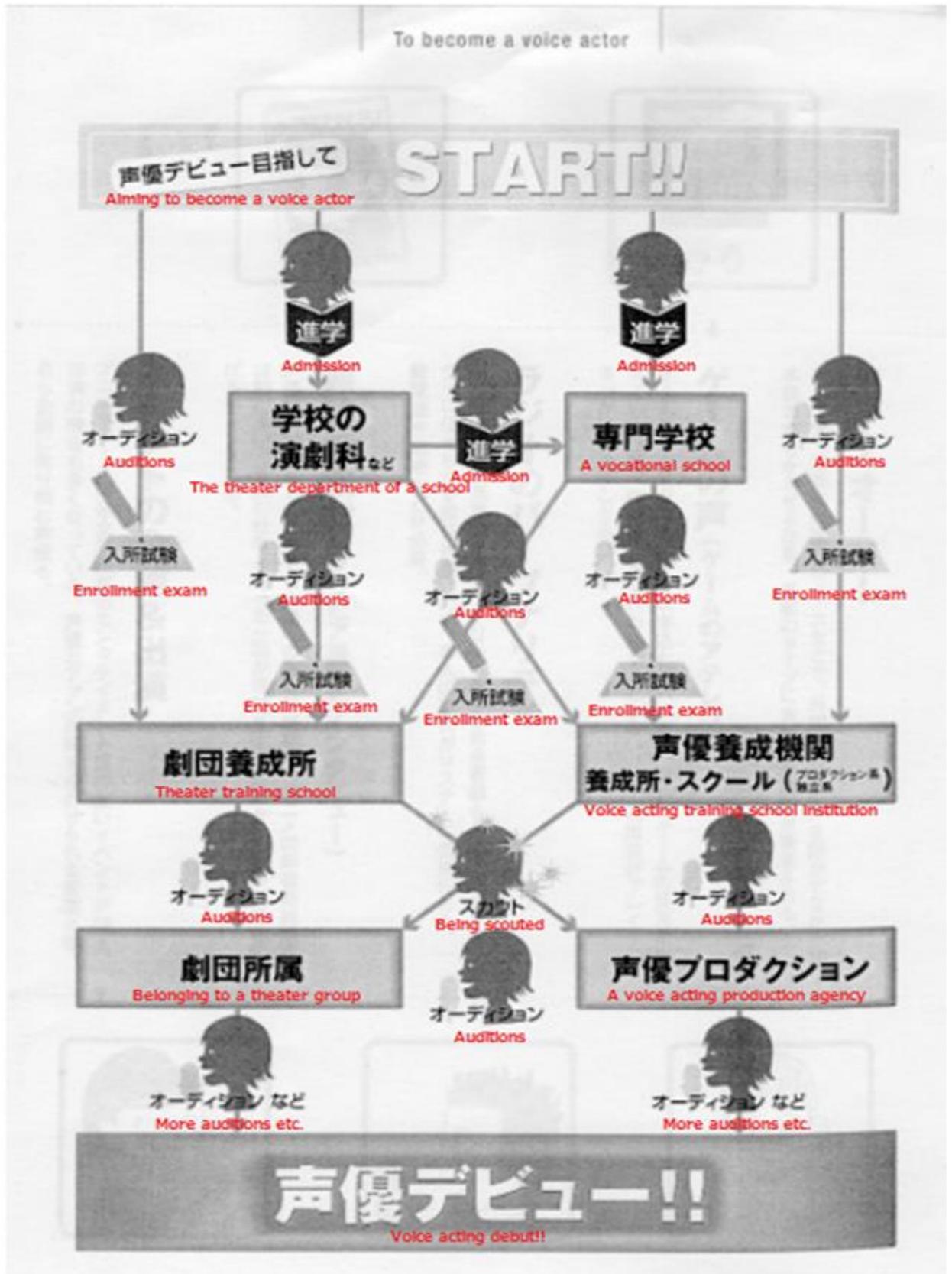
Figure 1. Yanagiya Yukihiro (2010) *'Seiyū ni naru! Saikyō BOOK'* (Revised edition) *Raichōsha*