

The desire of aged/ageless Japanese women

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要 約

現代日本における少女文化の一つの潮流として「ボーイズラブ (BL)」をとりあげ、ジェンダーならびに社会状況の視点から分析することで、現代日本社会がどのような欲望の視線を女性たちに向け、女性たちがどのようにその抑圧に対抗するのかを論じた。BL 文化形成の歴史的経緯の検討から、BL が男性中心社会に対するカウンター・カルチャーとしての意義を持つことを指摘した。同時に、BL に顕著に見られる暴力の表象に焦点化し、それらが男性の欲望の模倣・擬態であること、さらにそのような表象を「女性文化」として女性自身が内面化することの危険性を指摘し、今後の BL 文化の展開に向けての提言とした。

本 文

Preface

Japanese girls' culture, including girls' novels, girls' comics, girls' magazines and girls' fashion, for example Gothic & Lolita, or other stuff, has a long history. Referring to the history of Japanese girls' culture, the Boys' Love (BL) does not have such a long history. However, in contemporary Japan, BL has increasingly occupied a certain position in Japanese girls' subculture. Because of the special edition focused on BL of *Eureka*, which is a monthly high culture magazine, published in 2006 and 2007, the genre has become one of the notable academic issues.

Interestingly, BL appeared at the same time as when slash fiction appeared in the US as a fan fiction in the 70's. However, there is definitely a difference between them, which illuminates the characteristic dimension of Japanese girls' subculture.

This paper will discuss BL from the view point of gender and show how Japanese women produce their own culture as a counter against the oppression of the patriarchal ideology. Next, after examining the problem of representation in current BL, I would like to foreground the difficulty that Japanese women have to face. To consider this topic will clarify the social situation and gender ideology which has suppressed Japanese girls, especially following the 80s'.

What is BL?

At Aestheticism.com BL as a terminology is defined as follows: Boys' love (BL) is the common term used by the publishing industry to categorize works focusing on male/male relationships marketed at women. Sometimes the word "yaoi" is used in English also.

BL is a genre of story which depicts the love and sexual relationships between beautiful boys. It includes works in all types of media: novels, comics, anime, games, and drama CDs. However, the figure of love between boys described in BL is far from the true gay culture. In that sense, it should be defined as the illusion by girls and for girls in contemporary Japan. Because of the gap between the true gay culture and BL, gay people often protested against BL fans claiming that representation in BL was a kind of insult for true gay culture and it was the appropriation of representation. However, they had no effect on BL fans. Considering this reaction or lack thereof, it should be mentioned that BL fans have no interest in true gay culture. To say the least, they have no intention to make any contribution for the true gay movement. They seem to want to explore their imagination and sexual fantasy completely free from any type of restraint.

In my opinion, however, their way of consumption of BL is operated by complicated and social factors. Before analyzing them, I'd like to outline the history of establishing of BL as a genre.

History of BL

We can find the origin of this genre in Mari Mori's novels. Indeed, the writers who are treated as the first generation of BL culture confessed that they could feel, for the first time, to be acknowledged their desires addressing homo-eroticism when they read Mari's works. They admire her as a kindred spirit. When Mari wrote some novels describing romantic homo-sexual love, she was close to sixty years old. Now the essence of her novels has been succeeded and drastically transformed into BL by Japanese girls who are much younger than Mari

Mori.

Interestingly, Mari Mori's works were regarded as pure literature by critics in her heyday, during the 60's. The essence of her works was designated aestheticism. It is well known that there is a tradition of homo-eroticism in Japanese literature since the classical to modern. The canonical male writers, for example Ogai Mori, Tatsuo Hori, Yasunari Kawabata, and of course Yukio Mishima wrote homo-erotic stories. However, in her days, there were no works focused on homo-eroticism by female writer. Although Mari sometimes complained that nobody understood what she truly described in her works, in fact, there were no critics who accused her works of focusing on the theme of homo-eroticism. This was on the assumption because they were regarded unique and her desire as being her own. However, this was wrong. There were many latent recipients.

The 70's is a golden age for Japanese girls' comics even now. There appeared many original and talented writers and they produced varied and excellent works which sometimes exhibited complicated themes concerned with philosophy, religion, and gender-trouble. In that sense, they were more literary than literature itself. In those days, one of the main themes of girls' comics was the gender problem. Concerning this theme, many were flooded with images of cross-dressing, cross-gender, homosexuality, androgyny, and boy/boy relationships. Under the influence of girls comics, in 1978, *Jun*, the first commercial magazine which focused on BL, was published.

The first members who wrote for this magazine were mainly composed by professional critics and writers including Azusa Nakajima, who was in charge of the edition of this magazine. She attributed many essays, articles and novels for *June*, (Since the second issue, the title of the magazine was changed) and sometimes organized some round-table talks. In those talks, the attendants confessed that since their childhood, they caught hidden atmosphere of homosexuality in some TV animes and comics for boys and girls and they repeatedly transformed the brotherhood or homosociality in the original works into a homosexual story in their imaginations.

This style of transforming, that is to say, transform homosocial relationships into homosexual relationships, is the norm as a method of fan fiction. Interestingly, Mari wrote in her essay that she had the same experience as them. According to her writing, when she watched a photograph of French actors, Alain Delon and Jean-Claude Brialy in a film magazine,

they started to move like lovers in her imagination. Additionally, regarding slash-fiction in the US, female audiences have the same experience as Japanese women. In that sense, in this genre, women recipients share the same type of desire and method of transforming. That is to say, pick up homosociality in the original story and reconstruct it as homosexuality in their story. What my point in this paper is to elaborate this desire through examining the social factors in contemporary Japan, and I will mention this later.

In the 80's, the market of this genre drastically became bigger. The primary reason of this is that the comic market, which is the world's largest comic convention, had been established. The first comic market was held in 1975. At the beginning, there was no movement of BL in this event. And in the 80's, some amateur groups, which dealt with BL, started to participate in this event. Especially around 1985, there occurred a big prevalence of derivative works based on the boys' comic *Captain Tsubasa* (キャプテン翼), which described the story of boys who were football players, and *Saint Seiya* (聖闘士星矢), which was a kind of a fantasy whose framework was based on Greek myth.

Until this time, the market of this genre was very small and there strongly existed an atmosphere of taboo for this inclination. However, accompanied with the advance of the market, the atmosphere of taboo gradually decreased and the storyline developed from parody or derivative works to original. The decline of the atmosphere of taboo and the expansion of recipients and amateur writers had an effect on each other.

Thus, in the 90's, BL has been established as one genre in Japanese girls' subculture. At the beginning of this genre, it was assumed that most of readers and writers were young single women. Currently there are diverse groups of readers and writers, who cover all generations of Japanese women including those married with children. Because of the prevalence of Internet, the range of acceptance of BL has been getting broader.

Critiques for BL

The first professional critique for BL was written by Azusa Nakajima. In her book, *The Syndrome of Insufficient Communication* (1991), she analyzed the reason why Japanese women were indulged in BL from the view point of psychology. She pointed out that there were many anorexic girls in BL fans and concluded that BL fans were women who

refused to grow up, especially sexually mature as the object of male's desire. Additionally Nakajima and Chizuko Ueno (1989) found out a sentiment of misogyny in BL fans and declared that such a woman could reflect their self-identification only on the "non-woman". As a practical matter, there is no way to describe such an existent exception of a male.

This argument is of some use to explain the peculiarity of representation of BL. In slash fiction in the US, men's bodies are described as well-muscled matured adult figures. In contrast, the boys in BL have big eyes with long eyelash and effeminate lithe body without muscles. They are far from the real male figure. This dimension of fantasy represented in BL sometimes became a target of accusation from true gay people. However, if what BL fans need a "non-existent", as it were, neither female nor male, it is acceptable that the boys in BL appear as just something beautiful. On the other hand, it can be said that to treat BL fans as immature result prejudice towards BL fans that are considered deviators. Therefore, the analysis from the psychological view point is not quite supported currently.

Accompanied with the development of feminism critique and gender studies, the critiques for BL have become to focus on the problem of gender in their arguments. Mari Kotani argued that BL had a possibility to reveal what gender ideology concealed and to subvert gender order in the society (1994). Concerning this view point, it is possible to ask as follows: Is BL a kind of resistance or disturbing against the heteronormative order? Alternatively, does BL immortalize the heteronormative order?

The former question can bring the positive perspective that the relationships described in BL are free from the real love and sex and there are not any types of power relations. Commonly, the most important theme of BL is simply 'love'. BL absolutely centerize love in their story and regard it as supreme in this world. Although, in the process of story, there are many confrontations or difficulties between the couple, all stories result in the victory of love. BL fans enjoy this 'love' which is completely impossible in real life. In BL, 'love' is positioned in the top of all value system.

On the other hand, concerning the latter question, the problem of representation is foregrounded. Unquestionably, it is very difficult to describe love relationships without mimicry of heterosexual love in real life. Indeed, in BL, love relationships between

beautiful boys are described according to the code of heterosexuality. Additionally, what is more problematic is that beautiful boys in BL play their relationships according to the gender role in heteronormative society. Commonly, in BL, the coupling is expressed by the combination of two words, 'Seme' (攻め) and 'Uke' (受け). Originally this jargon is based on the role during sex. 'Seme' means penetration and 'Uke' means acceptance. Deriving from this principle, the concept of 'Seme' includes the following: being elder, bigger, taller, more powerful, aggressive, and masculine. On the other hand, the concept of 'Uke' includes being younger, smaller, shorter, weaker, passive and feminine. According to this code, their appearances are also illustrated. Being unrelated with writers' intentions, such typical gendered expressions result in the reconstruction and reinforcement of stereotype of gender.

The preference forwards rape as representation of love in BL effectively exemplifies this argument. Some critics regard this description of rape in BL as revenge against the phallocentrism in real life. However, if representation of rape in BL is a demonstration against phallocentrism, to say the least, this raises the question. Where is the reader as a subject of desire? Does she reflect herself on the side of boy who rapes another boy?

Next, I'd like to focus on this problem, that is to say, the positioning of reader of BL as a subject of desire, by examining the social factors which suppress Japanese women in contemporary Japan.

Where are they?

Surveying stories of BL, it can be found that there is a difference between works in the 70's and current works. In the 70's, which was the dawn of BL, there was a strong atmosphere of taboo for inclination towards BL. As if being parallel with the sentiment of taboo in readers, the story lines of BL were replete with tragic and pathetic tendencies. The couples were suffering from their own sentiment of guilt from being homosexual and were refused by ordinary society. At that time, it assumed without doubt that normal people were heterosexual and people including BL readers internalized that assumption. Therefore, the couples in BL story, if they were in a fantasy-world, had to be excluded and alienated from ordinary society. It has been pointed out that the anti-sentiment towards homosexuality has not been so severe in Japan traditionally. In Japan, to be homosexual has never

been certified as illegal and there have seldom occurred hate crimes caused by the anti-sentiment towards homosexuality. Even in such a background, true gay people and women who were affected by homo-eroticism were in the closet in the 70's. In that sense, it is possible to say that the story lines in BL of 70's reflected the real alienation towards true gay people and their solitude.

However, as has been mentioned, accompanied with the astonishing expansion of the market, the atmosphere of taboo has decreased and women have started to declare their own inclination towards homo-eroticism. Along with the change of circumstances of readers, the story lines in BL have also changed. They have settled their stages in all situations, for example in school, working place, in space, in the magical or historical world, etc. Additionally, it definitely sounds ridiculous but there is a popular situation set in the harem of Arab Kings or millionaires. It is notable that there is no alienation and persecution towards couples by society in current BL stories settled in daily life. What the situation means is that, in BL, boy/boy (male/male) relationship is regarded as just natural and normal by heterosexual people. In other words, currently, the description of love in BL is just same as hetero love in girls' comics. The only difference is the point that there appear just beautiful boys in BL.

It should be added that the acceptance of lesbian love by female readers is much negative than the acceptance of homo-eroticism. Recently, the numbers of magazines, which are focused on the relationships of lesbianism, for a female audience, have increased slightly. However, lesbian love as a sexual fantasy is mainly addressed to a man even now. In Japan, women's anti-sentiment or rejection against lesbianism is much stronger than male homosexuality. Considering this, it should be said that what Japanese female readers want is not homosexuality for both sexes but just only male homosexuality. Why do Japanese females want only boys (or males) as representations in their sexual fantasies? What does their desire mean?

To put it simply, it has been explained that the pleasure of reading BL works for Japanese women exists in release from the established ideology of gender, which has been suppressed them persistently. In the other words, Japanese women created BL culture as a counter against Japanese phallogocentrism or patriarchy. Considering the process of establishing of BL culture, the explanation is valid. In contrast, as the establishment of the Equal Employment

Opportunity Law in 1985 represents, it has been expected for women to advance to society and get careers in the 80's. Indeed, the percentage of female students who advance to University has been higher than that of male students since 1980. According to the research, in 2007, the percentage of female students advancing to University is 52.2% of the whole numbers of students who graduated from high school and that of boys are 50.0%. It can be said that Japanese women's social status has risen compared to before the 70's and also the oppression of patriarchy has been reduced.

Currently, the sexual liberation for women has advanced more and more, and they have become freer from the patriarchal ideology. Nowadays Japanese young women do not feel the former type of patriarchal oppression. However, on the other hand, the needs for BL are continuing to increase. Of course, it is possible to explain that the expansion of needs for BL is because of the fact that Japanese women have come to be able to explore and enjoy their sexual fantasy freely. Even if this explanation is acceptable, why the representation in their sexual fantasies lean towards BL?

What needs to be considered is another dimension of Japanese society following the 80's. The 80's were a time of the bubble economy in Japan, during this time a kind of mammonism had prevailed all over Japan. While the expectation for women to advance to society increased, the commodification of women's body and sex became conspicuous. Young girls always had to be exposed in front of the gaze of males' sexual desire and evaluated according to their appearance by males. At the same time, there occurred a trend of supreme principle of love (恋愛至上主義) among young generation, especially in young women. They have strongly internalized the ideology of romantic love, which is the Trinity of love, sex, and marriage. In my opinion, it is apparent that both of these inclinations, that is to say, the commodification of women and the internalization of the ideology of romantic love, are two sides of the same coin. In both of these situations, Japanese women have to face the obsession as follows: Will I be chosen by a man?

In BL, the desire is exchanged only between boys. In so far as the love relationship is described between a boy and a girl, if it is in a fiction, female readers can not release from the obsession and the alienation that they will not be chosen. In the other words, what hurts them is the fact that they will

not be chosen. Conversely, they don't have to feel any type of alienation when they are reading a BL story. For, in BL stories, the boy's desire is addressed only towards boys from the beginning and they just gaze at each other. Without any type of isolation, women can enjoy their sexual fantasies and stories focused on romantic love. In this case, it can be said that female readers enjoy the figure of boy/boy relationship itself rather to reflect themselves on each boy. In the other words, female readers consume boy/boy relationship as their sexual fantasy by means of keeping distance between boys and themselves.

Conclusion

On one side, BL is an extensive fantasy created and consumed by women. BL has a possibility to be a counter culture against the oppression of gender ideology or patriarchy. However, at the same time, it is ironic that, even in the genre created and consumed by women, the representation of love relationship cannot be described without mimicry of heteronormative code. Especially, in BL, the problem of representation of violence including rape or pedophilia should be reconsidered. In current BL, regrettably, the description of violence is just similar to that in pornography addressed male. What is worse is that the description of rape is adopted as the representation of love in BL. To enjoy and consume such a representation brings female readers to internalize the terrible misinterpretation that rape is sometimes equal to love. That is just as phallosentrism expects. What is expected in BL is to create new methods of expression of their desire without tracing that of male.

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