

Transgenderism and Japanese Anime: A Case Study of Kämpfer

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Abstract: Japanese anime has gradually become popular in the worldwide animation market since the 1980s and 1990s. But it is only in recent years that it has begun to receive academic attention as part of popular culture studies. This paper focuses on gender transitioning in Japanese anime and its relationship with transgenderism. After a brief introduction to the history of gender transitioning in Japanese anime, it critically reviews related literature on Japanese anime and transgenderism. Through an analysis of specific work *Kämpfer*, which centers on gender transitioning, this paper explores transgenderism in Japanese anime. This paper argues that the subgenre of gender transitioning anime is not progressive, but instead reinforces male dominance and concepts of gender binary. Researchers of Japanese anime seldom pay attention to gender transitioning as a subgenre, and scholars of gender studies rarely consider how Japanese anime, with its huge influence on transgender communities in Japan, affects the way Japanese people perceive gender transitioning. This paper connects the two fields to examine issues that have often been neglected.

Keywords: Japanese anime, gender transitioning, transgenderism, *Kämpfer*, gender binary

1. Introduction

In the Japanese ACG world, works about TSF (Transgender Fiction) became influential in the 1980s with *RANMA ½*. Its author is Rumiko Takahashi, who created famous works as *Inuyasha* and *Mermaid Forest* [1]. The anime tells of a young man who cultivated martial arts. When the young man came to the country of the spell spring to practice, he accidentally fell into the “female drowning spring.” After that, he would return to a girl when encountering cold water, and return to a boy when encountering hot water. After a series of stories, the male protagonist achieves higher levels of martial arts, but still needs to remove the distress caused by the transformation. TSF is the core in this work, creating elements of plot conflict. Some of the latter-day traditions of Japanese anime that uses TSF as a major selling point are also inspired by *RANMA 1/2*. They share with this work of the suddenness of the gender transformation and the hilarious plots about the contrasts caused by binary genders.

The number of Japanese ACG works about TSF increased significantly in the first decade of the new millennium. During this period, TSF became a specific or specialized “attribute” in ACG through “Moe,” the concept that developed from memes into a set of “taxonomy” and thus gained a somewhat independent status. Despite this, TSF remained a niche and less popular category, with only a few works having TSF as their core plots. The most representative of them is *Kämpfer* (2009). A glance

at its plot reveals that the show is sold on various sexual references, and most of these sexual references are related to TSF elements.

Most of the works containing TSF elements in the same period did not add TSF elements to their main plot, but instead put them in a special plot unit or “OVA,” such as *Scorching Eyes* (2002), *To LOVE Ru -Tora buru-* (2008) and *Sora no Otohimono* (2010). The selling point of the TSF episodes is more or less the same as *Kämpfer*’s, with a variety of sexual references.

Since 2010, the market for TSF has gradually expanded in the Japanese ACGN industry, and there has been a proliferation of works that use TSF as their core plots, such as *Ore, Twintail ni Narimasu* (2014) and *Yamada Koun and 7 No Witch* (2012), and even some phenomenal works such as *Kiminonawa* (2016) and *Back Street Girls* (2018). At the same time, there is no shortage of famous works that include TSF elements in the “OVA” or part of the plot, such as *Shutainzugeto* (2011), *Nyaruko: Crawling with Love* (2012) and *Korehazonbidesuka?* (2011). In these works, the TSF itself as a “Moe” has been further supplemented, elaborated and developed. Moreover, a large number of TSF-themed short manga, drawings and light novels have entered the consumers’ eye through new online platforms, some of which link TSF to other niche fetishes, such as fetish fantasies of silk fabrics and mask wrapping, and thus to a very specific style of cosplay [2], kigurumi. This style of cosplay shows its essence of transforming from real-world identities into fictional characters [2] in a very peculiar way in relation to the fantasies often structured by TSF-themed anime.

2. Literature Review

There is a wealth of research on the topics of Japanese anime, and of transgenderism, the historical and cultural backgrounds of Japanese anime, as well as some of its classic works. Patrick Drazen’s monograph *Anime Explosion* condenses the research on these topics into one book. A great deal of work has been done on transgenderism, especially Japanese transgenderism, both as theoretical and purely documentary studies and as anthropological approaches to the fieldwork of transgender communities. Mark McLelland’s “Western Insurrections, Eastern Approximations” is an example of a purely document-based study on the historical transformation and current status of transgender in Japan.[3] Junko Mitsutashi’s “The transgender world in contemporary Japan: the male to female cross-dressers’ community in Shinjuku” is an observation report based on a detailed field visit to the MTFCD communities in Harajuku, Tokyo [4].

Even so, there are still research gaps when it comes to Japanese anime and transgenderism in Japan. First, some studies are too general. *Anime Explosion*, for example, gives only a glimpse of Japanese anime and its industrial development as a whole. It rarely presents a detailed examination of a specific part or a specific work. Although the book does mention some specific, classic works of Japanese anime, such as *Pokémon* and *Girl Scout*, it is unable to cover new works [1]. This is problematic especially because new media and new themes have developed since the turn of the millennium, among which it is the subject of this paper: transgenderism in Japanese anime [1]. The studies of transgenderism alone, whether based on literature or fieldwork, also suffer from the problem of ‘obsolescence.’ For example, although McLelland claims to have examined the state of transgenderism “in recent years,” his focus on transgenderism as “occupational-amateur-normalized” has led him to ignore other forums of transgenderism that have deviated completely from the occupational ones [3]. These new transgenderism dynamics are everywhere in Japanese anime and play a significant role in spreading transgenderism. This leads to a conclusion different from McLelland’s ‘interrogation’ to traditional gender and optimistic expectation to a ‘gender free society.’ [3]

In general, the problem with the studies above is the lack of a comprehensive examination of Japanese anime and Japanese transgenderism. Such a comprehensive study is important for our understanding of both Japanese anime and Japanese transgenderism, and this paper intends to fill this

gap. Focusing on the analysis of Japanese anime works on the theme of transgenderism, this paper will take a small view of the whole history of Japanese anime. This analysis of transgenderism focuses on the transgenderism elements in anime with the attributes of ‘cultural commodities’ in the industrialized ‘anime industry,’ in which the important thing is the relationship between consumers and commodities. There is a story different from McLelland’s, in which there is ‘interrogation’ and ‘challenge’ against traditions [3]. Rather than challenging traditional gender consciousness, this transgenderism, under the influence of consumerism, has rendered itself less progressive and threatening.

3. Discussion

Transgenderism in anime works is most directly expressed through plot and setting. In this article, I will analyze the characteristics of transgenderism in *Kämpfer* a Japanese anime released in 2009. Its plot is representative among post-millennium “gender transitioning anime.” First, Natsuru Seno, the male protagonist, has a “feminine quality” even when he is not a transgender. In the first episode, he is called a “sissy” by another female character in the film. The most prominent manifestation of this “femininity” in this work is the voice of Natsuru Seno: his voice actor is female even when he is still a male. Contrary to this “femininity,” Natsuru Seno firmly identifies himself as a “male.” He repeatedly confirms this through his mental activities at various points in the film. This contrast between his strong self-identification as male and his “femininity” is one of the main characteristics of gender transitioning anime. It also creates conflict and tension surrounding the “gender transitioning anime.”

Second, its producer deliberately makes it unclear why the protagonist experiences gender transitioning. In *Kämpfer*, Natsuru Seno fights for no obvious reason. Moreover, the biological divide between the two genders is “easily” and freely bridged through some supernatural forces, such as magic or “rules.” Seno was chosen to be transformed into a girl because he was chosen to fight, and fighters can only be women.

Third, even the setting of some fixed “plot backgrounds” helps convey its transgender elements. In general, these settings only serve the “transformation” and the conflicts that will unfold in the plot. For example, Natsuru Seno has a male partner whose only role in the plot is to keep Seno’s female body as a secret and to remind Seno of his original identity as a boy. Another example is the setting of the school, the main place where the plot takes place. At Natsuru Seno’s school, there is a strict separation between the men’s section and the women’s section. The purpose of this strict distinction at the plot level is to create tensions through his absence of the protagonist in the men’s section and the presence of the protagonist in the women’s section.

Fourth, unfolding of the plot intends to showcase the sexuality of the female body. In this work, the plot unfolds through a series of battles. “*Kämpfer*,” the name of the anime, means “fighter” in German. Battle creates conflicts and is strongly associated with a lot of “sexual” content. As mentioned above, the protagonist became a woman because he was chosen to fight. And, in the process of fighting, the protagonist always faces the threat of having her female body’s “sexual organs” exposed. For example, the blouse is shattered by bullets, which reveals the breasts; skirt in the high-intensity movement is lifted, revealing her lower body. It can be said that the very aim of the battle scenes is to showcase the sexuality of the female body harnessed by the protagonist. In addition, in the “non-combat” episodes, we can always see a tense atmosphere of “teasing.” For example, in the fourteenth episode, when the protagonist attends a “sorority” as a woman, the stockings on her legs are hooked off by the feet of a female character sitting across the table in a provocative way. In general, *Kämpfer* wants to show the sexuality of the female body in the main storyline.

By analyzing the plot of *Kämpfer*, we can understand the main characteristics of the plot of a large number of TSF amines that appeared after the millennium. By combining the above four points,

Kämpfer and the substantial number of anime works of the same genre appearing after it aim to show the contradiction between “male mind and female body” and, in this way, to further reflect the sexual tension of the female body. It remains a question whether this genre has positive social impact. The answer by this paper challenges the traditional view that such transgenderism elements help create a more liberal understanding of gender [3]. Instead, it is still a disguised confirmation of the gender binary.

First, the very form of the “male mind and female body” is a metaphor for the unequal relationship between the sexes. As “mind” implies a control over the body, the trope of “male mind and female body” is a metaphor for the male control of over females. Moreover, the “male mind” implies a certain “activeness” or “dynamism.” The female, in contrast, exists only as a “female body,” a passive vessel to be filled with the “male mind. Therefore, if the “male mind” and the “female body” are to be considered combined in the same organism, then the “male mind” and the “female body” undoubtedly confirm the inequality between men and women in society.

Second, the paradox of “male mind and female body” indicates both the superiority of mind over body and the superiority of male over female. In the analysis of *Kämpfer*, it has been examined how Natsuru Seno’s repeated affirmation actually stems from the fear of losing his “identity,” or more straightforwardly, his gender superiority. The display of the protagonist’s “shyness” after being stimulated in battle and by other female characters always suggests that he might lose his mind. Since his mind is male (compared with his female body), the loss of his mind is related to his losses of sanity and male identity. Since his mind is male (compared with his female body), the loss of his mind is related to his losses of sanity and male identity. In this way, the male identity is associated with sanity and power of control.

Third, the process of transformation in this anime is far from being realistic in terms of the easy “erasure” of the “biological difference” between the sexes. In reality, the practice of “bridging” the biological gap for transgender people—including medication and surgery—entails great suffering. They have to struggle with compromised health, high cost of surgery and medication, familial pressure, and the difficulty to access other medical resources that they need. These are not reflected in the anime and even obscured and forgotten with the “free” transformations in the anime.

The fourth point is that in *Kämpfer*, we can find that the protagonist “uses” the female body only in urgent situations like “fighting” and “teasing.” This means that the hero’s “normal” everyday life is masculine; in other cases, he has to hide the female body from his male friends, as this is considered “abnormal.” Indeed, the female body appears only in abnormal, urgent “fights,” and scenes intricately linked to sexuality. This covert distinction undoubtedly presupposes an inequality between men and women.

The plot of *Kämpfer*, which highlights its transgenderism elements in one way or another, is well accepted by its Japanese consumers, namely, fans. In fact, the consumer’s celebration of this type of plot is exactly why comic and film producers produced works in the first place. The form of transgenderism is normalized through the new electronic media, but obviously not “progressive.” Kumito Saito, when exploring the relation between the “Magical Girl” Anime as a popular genre, concludes that the genre’s empowerment fantasy has developed symbiotically with traditional gender norms [5]. She contextualizes the criticism by incorporating the male domination of “fan culture” and “anime aesthetics.”[5] The case here is nearly the same. The “feminization” of women in TSF anime, represented by *Kämpfer*, and the presupposition of the traditional gender binary and inequality between men and women are all derived from the need to satisfy fans’ “fantasies” of the female body. Here, the analysis of fan modes of consumption [6] has its necessity. Because anime exists as a “commodity” for its consumers or fans, this transgenderism is actually a product of “commodification” Therefore, the increasingly commodified anime industry accounts for the popularity of anime with transgenderism elements, which are not meant to create a more liberal understanding of the female

or transgender community. Instead, it reinforces gender binary and male dominance in society.

4. Conclusion

This paper studies Japanese anime with gender-transitioning-related plots. It introduces the history of gender-transitioning anime and analyzes a representative anime work, namely, *Kämpfer*. As this paper aims to examine the relationship between gender-transitioning anime and transgenderism, it also reviews previous studies on Japanese anime and transgenderism. This paper argues that these anime works do not present a progressive attitude towards gender fluidity. Instead, they tend to reinforce male domination and binary thinking.

However, this research is not without its limits. First, due to limited time and space, this paper has focused on only one anime work. The small sample makes it difficult to research an overarching argument on this topic. Second, this research requires a more detailed history of the subgenre of gender-transitioning anime. To complete and complicate the argument in this paper, future researcher might want to delve deeper in the following directions. They can focus on more Japanese anime of the same subgenre, analyze the transgenderism elements in their plots, and classify and sort out these works in a more detailed way in the context of the development. In addition, the scope of the study can be expanded. For example, it can be expanded to the impact of gender transition anime on the real transgender community. How does this impact occur? Has the impact affected their real life and their perceptions of real life? How do transgender groups respond to this impact? These further studies can more clearly illustrate the relationship between Japanese anime and transgenderism and support the argument of this paper.

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