

TAKING GIRLS SERIOUSLY IN “COOL JAPAN” IDEOLOGY

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An event touted as a rare and historic occasion brought the renowned Japanese social critics Azuma Hiroki and Miyadai Shinji to Chicago for a roundtable discussion on the production and consumption of Japanese popular culture, which was held at the Association for Asian Studies Annual Meeting in 2009. The roundtable, funded with the generous support of the Japan Foundation, featured all male speakers discussing theories developed and promoted by men, and focusing on male *otaku* popular culture. There were no girls to be seen in the bodies or ideas of the roundtable. Later, when asked why Japanese feminists or female scholars of popular culture were not part of the event, the American organizer stated that once they “let in women” there would be no end to it: they would then have to include Korean-Japanese, gays, Ainu, everyone! In other words, girls and ‘girl culture’ are marginal to primary (male) culture. The great contribution of the authors of this collection of essays is that they take the products and interests of girl culture seriously as core and fundamental to our understanding of Japanese popular culture. I will suggest that girl culture is often missing in enthusiastic celebrations of Japanese popular culture, particularly in formulations that are sponsored or promoted by mainstream and elite institutions.

Japanese pundits and bureaucrats are reveling in a perceived tsunami of Japanese cool, pointing to the global spread of *Gundam*, *Ghost in the Shell*, and the Godzilla Roll as examples of influential new forms of cultural diplomacy.¹ Beginning in 2002, with Japan’s decline in

¹ *Gundam* refers to the *Mobile Suit Gundam* (Kidō senshi gendamu) media enterprise. It began as an anime TV series (produced by Sunrise Studios and directed by Tomino Yoshiyuki) that later gave birth to numerous sequels, spin-offs, filmic and other media adaptations. *Ghost in the Shell* (Kōkaku kidōtai, literally Mobile Armored Riot Police) is another massive multimedia enterprise that includes manga, anime, video games, and novels. The first anime version, directed by Oshii Mamoru (1995), was hugely popular with global fans. Ingredients in the Godzilla Roll vary, but often

manufacturing competitiveness, the government began to propose a shift in emphasis to intangible intellectual products and content-based export industries, with a special focus on media such as anime, manga, game software, and cinema. One outcome was a tourism campaign unleashed in 2006 entitled “Yōkoso! Cool Japan: Fusion with Tradition.” The Ministry of Foreign Affairs distributed massive numbers of Cool Japan campaign brochures, posters and videos worldwide. This may have led some people to wonder who decides what constitutes ‘coolness’ in the Cool Japan campaign, as well as what the basis is for the selection of exportable content. It is abundantly clear, however, that the campaign masks the gendered nature of contemporary cultural industries.



Figure 1. Cool Japan campaign poster featuring the J-Pop group Puffy.

One poster in the campaign featured a campy shot of Onuki Ami and Yoshimura Yumi from the J-Pop group Puffy. The Puffy girls are wearing tacky kimono with black boots and trendy hairstyles. The carefully planned posing combines the “modern” and “traditional.” In the background is a woodblock style Mt. Fuji, and Ami and Yumi are holding an eggplant and a hawk. These icons refer to the folk belief that it is highly

include shrimp tempura, avocado, spicy tuna, wasabi mayo and a drizzle of *kabayaki* sauce.

auspicious for the first dream of a new year (*hatsuyume*) to contain one of these elements.² Although for older male sensibilities or foreigners the look may appear daringly irreverent, the pairing of boots with kimono and *hakama* originated in the Meiji era (1868–1912) among elite female students.³ Now it has re-emerged as a fashion fad for girls' graduation costume.⁴ Instead of representing contemporary fusion, the Puffy outfits are forthright and somewhat parodic retro style. Puffy's putative coolness in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs poster is obviously calculated to stimulate but not to offend. These charming celebrities conform to conventional femininity norms and reinforce non-threatening girl sexiness. The images of girls and women in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs *Cool Japan* 2006 promotional video likewise line up with older male expectations of gendered femininity. In it we see sweet deserts, a waitress from a Maid Café, uniformed workers and schoolgirls, and kimono-clad women. The video does not include images of garish, anti-cute *ganguro* blackfacers or working class *yankii* biker chicks.⁵

² The folk saying is *ichi Fuji, ni taka, san nasubi* [first Fuji, then a hawk, then an eggplant]. It dates to the Edo period and there is no consensus on what the meaning is for selection of these items. There are different versions of what the following entries on the list include as well. See Natsui Yoshinori, *Hatsuyume no kamikuzu; Edo no warai o yomu* [Reading Edo humor: The detritus of first dreams] (Tokyo: Rekishi shunjū shuppan, 2005).

³ For more on the often subversive nature of Meiji girl fashion, see Rebecca Copeland, "Fashioning the Feminine: Images of the Modern Girl Student in Meiji Japan," *U.S. Japan Women's Journal English Supplement* 30-31 (2006): 13–35.

⁴ Girls may rent *hakama* sets that might include kimono, hair accessories and bags. The Kikuzuru company rents them for graduations, and has a special webpage for pairing *hakama* and boots. One *hakama* features a glittery appliquéd skull, a core motif in current girl culture. Hakama Rental, 2005 (accessed June 20, 2008, <http://www.hakama-rental.com/tieup/index.html>).

⁵ For more on *ganguro* blackfacers see Sharon Kinsella, "Blackfaces, Witches, and Racism against Girls," in Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley, eds., *Bad Girls of Japan* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), pp. 143–157; and Laura Miller, *Beauty Up: Exploring Contemporary Japanese Body Aesthetics*

There are other interesting problems associated with the Cool Japan initiative, officially called the Intellectual Property Strategic Program.⁶ One issue is government shaping of what is supposed to be free-wheeling creative output through selective promotion or sponsorship. Another is the clear intent of the Japanese government to use these creative products as a form of diplomacy, articulated in the “soft power” concept the bureaucrats appropriated from Joseph Nye.⁷ Douglas McGray’s influentially snazzy term “Japan’s Gross National Cool” no doubt also contributed to their thinking.⁸ The hope is that global consumption of Japanese food and popular culture will foster positive attitudes toward the Japanese nation and people. Government strategists hope that the export of Japanese products that encode both the cool and the traditional will eradicate historical difficulties between Japan and foreign nations, and will eventually establish a type of ideological power. Aside from the dubiousness of this assumption – consider, for example, the fact that sales of Mexican food items such as tortilla chips in the U.S. escalated at the same time that Americans asked for fences to keep actual Mexicans out – there is also an unconvincing confidence in official apparatchik involvement in the creation and promotion of coolness.

In 2006, former Foreign Affairs Minister (and recently deposed Prime Minister) Asō Taro urged the Japanese business community to work with diplomats to promote popular culture more assertively, particularly anime, manga, J-Pop and fashion.⁹ As part of this initiative, embassies,

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). A female *yankii* biker is represented in the character Shirayuri Ichigo in the movie *Shimotsuma monogatari* [Kamikaze Girls], dir. Nakashima Tetsuya (2006).

⁶ Joho Kanri, *Chiteki zaisan suishin keikaku* [Intellectual Property Strategic Program], Kantei, May 27, 2004 (accessed June 28, 2008, <http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/singi/titeki2/kettei/040527f.pdf>). English translation (accessed June 28, 2008, http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/policy/titeki/kettei/040527_e.html).

⁷ Joseph Nye, “Soft Power,” *Foreign Policy* 80 (1990): 153–171.

⁸ Douglas McGray, “Japan’s Gross National Cool,” *Foreign Policy* 130 (2002): 44–54.

⁹ “A New Look at Cultural Diplomacy: A Call to Japan’s Cultural Practitioners,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, April 28, 2006

consulates and JETRO offices outside Japan began to promote soft power in numerous ways through manga contests, Puffy concerts, and anime screenings. In 2009, the Foreign Affairs Ministry appointed three young women to serve as Japan's "Ambassadors of Cute." The three cultural envoys wear trendy fashions, including Lolita-style frilly dresses and bonnets.¹⁰

The Intellectual Property Strategic Program explains why an older, conservatively-suited businessman affiliated with JETRO discretely approached me a few years ago for advice on the feasibility of setting up a Gothic Lolita shop in Chicago. Eventually the idea materialized in San Francisco in August 2009 with the opening of New People, The Store, a retail and entertainment megaplex where fans may find the latest manga, catch recent anime, and buy Harajuku fashion. The mall, which is the brainchild of Horibuchi Seiji (CEO of VIZ Pictures and Viz Media), houses movie theaters, displays, and shops. A standout among the shops is a branch of Baby, The Stars Shine Bright, famous for its Sweet Lolita ensembles (the shop was also, not surprisingly, showcased in the Viz produced film *Shimotsuna monogatari* mentioned above). For all their enthusiasm to sell cool Japanese cultural products, the Japanese politicians, entrepreneurs and others involved are perhaps not aware that they are violating what news correspondent Douglas Rushkoff calls "the first rule of cool – don't let your marketing show."¹¹ Once elders and profiteering enterprises get involved in selling youth cultural products, those goods quickly lose their cool status. In the wake of cool's departure, we find only a sanitized version of the real thing, a product obviously crafted by adult strategists.

Still, it is almost endearing to observe the futile effort of unglamorous foreign ministry workers to keep on top of youth culture in order to exploit it for nationalistic and profiteering reasons. The once stigmatized *otaku* (nerd) culture has shifted into prominence as a trumpeted leader in the creative industries, and the violent, pornographic and hyper-cute have taken center stage in Cool Japan ideology. The promotion of

(accessed June 15, 2007, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/fm/aso/speech/0604-2.html>).

¹⁰ Isabel Reynolds, "Japan picks 'schoolgirl' among cute ambassadors," *Reuters*, March 12, 2009 (accessed August 25, 2009, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/idUKTRE52B4JC20090312>).

¹¹ "The Merchants of Cool," *Frontline*, PBS (February 27, 2001).

cyborg war games, seductive schoolgirls for enriching male erotic fantasies, and anime tentacle rapes as prized elements in creative J-culture is a type of endeavor that Hiroki Azuma disparages as “*otaku* nationalism.”¹²

My criticism of Cool Japan is not driven by a sense of priggish nose-thumbing at the vulgarity of capitalism or a contemptuous assessment of low or eroticized tastes (an example of which might be the bizarre bombé breasts found on female figures created by artist Murakami Takashi.) Rather, I question the ability of elders to grasp, let alone package for foreign consumption, various cultural innovations and forms produced by young people. (When they *are* able to do so, those innovations immediately lose their appeal among youth innovators themselves.) As Ito’s article on ladies comics in this issue makes clear, women too have their own types of eroticism. In addition to the ladies comics she describes there are also genres such as BL “Boy’s love” manga created and consumed by women and girls, yet these too, do not take center stage in Cool Japan ideology.¹³ In the case of cultural products created by and for young women and girls, the *otaku* thrust of mainstream sponsorship of Cool Japan is especially off mark. The variation in girl culture images and products explored in this special issue are given very little space in Cool Japan exportation, which is dominated by cultural products endorsed by official bodies.

Even when Japanese girl culture products do successfully get exported, some of their important elements are nevertheless left at home. Parallel to the efforts of the government are the activities of fans and private entrepreneurs to promote global consumption of things Japanese. In girl-oriented media consumed by non-Japanese consumers, key images and details thought to be too imbued with cultural or historical reference are sometimes excised by translators or publishers. (There is actually a job called a “localizer,” a person who not only translates Japanese cultural products for release in the U.S., but also examines them for references and content that are thought to be too offensive or overly difficult for the

¹² Hiroki Azuma, “Superflat Japanese Postmodernity,” MOCA Gallery, 2001 (accessed May 2006, http://www.hirokiazuma.com/en/texts/superflat_en1.html).

¹³ BL manga, also known as *yaoi*, is discussed by Kazuko Suzuki, “Pornography or Therapy? Japanese Girls Creating the *Yaoi* Phenomenon,” in Sherrie Inness, ed., *Millennium Girls: Today’s Girls Around the World* (London: Roman & Littlefield, 1999), pp. 243–268.

American consumer.) The resulting texts and artifacts lose some of their weight as vehicles for important girl themes and fantasies and become narratives of a different sort. As part of girls' interest in female power and authority, as well as the supernatural and the occult, manga artists often insert symbols related to Himiko (legendary ruler of the third century Yamato polity) or to powerful or revitalized female shamans. In the manga *Cardcaptor Sakura*, for example, the character Kaho Mizuki is a *miko* (shrine attendant) at Tsukimine Jinja, but in the English adaptation this point is not always easy to detect.¹⁴ For instance, when Mizuki is seen posed in the shrine grounds, the English merely refers to it as a "park." Such "localization" robs the character of her association with romantic notions of ancient female power.

Girl Studies

The study of girls (and women who remain girls in their hearts) as a separate research focus, increasingly labeled "Girl Studies," continues to be a contested idea in academe. Supporters claim that Girl Studies is a worthwhile research domain because of past disregard for age within women's studies, and past neglect of gender within youth studies. Naysayers believe that the category and boundaries of what counts as a "girl" are too shifting and divergent across cultures and through time. This ambiguity, however, is what many scholars find so appealing, and why some have tried to come up with a way to capture this. For example, Takahara Eiri proposes the notion of "girl consciousness" to describe a state of mind oriented toward girlhood that may be present regardless of one's age or gender.¹⁵

Until recently, incipient Girl Studies was dominated by feminist psychology and informed by adolescent development theory. Several new volumes have opened up Girl Studies to a wide community of scholars. Girl Studies as an emergent field of interdisciplinary inquiry focuses on girls' interests, experiences and culture in an era of global transformation.¹⁶

¹⁴ Clamp and Carol Fox, *Cardcaptor Sakura* 1 (Los Angeles: TokyoPop, 2004).

¹⁵ Takahara Eiri, "The Consciousness of the Girl," in Rebecca Copeland, ed., *Woman Critiqued: Translated Essays on Japanese Women's Writing* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), pp. 185-198.

¹⁶ For examples see Anita Harris, *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Sharon R. Mazzarella and Norma

Scholars within Girl Studies are careful to balance interpretations that recognize both agency and oppression by noting what editors of one volume called “the power, agency, and complicity of girls in resisting and negotiating oppression and inequality within the matrices of structural forces that constrain, impose limits on and contribute to [girls’] vulnerabilities.”¹⁷ By contributing to this new research area, which continues to be dominated by studies of Euro-American girls and their culture, articles by Bardsley, Brodey, Ito, and Watanabe in this issue are creating a more balanced scholarship.

Japanese girls, particularly schoolgirls, are the focus of intense interest in Japan. Whole books have been devoted to them, and authors such as Ōtsuka Eiji, Yamane Kazuma, Tochinai Ryō, and Honda Masuko have built careers and reputations on studies of girls.¹⁸ Nakamura Yasuko, the president of Boom Planning, published a compilation of marketing research on high school girls and their latest tastes.¹⁹ Girl culture texts written by young women as guides or critiques of girl lifestyles include those by Ōta Uni, also known by her pen name Unikki, and whimsical books that meld comics, essays and drawings by writers such as Shinsan Nameko.²⁰

We find works that take Japanese girls or girl culture as their subject in English language scholarship as well. Scholars have investigated

Odom Pecora, *Growing Up Girls: Popular Culture and the Construction of Identity* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999); and Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick, and Anita Harris, eds., *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power and Social Change* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

¹⁷ Yasmin Jiwani, Candis Steenbergen, and Claudia Mitchell, eds., *Girlhood: Redefining the Limits* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2006).

¹⁸ Ōtsuka Eiji, *Shōjo minzokugaku* [Native ethnology of shōjo] (Tokyo: Kobunsha, 1989); Yamane Kazuma, *Gyaru no kōzō* [The structure of the girl] (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1993); Honda Masako, ed., *Shōjoron* [Theorizing shōjo] (Tokyo: Seikyusha, 1988); and Tochinai Ryō, *Joshikōsei bunka no kenkyū* [Research on high school girl culture] (Tokyo: Goma Books, 1993).

¹⁹ Nakamura Yasuko, *Uchira to osoro no sedai: Tokyo joshikōsei no sugao to kōdō* [The Generation of ‘Us’ and ‘Together’: The True Face and Behavior of Tokyo High School Girls] (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2004).

²⁰ Ōta Uni, *Girls Be Ambitious* (Tokyo: Gentosha, 2007); and Shinsan Nameko, *Onna no jinsei sugoroku* [The Woman’s Game of Life] (Tokyo: Magazine House, 2008).

girl culture resistance, manga, anime, and other realms of cultural production that reflect girls' unique worldviews.²¹ Unfortunately, among the new crop of books on Japanese girls are some trade books and popular press articles that come close to being condescending or lacking in empathy.²² Others dish up a rehash of tired Western journalism that claims to have discovered how "changed" and "evolved" Japanese women have become.²³

It is wonderful to read the work of the scholars in this issue because they are contributing not only to our understanding of representations of the girl as well as female complicity in and uses of such imaging, as so clearly seen in Watanabe's article, but are also looking at influential forms of culture produced by and for girls and women. The *maiko* moment described by Bardsley spans many domains of activity, from cosmetic shops and photo studios (some of which are female-run or managed businesses). While most critics attribute the rise of the Maid Café boom to *otaku* male fantasy and interests, Brodey in this issue makes a good case for linking this new and highly lucrative business to girl culture inspired *kosupure* enthusiasms that are linked to cultural products emerging from the *Emma* manga.²⁴ Finally, the articles in this issue are important

²¹ Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley, eds., *Bad Girls of Japan* (Palgrave Macmillian, 2005), Jennifer Prough, "Reading Culture, Engendering Girls: Politics of the Everyday in the Production of Girls' Manga" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2006); Kimberly Gregson, "What if the Lead Character Looks Like Me? Girl Fans of Shoujo Anime and Their Web Sites," in Sharon R. Mazzarella, ed., *Girl Wide Web: Girls, the Internet, and the Negotiation of Identity* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 121–140; and Kawasaki Kenko, "Osaki Midori and the Role of the Girl in Shōwa Modernism," *Asian Studies Review* 32/3 (2008): 293–306.

²² Examples are Patrick Macias and Izumi Evers, *Japanese Schoolgirl Inferno* (Tokyo: Chronicle Books, 2007), and the regular "Japanese Schoolgirl Watch" in *Wired* magazine, see for example Brian Ascraft, "Japanese Schoolgirl Watch: Downloading Sticker Booth Shots Is Now a Snap," *Wired*, May 19, 2008.

²³ Veronica Chambers, *Kickboxing Geishas: How Modern Japanese Women Are Changing Their Nation* (New York: Free Press, 2007).

²⁴ Kaoru Mori, *Emma*, trans. Sheldon Drzka (La Jolla, CA: Wildstorm Productions, 2008).

because these scholars have immersed themselves in girl culture, unpacking the many different products and media that are appealing to girls and women, paying attention to phenomena that drive a huge part of the Japanese economy but which many critics oddly ignore or negate.

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