

A Socio-cultural Analysis of Romantic Love in Japanese Harem Animation: A Buddhist Monk, a Japanese Knight, and a Samurai

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Abstract: *The present paper deals with the harem genre of Japanese animation as a representative example of Japan's socio-cultural reality in terms of dating and marriage patters in the early 21st century. Animation and manga (comics) are an important part of the public sphere in Japan and one of the most widespread forms of popular culture. Three animated series are discussed in this paper namely: Zero no Tsukaima (Zero's Familiar), Ameinaideyo!! (Ah my Buddha!!), and Asu no Yoichi (High School Samurai). The main characters are a Japanese Knight, a Buddhist Monk, and a Samurai. The paper concludes that the harem genre in animation and comics represents a turning point in Japanese culture in terms of popular attitudes regarding romantic love and also embodies some of the inherent contradictions involved in the transition from arranged marriages to the Western ideal of chivalric romantic love.*

Keywords: *Japanese Animation, Social Change, Harem Genre, Marriage*

Introduction

Animation and *manga* (comics) are important parts of the public sphere in Japan (von Feigenblatt 2008; Kelts 2006). Their audience and readership is not limited to children and teenagers as in most Western countries but

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also includes young adults, house wives, business executives, and even politicians (Smith 1997). Part of the attractiveness of animation and *manga* is the flexibility they provide for expression. Topics range from the most common and habitual of daily life as in the *slice of life* genre to complex political scenarios in the *critical* genre. In animation and *manga* the serious and sad in life is not separated from the funny and ridiculous which is one reason why an anime series or a *manga* can have such a broad readership (von Feigenblatt 2008). Nevertheless it is sometimes shocking for non-japanese audiences for adult themes to appear next to childish games and naïve humor (Kelts 2006). The adult-child dialectic is especially present in some genres of animation and *manga* such as *harem*, *romantic*, and *war*. One of the results of superimposing adult themes on traditional childish behavior is that the adult-child dialectic is overcome and something new emerges out of the synthesis. The resulting synthesis is a particularly Japanese view of life which accepts its contradictions and brings them together as complementary parts of an interdependent whole. The contradictions may refer to concepts such as war and peace, love and hate, and failure and success, inter alia.

This paper mainly deals with one genre popularly known as *harem* anime or *harem* *manga*. As a genre it includes a range of topics but they all revolve around a single general theme. Romantic love is the core theme of the *harem* genre. As the name implies there is a sensual side to the dialectic but there is also an important relational factor influenced by the Western notion of Romantic love (von Feigenblatt 2008). Most animation series and *manga* classified as part of the *harem* genre tend to be about two or more women who are attracted to a single, usually very plain, main male character. The entire plot usually revolves around the challenges and opportunities presented by the previously mentioned context to the main male character. It is about the tension between sexual attraction and a deeper affection based on romantic love. Communication is at the core of the *harem* genre. The expression of feelings and relationship issues does not come easily to the Japanese and therefore it features prominently in the *harem* genre as a central factor in determining the success or failure of attaining stable romantic love.

The next sections deal with three anime/manga series belonging to the harem genre. Their main themes are identified and analyzed in the next sections. First, *Zero no Tsukaima* will be discussed briefly, followed by *Amainaideyo* and finally concluding with *Asu no Yoichi*. Each animated series will be discussed in a separate section while the main themes will be analyzed together in a later section.

Zero no Tsukaima (Zero's Familiar)

Zero no Tsukaima is a recent example of the harem genre. The animated series was released in 2006 based on the manga originally created by Noboru Yamaguchi (*The Familiar of Zero* 2010; Yamaguchi 2006, 2006). It deals with the adventures of a young magician in the Kingdom of Tristian. The setting is an imaginary kingdom based on 18th century Europe. More concretely the main female character, Louise de La Valliere, is the youngest of three daughters of an aristocratic family. Louise is one of the worst students in the academy of magic. One day the entire second year class has to summon their familiar spirits. Louise summons a regular Japanese boy named Saito Tanaka who suddenly teleports from Tokyo to the academy. Due to the spiritual contract between master and familiar spirit, Saito is expected to obey Louise and he is initially treated as a pet rather than as a man. This leads to him being allowed to sleep in her room and to doing her laundry.

The rest of the series revolves around that initial relationship between Louise and Saito and how other female characters fall in love with Saito and attempt to gain his favor. Other competitors for Saito's affection include a Japanese maid, the Queen, a German aristocrat with a promiscuous personality, a French princess with a shy and reserved inclination, and a naïve half Elf princess. Each character represents one ideal typical personality type according to Japanese culture. Louise is presented as childish, easily angered, vulnerable, and proud. Saito is meant to represent the average Japanese youngster, inarticulate, slightly shy, and a little perverted.

Some themes that are central to *Zero no Tsukaima* are issues of hierarchy and power in relationships. Saito was

first viewed as a pet, then as a servant, subsequently as a brave commoner, and finally as a knight and a member of the nobility. Each time Saito's relative status changed the relationship between himself and Louise was shaken. Louise's affection for Saito as a pet had to adapt to the fact that he was no longer viewed as a spirit but as a common boy. Later on the gap between the two of them belonging to different social classes also made it difficult for Louise to accept her love for him. Finally his induction into the nobility made it harder for Louise to adapt to a more equal relationship, now more obviously based on love and affection. Class was also an important factor when dealing with competition for Saito's affection. One maid, Siesta, had a relative advantage over Louise due to her low social extraction she could openly court Saito and was able to serve him without any qualms. On the other hand, competition from other quarters such as from other aristocrats was easier to deal with for Louise since she could argue that he was her familiar spirit and that he had shores to do.

In summary, *Zero no Tsukaima*, has many elements of the harem genre of animation and manga. The main character is an average young man who is courted by several women. Another important characteristic is that the main male character is more attached to one of the girls while is still confused about his feelings for the other ones. Furthermore, communication is at the core of most conflict. Finally, the institution of marriage was present as an important goal to achieve while the methods of getting there were varied and contested. Several examples of arranged marriages were shown in the series, as well as one example of what happens when a woman fails to get married by a certain age, represented by the strict and grumpy older sister. The lesson of the story is that marriages freely entered into and based on love are better than the other options.

Amainaideyo!!!

The name title of the series known in the West as *Ah my Buddha!* is originally titled *Amainaideyo!* in its original Japanese version (Sogabe 2009). The original title is an imperative meaning "don't be so immature". *Amainaideyo!* is

based on the manga created by Bohemian K and Toshinori Sogabe which was originally released in 2005. The animated version was also released in 2005 and was produced by Studio Deen. *Amainaideyo!* is also an example of the harem genre of animation and manga but is considered to be for a more mature audience than *Zero no Tsukaima*.

The plot of *Amainaideyo!!!* is centered around the life of a young Buddhist monk in training, Ikkou Santonaka. His grandmother is the head priestess at the temple and he is the only male monk surrounded by several nuns in training. The young nuns in training come from a varied array of backgrounds and as usual in Japanese animation, they represent ideal personality types. Other than the hours of training at the temple and their spiritual powers, students at the temple lead normal lives and attend a regular high school.

The main relationship is the one between Ikkou and one of the young nuns in training, Chitose. Chitose is a country girl who takes her training very seriously and has an explosive personality. Her maturity is constantly compared and contrasted to the young monk's irresponsibility and lack of dedication to his training. The action in the animated series is provided by the regular assignments the young students have to carry out in their town such as carrying out exorcisms. Danger is introduced by the ghosts and spirits encountered during their multiple adventures. One important factor is that Ikkou has the most spiritual power hidden inside of him but it can only be released when he gets overly excited by women. This leads to the contradictory situation that the girls dislike his perverted nature during normal life but need it during emergency situations.

Therefore *Amainaideyo* revolves around a few important themes. As expected, communication between males and females is an important issue. Both Ikkou and the girls find it difficult to let each other know about their feelings, which leads to misunderstandings. Another important theme is the tension between sexual attraction and a serious couple relationship. Chitose likes Ikkou and Ikkou also likes Chitose but the way each side views the relationship is a little different. Chitose represents the caring and serious side of the relationship while Ikkou represents the irresponsible and fun side. In *Amainaideyo* there is a

constant tension between two types of attraction one based on friendship and the other based on sexuality. A third important theme is the relationship between the sacred and the profane. The story takes place in a temple and among religious people which does not negate the presence of temptation and sexuality. Ikkou's spiritual power is directly linked to his libido, and therefore to his profane side. This reminds the viewer and the reader that both the sacred and the profane are parts of a single whole and that the division between the two is artificial. A final theme is the relationship between the traditional and the modern, the old and the new. The very traditional Buddhist Temple is part of a very modern city. Amulets and scrolls exist side by side cell phones and television. Amainaideyo shows how the tension between the modern and the traditional can be overcome. It is another dialectical relationship in which the combination of the two produces something new, not entirely traditional while not modern in the Western sense, but rather something including elements of both in relative harmony.

Asu no Yoichi (High School Samurai)

Asu no Yoichi is based on the manga originally created by Yuu Minamoto (*Asu No Yoichi* 2010). The animated series was released on 2009 by Geneon Entertainment. It is a good example of harem animation for a general audience. The plot revolves around the training of Yoichi Karasuma who lived all of his life in the mountains training with his father. He is considered to be a superb swordsman who practices a style that makes use of wind. After completing his training in the mountain his father sends him to train in the city in a Dojo (martial arts school) that practices the same style of swordsmanship. The dojo is run by a beautiful young woman named Ibuki Ikaruga who is the eldest of four sisters who own the place.

The main relationship is the one between Yoichi and Ibuki and the competition from the other sisters and other external rivals for Yoichi's affection. As usual in harem animation, Yoichi is clumsy and plain in everything other than swordsmanship and is attracted to beautiful women. The action in the series is provided by the recurrent

challenges to Yoichi by members of other martial arts schools as well as the training of pupils in the dojo.

Ibuki's relationship to Yoichi is very similar to that between Chitose and Ikkou in *Amainaideyo*. Ibuki is the serious and caring side of the relationship while Yoichi is the careless and naïve side. As usual communication is an important obstacle in the relationship between the two which leads to recurrent misunderstandings. Rather than an improvement in the clarity of verbal communication, the relationship grows due to Yoichi's communication of his love through actions.

The rivals for Yoichi's affection represent ideal types like in most other examples of harem animation. Each of the Ikaruga sisters is unique and shows unique strengths and weaknesses. Yoichi likes the four sisters but has a strong preference for Ibuki. His affection for the other ones is more like a friendship than a romantic relationship. This ambiguity between friendship and romance creates problems for the other sisters since it makes them feel that they still have a chance. Thus one of the most important themes in *Asu no Yoichi* is the difference between friendship and love. Communication is a second theme, and finally the dialectic between the traditional and the modern is also present.

Yoichi represents the traditional while the sisters represent a link between the modern and the traditional. Issues of honor and duty are discussed in relation to who those concepts evolved in Japanese history. The honor of the samurai is different from the honor of a contemporary high school boy. Another aspect of the traditional-modern dialectic that is discussed in the animated series is the danger and aggression that is always present in the modern world. Live in the mountains is compared to live in the city and the city is considered to be a much more dangerous place. Finally, marriage also comes up as an important theme. Ibuki was engaged to a young boy when she was a small girl. The boy who then grew up to become a powerful young man believes that the engagement was perfectly legitimate and that it is her duty to honor it. On the other hand Ibuki feels that she did not agree to the engagement in the first place and that therefore she is not bound to it. This is an example of conflict between tradition and modernity and between marriage as an instrumental institution and

marriage as based on romantic love. Finally, Ibuki decides that she loves Yoichi and that she will not marry the other young man. Nevertheless this decision is not done openly. Ibuki refuses to marry to other young man but that does not mean that she expresses her feelings to Yoichi. Her relationship with Yoichi continues to be ambiguous but one important step has been taken. The relationship is one step closer to romantic love.

Common Themes

Now that three representative examples of the harem genre of animation and manga have been discussed at length some of the common themes can be analyzed in more detail. Changes in the institution of marriage, communication problems, the tradition-modernity dialectic, and the tension between sexuality and love are some of the most important themes shared by the three animated series. This section examines each one of the common themes and puts them in perspective according to trends in Japanese society.

It can be argued that changes in the institution of marriage are at the core of the harem genre of animation (von Feigenblatt 2008). Finding a suitable couple, formalizing the relationship, and ultimately getting married are important steps in the process. Nevertheless those steps are inherently cultural and are characterized by the importance of ritual and other common social practices. How does one find a suitable couple in Japan? How is that relationship formalized? Those are just some of the questions that can usually be answered based on commonly shared cultural assumptions. That is not the case anymore in Japan due to changes in the institution of marriage (Chambers 2007; Smith 1997). Traditional Japanese marriage used to be arranged by parents and it used to be based on an instrumental view of the family rather than on romantic love between the couple. The goal was to establish a functional and stable household rather than a loving relationship between two people. Due to this instrumental view of marriage several aspects of finding a couple greatly different from those of romantic love. Considerations of social class were more important than they are now as in the Europe of the renaissance and the middle ages. Duty and honor to the

group and the family took precedence over the happiness of the individual. Those characteristics of marriage in Japan have not disappeared completely but rather coexist with the modern concept of romantic love imported from the West.

The result of the state of flux in which the institution of marriage in Japan is that the new generations of young adults have few role models and few guidelines when it comes to freely finding a suitable couple. Attraction and love are universals but the way in which they are expressed are influenced and in a way determined by cultural mores (Avruch 1998). At this point in time, young men in Japan are at a loss as to how to approach women in order to initiate a serious romantic relationship. The closest to a relationship known by most young Japanese is friendship which explains the great difficulty they have in separating friendship from love. All three of the Japanese series discussed in this paper show some of the problems in ambiguous relationships based on friendship.

Communication is related to relationship problems in that Japan is a high context culture (Morton and Olenik 2005). This means that a shared world view and common assumptions are relied upon heavily during communication. When those shared assumptions are not shared anymore a breakdown in communication takes place which is partly what is happening between young women and young men. Young men are not taught how to express their feelings and thus an important obstacle in relationships is communicating those feelings to the other person.

The dialectic relationship between sexual attraction and caring is also related to communication. Both sexual attraction and caring are present in all romantic relationship however the way in which they are expressed makes a big difference. Western chivalric love established an art in the way in which sexual attractiveness could be expressed indirectly. Flattery and metaphorical hyperbole softened the sexual hidden message. The result of the use of a very effective kind of social lubricant was that it helped to obscure the inherent tension between sexual attraction and platonic love. In Japan, both sexual attraction and platonic love are present but there is a lack of a proper social lubricant to express it. This explains the conflicts depicted in popular manga and animation series over the alleged sexual

perversion of Japanese males. There is no perversion but rather no way to express their sexual attraction in a smooth and socially acceptable way. Sexuality in Japan was historically divided from the institution of matrimony and relegated to the dark alleys of the red light district and the geisha houses. Now that the two aspects of a romantic relationship are finally together, neither women nor men know how to deal with it in a socially appropriate way.

Finally the tradition-modernity theme is related to the changes in the institution of marriage but also transcends it. Japan is changing but it is not necessarily becoming unambiguously modern. Both the traditional and modern coexist in permanent tension. The samurai is both shunned and idolized while the result is something new neither traditional nor modern. There is no simple solution to the tension between the two currents other than flexibility and an open mind. The synthesis of the traditional and the modern will be something very Japanese but most importantly hopefully a new social consensus that will be beneficial for the future generations. Popular culture is a testing ground for ideas and an integral part of the public sphere.

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