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BL Manga Studies: Essentializing and Queering “Japanese Studies”

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Introduction

In Japanese popular culture, boys' love (BL) represents a genre of female-oriented narratives concerning male homosexuality, often taking the form of graphic narratives, that is, manga. The popularity of BL also continues to spread abroad in what has been called “Glo'BL'ization.” BL has also attracted the attention of critics in various academic disciplines including “Japanese studies,” both in Japan and abroad. The prevailing mood of uncertainty in relation to “Japanese studies” as an academic field coincides with a new intense phase of transnational, even transdisciplinary challenges. This paper presents critical insights regarding both essentializing and queering the field of “Japanese studies” as part of an organized intellectual project that is intended to provide a distinctive foundation for BL studies and to explore its cross-cultural as well as cross-disciplinary possibilities on that basis. One part is the thematic analysis of self-identified hetero-sexual *fudanshi* (i.e. male readers of BL, lit. “rotten boys”), who initially seemed to demonstrate the critical importance of Japan as a locality. Accordingly I myself focused on the concept of a strategically essentialized Japaneseness in my *fudanshi* research in Japan to open up a new phase of BL manga studies.² However, my inter-Asian *fudanshi* research enabled me to question a place-defining approach. In this context, I would like to discuss the importance of using the anti-boundary

¹ This term was coined by Dru Pagliassotti, an American-based BL scholar. See Pagliassotti (2009).

² I fully analyzed issues concerning female identity, sexuality and sexual desires related to BL production and consumption in my monograph, *Fantasies of Cross-dressing: Women Write Male-Male Erotica* (2012). My *fujoshi* research definitely provided a starting point from which it is possible to analyze the mutually compatible contexts of female BL readers and male BL readers in terms of attempts to question heteronormative standards.

discourse which is called “connective studies” (Hokari, 2007) as a means to facilitate multicultural/disciplinary transactions.

Fudanshi Studies as Area Studies

BL has been embodied as the habitus of what gender studies scholar Alice Jardine calls “gynesis,” an exclusively female-oriented sphere.³ The word *fujoshi*, which literally means “rotten girls,” connotes the presumed perversion of women who fantasize about male-male eroticism, and this term is now widely accepted in popular jargon.⁴ Yoshimoto Taimatsu (2008 and 2010), a Japanese cultural critic and one of the founders of Japanese *fudanshi* studies, attempts to widen that research focus by making male readers of BL visible. *Fudanshi* is used as a generic term to refer to all (biologically and socially acknowledged) male readers of BL, no matter what sexual orientation they may have (or are believed to have), including homo-, hetero-, bi-sexual and others; the respondents in Yoshimoto’s research include many gay and bisexual men. However, Yoshimoto claims that *fudanshi* identity is mainly hetero-sexual, which has only recently been discovered, and he suggests that their psychology deviates from established heteronormativity.

My research on Japanese heterosexual *fudanshi* initially deployed the approaches of traditional area studies to craft a firm Japaneseness out of this porous material, underscoring the importance of one locality: Japan. I have previously shown the ways in which BL may subvert socially enforced gender paradigms among Japanese heterosexual *fudanshi* (Nagaike, 2015). In the process of recognizing their own desire to participate in BL, a previously female-dominated genre, they may be enabled to take a postmodern perspective on pre-existing concepts of maleness and masculinity (e.g. practicing self-feminization). I found out that individual heterosexual *fudanshi* in Japan learn how to overcome their own dilemma regarding socially conditioned masculine behavior by listening attentively to the voices of other *fudanshi*. I also realized that in order to better understand the desire to consume male-male erotic narratives among

³In her monograph *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (1985), Alice Jardine discusses the problematic nature of discourses that are coded as “feminine” — abstract discourses defined in terms that have little to do with actual women but that are necessary for the construction and maintenance of modernity. She coined the term “gynesis” (suggesting a specifically female [gyn-] form of poesis) to designate an epistemological space that transcends (or is separate from) the constructed contexts of modernity — i.e. an alternative, female narrative space.

⁴See Galbraith (2015) and Hester (2015) for further analysis.

Japanese self-identified heterosexual *fudanshi*, issues regarding their physicality, and sexual pleasure in particular, need to be addressed. It is undeniable that Japanese *fudanshi* studies have generally ignored sexual pleasure in view of the male body represented in BL manga. I delineated the characteristics of Japanese heterosexual *fudanshi* through an analysis of my personal interview with Yoshimoto Taimatsu, as well as through a close reading of the book, *Oretachi no BL ron* (We, Men's BL Studies, 2016).

Oretachi no BL ron consists of a dialogue between two self-identified heterosexual *fudanshi* —Kasuga Taichi, a cultural critic, and Thank you Tatsuo, a comedian. Kasuga's confession concerning the relationship between his active BL consumption and his physical and mental discomfort with having sex with women indicates the degree to which the idea that men must achieve erection and ejaculation in sexual intercourse retains an overriding hegemony. Kasuga also suggests that his resistance to such notions of penis/phallus-oriented hegemonic masculinity leads him to obtain sexual pleasure through his identification with BL *uke* (literally *receiver*, connoting the passive sexual role) characters, whose form of sexual desire primarily negates the penetrating penis. He confesses that he became sexually enlightened concerning such issues when he was involved in a threesome with a lesbian couple for the first time. This led to his realization that sexual pleasure can be obtained without the act of penetration. In other words, Kasuga realized that in sex the male physical body does not inevitably require penis-oriented pleasure. It is this experience which initially motivated him to access depictions of the physical pleasures of the BL *uke* with his passive male body. In their dialogue, the two heterosexual *fudanshi* authors show how, in accordance with their psychological orientation, they can transfer the male-male eroticism of BL into heterosexual love-making by taking a passive position in which they are loved and petted by a phallic, or *seme*-like,⁵ woman:

[Kasuga:] However, I have my own technique of imaginatively replacing the *seme*'s face with the face of a lesbian who is petting my body. By doing this, the degree of my dislike regarding the graphic portrayal of male-male sex gradually fades, and instead I

⁵ *Seme*, the penetrator, refers to characters who play an active and masculine role, while *uke*, the penetrated, plays a more passive and feminine role. The stylized depiction of the characters in BL has considerable significance, in that the conventions of depiction generally reinforce the binary oppositional relationship between the *seme* character and the *uke* character in ways that parallel forms of heterosexual pairing.

become erotically aroused. In fact, when his body takes a passive position and is petted, a man can experience a similar process of sexual arousal as a woman does (Kasuga and Thank you Tatsuo, 2016, 229).

In the personal interview which I conducted with Yoshimoto Taimatsu, he acknowledged the same discourse of BL eroticism:

Talking about my own sexual arousal through BL, mostly I agree with Mr. Kasuga and Mr. Thank you Tatsuo. I can't negate my sexual inclinations, which involve "being passive" in sex and "being penetrated by the penis."

In general, male sexual pleasure has unfortunately been limited to the pleasure of the penis. However, BL proves that men can derive sexual pleasure from other parts of their bodies. This fact is very appealing to me. As *Otoko no karada wa kimochi ii* (The Male Body Has Sweet Spots)⁶ already shows, the male body has erogenous zones apart from the penis. In particular, the pleasure derived from "being penetrated by the penis" cannot be denied.⁷

As mentioned above, initially, my approach reflected certain basic assumptions regarding Japanese particularities. I then believed that such key terms which characterize heterosexual *fudanshi* such as soft masculinity, anal pleasure, and *shota* ("love for boys" – a term I will expand on later)⁸ are border-limited. The focus on Japanese particularities in my initial *fudanshi* research definitely reflected my conscious/subconscious attempts to essentialize Japan and Japaneseness. While area studies of this kind can provide a sense of "pseudo-reality" in relation to large-model generalizations, border-specific discourse is also prone to distortion. I

⁶This book consists of a fictitious dialogue between a Japanese male porn director and a female BL critic; it demonstrates ways to challenge the established framework of sexuality by suggesting anti-penis approaches.

⁷Personal interview conducted on June 19, 2017.

⁸The term *shota* derives originally from a boy character named Shōtarō, in the famous Japanese anime, *Tetsujin 28 gō* (released as *Gigantor* in North America). Shōtarō, who has a cute face and wears short pants, is considered the ideal boy (*shōnen*) figure. People who are attracted to *shōnen* images are generally called *shotakon* (or referred to as having a Shōtarō complex). But *shota* should not be discussed on the same discursive ground as pedophilia. *Shota* involves fantasy narratives which contain idealized images of boys, rather than expressing any overt sexual desire toward boys. See Saitō (2007) for further analysis.

therefore proceeded to delineate the characteristics of *fudanshi* in other Asian countries, including the Philippines, mainland China, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Indonesia. This comparative cultural study of *fudanshi* enabled me to reconsider *fudanshi* studies as a set of culture- and geography-specific objects of study. I found that national borders do not necessarily shape specific communities, identity formations, and construction of locales in Asia. Instead, *fudanshi* are connected to each other as members of the transnational BL community. My initial inter-Asian research on heterosexual *fudanshi* indicates that the commonality of the problematic aspects of hegemonic masculinity, subconscious desires for self-feminization, and craving for purely romantic narratives, which I found in Japanese heterosexual *fudanshi*, also apply to *fudanshi* in other Asian countries and regions.

Fudanshi Studies as "Connective Studies": Challenging Hegemonic Masculinity

In the era of globalization, research on specific localities in the field of area studies has started to be extended to a wider cultural understanding, considering transnational mobility and networking. The discursive framework of such transnational studies appears to be "connectivity," enabling us to loosen the grip of essentialism inherent to concepts of locality. Historian and anthropologist Hokari Minoru argued that "connective studies" are central to minority studies, precisely because any seemingly border-limited minority model crosses boundaries in the act of physical and psychological cross-cultural mobility. Hokari suggested that narratives concerning the repression and liberation of the Ainu, a Japanese ethnic minority, should not be contextualized at the level of locality, but rather should seek to describe more adequately the ways in which such ethnic minorities can become interconnected:

[...] I wrote an article titled "Anti-Minorities History" in which I proposed to study "mobility and network" in the context of Aboriginal-Japanese connections.... The question is how to "unmarginalise" Aboriginal-Japanese relations without integrating them into either Japanese or Australian national histories (Hokari, 2007, 18-19).

This can, arguably, be applied to *fudanshi*. As long as the stigmatization of male homosexuality persists, I believe that self-identified heterosexual *fudanshi* may be considered a sexual minority. Accordingly, I propose to study "mobility" and "networking" in transnational *fudanshi* connections,

and to read Japanese *fudanshi* as being part of an interconnected series of dislocated *fudanshi* communities throughout the world.

In my examination of mixed, hybrid, and displaced identities, connective studies on *fudanshi* helped me realize that, as different as people in diverse parts of the world may seem, *fudanshi* “identity” is not confined by national borders. In this regard, the case of a Chinese heterosexual *fudanshi* in Hong Kong, whom I interviewed, is telling. The interview subject is a 24-year-old university student who lives in Hong Kong, who confirms that his sexual orientation is heterosexual, and professes to have “no desire for male love in reality at all. Moreover, I am a Christian (Protestant).” His first encounter with BL occurred when he was fourteen years old. One of the questions which I asked him was: “What are your thoughts when you read that a Japanese heterosexual *fudanshi* does experience sexual arousal through reading BL, imagining himself as a BL *uke* character and replacing the *seme*’s face with that of a sexually dominating woman?” He answered:

I would say that I understand this situation. My ex-girl- friend (the first and only one, at this point) is also a possessive person and has a strong character. During our relationship, I had often imagined her assuming the dominant role in our future sex scenes, and this idea excited me sexually. I think, in my future sexual life, my partner and I will always take turns at playing the dominant role in sex. That’s an important source of sexual pleasure. For me, I do not find that BL scenes have influenced my real-life sexual desires, but I can understand that someone might imagine himself as a *uke* in a BL scene and derive sexual delight or excitement from that. I also think this kind of sexual desire is complex. I remember reading a remark (some kind of joke) on the Internet, referring to *otoko no ko* [sic]⁹, that said you should make your partner (usually a *shota*) become a *otoko no ko* because that way you can draw off his male dignity and give him the shyness of a woman at the same time. I think this concept accords with our situation. Considering others’ Facebook comments on that remark, and even my own attitude, it seems to me that losing some part of a man’s dignity and adopting some part of a woman’s shyness can definitely provide sexual excitement. So, even though I have very little desire for that, yes, the

⁹ In Japanese, *otoko no ko* is a pun, used among anime and manga fans. It originally means “boys.” If one changes the orthography of the Chinese character for *ko* from that meaning “child” to that meaning “girl,” *otoko no ko* then signifies cross-dressing pretty boys who look exactly like girls.

feeling does exist.¹⁰

Here, his answer echoes the above-mentioned opinions expressed by Japanese heterosexual *fudanshi*, in that it assumes the existence of an autonomous subject in opposition to heteronormative conditioning. A Hong Kong heterosexual *fudanshi* can also read BL as a means of self-expression and unintentionally recognize the possibilities of neutralizing the imposed social and psychological structures of established hegemonic masculinity in the act of feminizing his masculine ego. Implicit in comments by Japanese and Hong Kong *fudanshi*, then, is the notion of connectivity: the idea that their sense of uneasiness concerning hegemonic masculinity can be shared through the medium of BL, regardless of the “area” in which they live.

Fudanshi Studies as “Connective Studies”: Conscious and Subconscious Desires for Shota

Shota constitutes another significant feature of *fudanshi* discourse. As shown above, my Hong Kong interview subject brought up the issue, and Yoshimoto also mentioned it:

In my twenties, I never doubted that I was heterosexual. However, with the advent of the BL manga subgenre called *shota mono* (*shota* works), I vaguely realized that I could be sexually aroused by cute boys. Around 2006, BL works started featuring hard-core and realistic sex scenes, and this made me fully realize that BL narratives can arouse me sexually.¹¹

An 18-year-old South Korean heterosexual *fudanshi*, whom I interviewed, also brought up the topic of *shota* to illustrate his pleasure and desire in consuming BL works:

I believe that my sexual orientation is hetero. But I’m not sure my sexual orientation will be consistent in the future. One of the reasons why I love reading BL is that I love *shota*, which came from Japan. I like *shota* characters wearing knee-length pants. Though I can’t explain why.¹²

¹⁰ Personal interview conducted on May 9, 2017.

¹¹ Personal interview conducted on May 20, 2018.

¹² Personal interview conducted on May 20, 2018.

Concerning the psychology of *shota*-loving *fudanshi*, I asked him if he has any desire for self-feminization in terms of being loved as a small boy. He said: "I can relate that to myself to some extent, considering my family issues." However, overall he disagreed: "My *shota*-loving is mainly based on the simple idea that anything which is cute should be loved. A *shota* is cute, isn't he? Then he should be loved."

The role of *shota* for self-identified heterosexual *fudanshi* can be discussed in terms of the psychological process of projection. Acts of projection are diverse, not limited to one specific person (or character). As one BL scholar-fan mentions, in reading BL works she simultaneously identifies with the beloved and the lover:

In my case, I certainly feel relieved in reading stories about lovable *oyaji* (middle-aged) male characters, since they reassure me that I'm okay as I am now. BL manga works like Uchida Kaoru's,¹³ which feature gorilla-like *uke* characters, enable me to affirm that I'm also qualified to act as an *otome* (pure, innocent maiden). A BL *uke-oyaji* character with pubic hair who is loved represents one of my alter egos. At the same time, the one who dominantly loves the *oyaji* with pubic hair is also myself (Senda, 2012, 69-70).

The beloved *shota* and the dominant lover of the *shota* can be seen as an integration of alter egos. The previously quoted South Korean *fudanshi*'s attachment to the *shota* as "something cute which should be loved" constitutes the basis for his subconscious desire to both dominantly love the *shota* and be loved as the *shota*.

I would like to read *fudanshi*'s attachment to *shota* as their subconscious desire to return to boyhood which represents another facet of their self-feminization. In part this is reminiscent of Sigmund Freud's view of male beating fantasies as manifestations of repressed homoeroticism/homosexuality.¹⁴ I certainly recognize the analytical risk in theoretically systematizing the attachment of *fudanshi* to *shota* in a Freudian context. Their unmediated voices were introduced above to show that *fudanshi*

¹³ Uchida Kaoru is a famous BL manga artist. Her works usually feature hyper-muscular men as *uke* characters, parodying the BL "golden rule" of pairing a muscular *seme* and an effeminate *uke*.

¹⁴ See Nagaike (2012) for a detailed analysis of female beating fantasies, which can also be discussed in terms of the three-stage Freudian structure. Freud emphasizes the differences between male beating fantasies and female beating fantasies, although he focuses more on the psychological orientation underlying female beating fantasies in this famous article.

themselves are aware, to a certain degree, of the correlation between self-feminizing and questioning hegemonic masculinity. My aim is not to regain an authoritative status for Freudian psychoanalysis, but rather to suggest “another discourse” which considers *fudanshi* on a subconscious level, using Freud as a springboard for the further development of *fudanshi* studies. After all, the aspect of male sexuality which opposes heteronormative conditioning is clearly manifested in Freud’s discussion of male beating fantasies.

In terms of Freudian theory, male beating fantasies may be categorized in terms of three distinct stages:

“I am loved by my father”: This phase clearly indicates the boy’s feminine attitude toward his father, but it does not include any sadistic impulses, as the first phase of female beating fantasies does.

“I am being beaten by my father”: This phase is equivalent to the second phase of female beating fantasies, but while the girl represents her incestuous desires toward her father at this stage, the second stage of the male beating fantasies indicates the boy’s repressed (homosexual and incestuous) desire toward his father.

“I am being beaten by my mother”: Even though the subject performing the beating has changed from father to mother, the beater still manifests masculine qualities. Thus, this third stage can also be discussed in terms of the boy’s (homosexual) desire toward his father, precisely because the “mother” represents a disguised “father” here. (Freud, 1955).

If male beating fantasies may be considered to represent a subconscious masculine desire to return to boyhood (as self-feminization) and thus receive unconditional love from the Symbolic Father, then the longing for boyhood (or *shota*) among *fudanshi* may be considered in a similar way. In this sense, a *fudanshi* may imagine himself to be a boy who is subject to being “beaten” (i.e. loved) by the Father, his nostalgia for boyhood thus representing another aspect of self-feminization. This subconscious desire to return to boyhood is not confined to any specific national area. By focusing on the connections between different locations and communities, *fudanshi* studies can cross area boundaries without becoming entrapped by the notion that in separate areas, such as Japan, Hong Kong, or South Korea, the persistent structures of hegemonic masculinity are challenged in entirely different ways.

Conclusion

My first encounter with media scholar Jaqueline Berndt was at a BL conference held at Osaka City University in 2010, when she addressed the necessity of bridging between manga studies researchers in Japan and abroad. At that time, I honestly did not quite understand what she meant. I thought that my Japanese BL research was quite sufficient, since authentic BL manga were only created and maintained in Japan, which was, after all, the origin of BL culture. However, through collaborating with Jaqueline Berndt and women's manga researcher Ogi Fusami on several research projects and performing ethnographic research in other Asian countries, I recognized the importance of transnational/transdisciplinary approaches to manga and BL studies. In this context, I agree with historian Tessa Morris-Suzuki's idea, who in a famous article promoted a kind of "Anti-Area Studies," that "seeks to reverse the process of spatial integration, through which area studies sought to create a single framework for the interdisciplinary study of social wholes" (Morris-Suzuki, 2000, 20). Manga studies as connective studies provide us with unique opportunities to analyze networks and transnational processes in a way that also recognizes the importance of characteristics and features unique to specific local contexts.

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