

When a “male” reads shōjo manga

ITŌ Kimio
(trans. Miyake Toshio)

My research field is sociology. In particular, my work so far has been about inquiring into cultural phenomena in a wider sense by tying them to politics, including power relations in everyday life, and Masculinities Studies in particular. Since the second half of the 1970s, one of my research topics has been the interrelationship between culture and masculinity, as well as masculinities and politics in a wider sense. In this paper, I should like to reflect on shōjo manga (or Japanese girls’ comics) from the stance of men and Masculinities Studies. In what kind of situation do men read shōjo manga? What is it that makes shōjo manga attractive to men? And what kind of influence does the contact with shōjo manga have on men and masculinity? These issues also relate to what men and masculinity mean to shōjo manga.

Below, I focus on readers of shōjo manga; in particular, on the shōjo manga experience from the 1970s to the early 1980s. This experience involves internationally simultaneous and universal issues. In the summer of 2009, Oguma Eiji’s book *1968* attracted wide attention in Japan. As evident from its title, it discusses the youth rebellions of 40 years ago. Recently, interest in the young generations’ protests which broke out simultaneously all over the world in the economically developed nations, is spreading in the academic field. My presentation too is deeply related to that period’s events.

I began to seriously read shōjo manga at the beginning of the 1970s, right in the

Itō Kimio

middle of the aftermath of the explosion of counterculture and in the continuing wave of political youth rebellion. From the late 1960s to the 1970s I was living in the middle of left-wing student movements. During my time as a student activist, there were two “rumors” about me; not widespread, but shared amongst some activists of the Women’s Liberation Movement whom I knew. One rumor was that “Itō had a huge number of shōjo manga under his bed and that he masturbated reading them”. The other rumor was that “Itō had a life-sized mirror in his room, and that every evening he undressed in front of it and was filled with rapture looking at his image reflected in the mirror”. Actually, the first thing that a women’s liberation activist and lesbian friend of mine said, when visiting my room, was, “Where is the life-sized mirror?” There was a mirror in my room, but it was not that big. And I had never masturbated with shōjo manga. In the first place, shōjo manga of that period had almost no erotic scenes. Maybe my lesbian activist friend was imagining that I was not masturbating with manga about love between man and women, but those about so-called *shōnen-ai*, that is love between boys. As I shall explain later, eroticism in shōjo manga of that period was more explicit in boys’ love stories than in romances between men and women. The two rumors were nothing more than rumors, but one thing was true: I had a huge number of girls’ comics under my bed. In that period, I was reading the manga magazine *Shōjo Margaret* every week as well as the supplementary edition of *Shōjo Friend* and the magazines *Nakayoshi*, and *Ribon*, and I bought every monthly I could lay my hands on, my favorite being the supplementary edition of *Seventeen*.

I began with this story in order to point out, that we must take the counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s into consideration when discussing Japanese shōjo manga. In that period, young people of the whole world started to move, aiming towards their own culture and their own politics. Of course, this affected Japanese society heavily. The New Left Movement, a pillar of protest, became the point of departure for the Women’s Liberation Movement which in Japan, not unlike other countries, criticized male-dominated leadership.

However, youth rebellion and the new counterculture activities began to decline rapidly from 1972-73 onwards. Of course this happened in other countries too, but in Japan it was particularly tragic. Already in the early 1970s, the Women’s Liberation Movement had attracted media attention. But by turning women’s voices who were asking for freedom into objects of ridicule, the media suppressed their claims, and the

Itō Kimio

Japanese movement lost its strength rapidly. One of the reasons was certainly the armed uprising's failure of one part of the Japanese New Left and its internal mutual killing. At the same time, there was also a new move in Japan to absorb counterculture and youth rebellion; to put it simply, the expansion of the commodification of culture. In this period, other countries too were undergoing great changes towards a consumer society and media society. I have called this the "1970 problem". Around 1970, in most of the economically developed countries, cultural change in a wider sense occurred, including the way of looking at things, thinking, speaking and behaving. In the case of Japan, this change was extremely huge. It was characterized by young people and women being pushed to prominence as protagonists of consumer culture.

At present, according to the gender empowerment index of the United Nations, Japan is ranked at 58th place, and according to last year's gender index gap of the World Economic Forum at 98th. Contemporary Japan is known for women's little participation in society. However, in 1970 the proportion of working women was very high. Among the 24 most economically developed OECD member nations, Japan's female labor force percentage was at second place, between the top ranking Finland and the third ranking Sweden. As is well known, since the 1970s, women's participation in society has expanded in many nations. But in Japan, the percentage of working women has only increased by 5% in the last 30 years. So, what has been the obstacle to women's participation in society? To put it simply, men's long working hours.

My analytical focus on gender aims at explaining the maturation of women's consumer culture. From the 1970s onward, women's participation in society has been restrained. But as distinct from other countries, strong opposition by women against this situation has been strangely rare, first of all, because married women have been in control of the household budget, a phenomenon that may only exist in Japan and Italy. Married women gained relative freedom of spending money, due to their husbands' incomes obtained through long working hours. This gave rise to a huge consumer culture targeting women. However, the maturation of this women's consumer culture has been achieved through men's long working hours and women's exclusion from society.

Youth culture matured in the same period. As in other countries, countercultural leaders became leaders of consumer culture. Moreover, due to the rise of their parents' incomes, young people emerged as protagonists of this consumer culture. The end of

Itō Kimio

the political era in Japan is connected to the coming of age of youth consumer culture.

Precisely this growth of women's and youth's consumer culture in Japanese society triggered the upswing of Japan's popular culture. In this period, the young generation began to distance itself from politics and culture, getting instead absorbed by anime, manga, videogames, and showing more and more interest in the details of their stories and characters. But as receivers of popular culture they did not completely lack creativity and imagination. In some sense they managed to preserve their own space, by enjoying a commodified world through their own point of view, or by manipulating the commodified objects of consumption and adopting them to their own needs. That is to say, *otaku* culture was born, and the receivers' maturity facilitated the further maturation of popular culture. This has become one of the sources of today's "Cool Japan".

The maturation of women's culture has followed a similar route. They were excluded from participation in society, but became important consumers of culture as they gained relative autonomy by receiving money from their husbands or parents. A symbol of this is the sudden growth of women's magazines from the 1970s to the 1980s. In particular, in the second half of the 1970s, *shōjo* manga magazines increased rapidly in a market that had been completely dominated by *shōnen* manga magazines. Women's manga magazines which are the equivalent of men's manga magazines, began to appear one after another. When entering a Japanese bookstore today, you may notice that women's manga magazines are by far much more numerous than men's or boys' manga magazines. This tendency began around 1980.

However, from the 1970s, one may find aspects which distinguish Japanese women's and girls' culture from male youth culture, because they offer glimpses of the point of view of those who have been expelled from society. In his recent publication *Democracy and Shōjo Manga*, the photography critic Iizawa Kōtarō commented on *shōjo* manga artist Ōshima Yumiko in the following way:

“Her heroines feel at the beginning out of place in their surrounding situation, without having an affirmative sense of themselves. That is why confusion occurs, but at the end the heroine expresses the will to life on her own, by affirming the relation between themselves and their surroundings just as they are” (Iizawa 2009: 46)

Itō Kimio

I am a little older than Iizawa, and was involved as a male in youth's rebellion and counterculture of the 1960s, but even I can find his point very easy to understand. In shōjo manga which had somehow experienced the voice of the Women's Liberation Movement, the sense of incongruence against a male-dominated society was not rare. Feeling out-of-place in regard to this kind of situation was always present in the works by Ōshima Yumiko, Hagio Moto, Takemiya Keiko, and Yamagishi Ryōko, who opened up the new scene of shōjo manga. However, this did not lead to a clear expression of feminism. A direct assertion of women's liberation would have been incomprehensible to most of the female readers. That is why the expression of feeling out of place, is followed by a feeling of affirmation. However, a certain "truth" is represented visible only to those who are on the fringes of society, that is "the clarity of the excluded", as Pierre Bourdieu theorized it in his *Masculine Domination*. In other words, shōjo manga mirrors the power of women who have been excluded from the majority of the male-dominated society, to see things which are precluded to the male majority.

At that time, I was an enthusiastic reader of shōjo manga. Retrospectively, I see that I was strongly attracted by its expression of feeling out of place. For example, let us consider *Lady Oscar* (or, *The Rose of Versailles*) and *Aim for the Ace*, serialized in weekly shōjo manga magazines back then. One is a historical narrative with fights and battles, and the other one is a sports story, which are both themes often seen in boys' manga. But the heroines of both stories constantly have a sort of discomfort about themselves and their surrounding society, and this discomfort comes from the very fact that they were women.

My encounter with shōjo manga has been of great importance to me. I suppose it has brought about one of the starting points for my research into masculinity. In a male-dominated society, most men belong to the majority. Therefore, research into masculinity is essentially research into the majority. This is fundamentally distinct from women's studies, which rest on the standpoint of a minority. Having always been put into the margins, the minority is forced to face itself. To be excluded from the mainstream generates various feelings of alienation and discrimination. The majority though does not become aware of its own majority-ness, unless something extraordinary happens. Being majority means having almost no opportunity to sense social alienation or discrimination. This makes majority studies conducted by persons belonging to the majority more difficult than minority studies.

In a certain sense it is through the circuit of shōjo manga that I have been able to reflect upon male-dominated society from a male point of view. Above all, it was of great importance to me that the development of shōjo manga at the beginning of the 1970s started with boys' love stories, because the marginal male/homosexual perspective (as opposed to the heterosexual majority of society), turned my eyes to the indifference of the social majority hidden in gender and sexuality.

This must have been of equal significance for shōjo manga authors, as a magazine interview with Hagio Moto in 1991 reveals. There she stated, "I turned to the topic of male homosexuality because it was very hard to depict the problematic distortion in gender structure of those days by resorting to a direct male-female contrastive plot". In any case, whether those authors of the 1970s were conscious of this or not (actually, there may be a little bit of hindsight in Hagio's statement), there is no doubt that gender issues were reflected in their works at least unconsciously. In the last phase of the countercultural wave, when I was feeling a kind of alienation from the so-called male culture, shōjo manga offered me the opportunity to reconsider masculinity and to critically review the present situation of gender.

I was an enthusiastic reader of shōjo manga for just ten years, from the early 1970s to the 1980s. Interestingly, the boom of shōjo manga among young male readers lasted from the late 1970s through all the 1980s. Mutsu A-ko was especially popular then. Many young men favored the *otome chikku roman* (girlish romances) by her and other manga authors. From the stance of Male and Masculinities Studies, this was a very interesting trend. It may have started from a small sense of discomfort towards the contemporaneous male-dominated society. But this discomfort, that I myself had experienced, would not necessarily lead to a fundamental criticism of the given gender structure. What deserves attention here is the existence of a stream which led to an affirmation of the status quo on a larger scale, while embracing small-scale discomfort.

This sense of incongruency occurred against a specific backdrop, that is the move towards a male-dominated society which follows slogans like "fight and win", and the enormous increase in men's working hours. Precisely because male readers felt out of place in view of the sudden male-dominated growth and reinforced competition, they found a kind of "healing" in the different world of shōjo manga. Young men began to realize more and more that the male way of living in the labor market was much more monotonous and hard than the female way of living. Human relationships and their

Itō Kimio

kindness were in the process of being expelled from male culture. Moreover, there was also a sense of envy in regard to the heterogeneity of consumer culture targeted to women. Following the development of youth consumer culture, young men began to be increasingly involved too. As mentioned before, this was one of the reasons for youth's political apathy. But from a gender point of view, it is evident that the women's side offered a much more abundant variety and a wider range of choices.

The phenomenon of especially young men's "feminization" is a topic which has been picked up over and over again by the Japanese media since the late 1970s. Phenomena such as the *femi otoko* (girlish boys), the *hitsuji otoko* (sheep men), and the recent *sōshokukei danshi* (grass-eating men) are the same thing in a different shape. There may be many reasons for this, but one reason is apparently the sense of alienation among men against the Japanese or the international male-dominated society, together with some envy of women culture's heterogeneity and humanity.

At present the romanized term SHŌJO is becoming increasingly internationalized not only with respect to manga, but also fashion and life-style. SHŌJO culture, which began in 1970s Japan, reflects past, present and future issues of gender and sexuality which apply to women in Japan and throughout the world. But in relation to this shōjo culture, the direction of men's gender issues deserves equal attention, which as a researcher involved in men and masculinities studies, I will continue to investigate.

Bibliography

- Hagio, Moto and Torimori Hideki (1991) "Seishin no ryōsei guyū renessansu-ningen no kanōsei o issō hirogeru tame ni sei ni tai suru jūrai no kangaekata o toriharau" [Renaissance of a bisexual spirit—getting rid of old thinking about sexuality to expand the possibilities of humanity]. In: *SPA!* 1991/07, No. 31, pp. 36-41.
- Iizawa, Kōtarō (2009): *Sengo minshushugi to shōjo manga* [Post-war democracy and shōjo manga]. Tokyo: PHP Kenkyūsho.
- Oguma, Eiji (2009a): *1968 jō: Wakamono tachi no hanran to sono haikei* [The struggle of the young in 1986 and its background]. Tokyo: Shinyōsha.
- ____ (2009b) *1968 ge: hanran no shūen to sono isan* [The end of the young's struggle in 1968 and its legacy], Tokyo: Shinyōsha.