

Yaoi Comics: Fan Art in Japan

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1. Introduction

Japanese comics, or Manga, are widely read and created by people of all ages in Japan, and various cultural phenomena have occurred as a result of these comics. Yaoi is one of these phenomena. I will define Yaoi as comics or illustrated novels generally created by and for women, and that focus on romantic relationships between males. Yaoi is now attracting worldwide interest. One cannot deny that Yaoi plays an important part in modern Japanese culture.

Yaoi is generally classified into two genres. One of them is original artwork and the other is fan art. The former is sold in bookstores in Japan [pic.1]. The latter, fan art, is a production that borrows male characters from a source text and transforms their relationship into a romantic one. This type of creation by fans has greatly increased in scale in Japan [pic.2].

The aim of my presentation is to examine the mechanism of creating Yaoi fan art, taking a comic fanzine as a case. I would like to divide my discussion into three parts. The first is to define Yaoi and its fan art, and survey its outline. The second is to demonstrate how Yaoi fan art has been interpreted from outside the Yaoi fan community and analyze Yaoi fan artists' motives. The third is to examine why and how Yaoi fan art has been created by female fans.

2. Definition and Outline

2.1. The Definition

In Japanese, Yaoi is an acronym for “Yama nashi, Ochi nashi, Imi nashi”. It is often translated into English as “No Climax, No Resolution, No Meaning”. This term first appeared in the comic fan community during the late 1970's, and was originally used by amateur comic artists for their short stories that lacked any storytelling technique. Because these stories often dealt with love and eroticism between males, the usage has gradually changed and the term Yaoi has come to refer to artworks that focus on romantic relationships between male characters.

Although the definition of Yaoi can change depending on the situation or the researcher, I will define Yaoi as comics and illustrated novels, including both original texts and fan art, which focus on romantic relationships between males created by and for women. Yaoi

fan art, one of the female-oriented fan arts, is defined as the production that transforms the relationship between males of the source text into lovers. Fan art itself is defined as an activity or production that borrows characters and settings from the source text by its fans.

As the diagram shows, Yaoi fan art is a subgenre of both Yaoi and fan art [diagram. 1]. Fan art takes various forms such as Dōjinshi (fanzine, self-published work), Kosupure (Costume Play) and so on. I will examine and analyze the most popular style of fan art, fanzines drawn by comics.

2.2. The History

Yaoi has a thirty-year history. It has developed amongst amateur comic artists since the 1970's. In Japan, Shōjo Manga (comics for girls) has been established as one of the main Japanese comic genres since the 1950's. The popular subject in Shōjo comics at that time was “pure love between girl and boy”. Against this trend, some female artists dealt with a love between beautiful boys in their comics. They are called as Nijūyonen Gumi (the Year 24 Shōwa Era Group). In the 1980's, the younger generation who had been influenced by the Year 24 Shōwa Era Group began to draw comics that focused on male-male relationship in the comic fan community. Yaoi had gradually divided into various subgenres throughout the 1980's and has been established as one of the main Japanese subcultures today.

2.3. A Review of Preceding Studies

Although Yaoi usually deals with love and eroticism between males, Yaoi is artwork intended for mostly heterosexual women, not for gay men. The preceding studies on Yaoi have mainly discussed the reasons why (heterosexual) women are absorbed in male homosexual stories in terms of gender studies or feminism in general. They often connected Yaoi to issues related to social institutions and feminine psychology. For instance, some preceding studies have discussed this issue in the following way: Gender asymmetry is one of the most fundamental structures in our society. Women do not feel this kind of gender power relation in Yaoi and can enjoy the story of an equal relationship [e.g., Nobi2003, Ueno1998]. While the preceding studies have mainly focused on the original forms of Yaoi, few studies have so far been made into examinations of Yaoi fan art in Japan. Thus, in my presentation, I will focus on Yaoi fan art and analyze its text.

3. Analysis

3.1. What is Yaoi Fan Art?

Yaoi fan art is generally exhibited on websites or is distributed and sold at comic conventions. The Comic Market (Comiket) is the largest comic convention in the world [pic.3]. The first Comiket was held in December 1975 by comic fans. At present, it is 3 days long and held twice a year by a volunteer organization in the ‘Tokyo Big Sight’ venue. 35,000 Sākuru (Circles), an individual or group of fans, and 500,000 people participate in it. 70% of Circle participants are women [Comiket2008: 1296-1298]. The Comiket is primarily the place to exhibit and distribute not only fan art but original artwork. Fan art Circles, however, account for half of all Circles at least today [Comiket2008: 32-33].

Strangely enough, although it has a major presence, its members and their activities are invisible to community outsiders. Members of Yaoi fan art generally do not like to confess their hobby in public spaces such as schools and offices. It is shared only in the closed community [Kaneda2007: 167]. Connected to this, it can be noted that they fear being sued for copyright infringement. Their community is segmented into various cells defined by their taste, style and interest. For example, in the Comiket, Circles are arranged according to the same taste, style and popularity [pic.4]. The fan art community is complex and such segmental cells are invisible to community outsiders.

3.2. How Do Outsiders Interpret Yaoi Fan Art?

The source text is selected from comics, animation, video games, novels, movies and so on. The two characters who do not appear to love each other in the source text are transformed into romantic lovers in fan art. It may be said that Yaoi fan art finds some erotic factors in the original homosocial relationship and develops another narrative by giving other interpretations to it. The relationship in fan art is transformed according to Kappuringu (Coupling).

Coupling is the fundamental convention in Yaoi. It refers to a pairing that indicates a romantic relationship. The two participants in the relationship are referred to as Seme (Tops, the penetrating) and Uke (Bottoms, the penetrated), and these roles are generally fixed [Nobi2003: 233-234]. Thus we see that the first step of creating Yaoi fan art is extracting two male characters and transforming their relationship according to the code of Coupling [diagram. 2].

Critics described such a characteristic of Yaoi fan art as the following: “The story is quite different from the source text.” [Ōtsuka1989/2001: 16] or “Women are not interested in Parody. They poach characters and minimum settings of the source text to create homosexual

stories.” [Ajima1987/2004: 104]

Please take a look at these images. This is Yaoi fan art drawn by Miyako Takano [pic.5]. She was a high school student at that time. The source text is a boy-oriented comic about Japanese youth football by professional comic artist, Yōichi Takahashi [pic.6]. In this fan art, two boy characters, who are teammates in the source text, are transformed into lovers through Coupling. Moreover, this fan art is doubly parodied by quoting the storyline from a romance tale by Japanese novelist, Taichi Yamada.

Eiji Ōtsuka, an editor and critic in Japan, thinking this fan art as “a strange work” mentions as follows: “Contrary to our expectations that such a parody intends to be comical, the artist Takano is quite serious.” [Ōtsuka1989/2001: 81] Ōtsuka thinks that Takano aims for an emotional love story. To quote a storyline from a novel is not to caricature the comic characters in the context of a romance but to represent more dramatically their romantic relationship. In this sense, Ōtsuka concludes that Takano’s fan art not only deviates from the source text but is neither a parody as a critical act.

3.3. How Does the Yaoi Fan Art Community Interpret the Genre?

While Ōtsuka points out the deviation from the source text related to it, the deviation is not always important to Yaoi fan artists. Yaoi fan artists do not make Yaoi fan art just because they wish to criticize the canon. The most important thing for them is the attachment to the male characters and their relationships.

Take fan artists’ remarks for example. Yun Kōga began her career as a Yaoi fan artist in the 1980’s and is now well known as a professional comic artist. She says that the attachment to the artwork and characters and the wish to convey their attachment to the community are the key motives behind making fan art [Yonezawa ed. 2001: 81]. This attachment prompts her to make fan art, and it is textualized through the transformation of a relationship between two male characters.

What is the connection between this attachment and the desire to create fan art? I would like to state one of the key reasons for it is dissatisfaction of the source text. For example, Yayoi Takeda, a popular Yaoi artist since the early days, states that she has ambivalence toward the attachment and the dissatisfaction of the original text when she wants to make Yaoi fan art [the Comic Market Preparatory Committee ed. 2005: 231]. The source artwork does not always depict the ideal story for them. As a means to cure their dissatisfaction, they textualize their own desires and fantasies, and make their own ideal story without being restricted by the situation or

context of the source text.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Summary

I will now briefly summarize what I have discussed so far: The aim of Yaoi fan art is to make the ideal story for fan artists, including the transformation of a relationship between male characters such as changing a friendship into a romantic scenario. Therefore, opposed to the source text, Yaoi fan art is different in terms of drawing touch, storyline and setting. This process of making fan art has been regarded as a strange phenomenon by community outsiders. Critics sometimes point out that Yaoi fan art is too deviant to be a critical act of the original.

4.2. Conclusion

Yaoi fan artists do not care about such deviation as they depend on the collective illusion. They suppose that they share the same source text, the same characters and the same Coupling in the community by tacit agreement. They form a closed fan community by arranging Circles or announcing their own Coupling on their fanzine or website. Thus they can concentrate their interest on creating their ideal story as long as they follow minimum settings that identify characters. Yaoi fan art is a closed representation in this sense.

However, the text of Yaoi fan art itself is also open to new interpretations not bound by the canon. Yaoi fan artists can create fan art as to their desire by interpreting, referring, quoting and mosaicking other source texts. I will conclude my presentation by saying that Yaoi fan art provides possibilities for interpreting and creating new narratives that are not bound by the canon. Yaoi fan art is the emprise that transforms homosocial stories into homoromantic/erotic stories.

The reason why the Yaoi fan community concentrates their attention on the relationship between males, not females nor heterosexuals, is still to be discussed. Although I have not reached a solid conclusion, I would like to continue to examine about this issue by analyzing fan art. Considering a rise of male readers of Yaoi today, I feel I must also work on reviewing the definition and present condition of Yaoi.

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