Exploring Representations of New Gender Roles in Japanese Animations
日本のアニメーションにおける新しいジェンダーロールの表象研究

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Abstract

This article focuses on new images of male characters in Japanese animations known as *soushokukei-danshi* (or *herbivorous boys*) and explores the changing gender roles that these new characters embody. Men who are categorized as *soushokukei-danshi* appear weak, both physically and mentally, and are quite different from conventional male stereotypes. In that gender is not inherent but rather is performed, an analysis of *soushokukei-danshi* can help us understand how we are pushed to behave in certain ways by social power and how we perform gender roles unconsciously. This analysis can enable teachers to see their students in new ways and make better learning environments for them. Understanding the creation and reproduction of gender diversity in Japanese animations can thus help teachers recognize a greater diversity of gender performances among the students they teach.

要旨

この論文では、草食系男子とされる日本アニメのキャラクターから見る新しい「男らしさ」に注目する。そして、それらのキャラクターによって具現化されたジェンダーの変容を分析していく。草食系男子に分類される男性は身体的にも精神的にもよわい。つまり、ステレオタイプの肉食系男子とはかけ離れた男性のことである。ジェンダーは生まれつき持っているものではなく、パフォーマンスである。この草食系男子の分析は、私たちがどれくらい社会的・文化的な力に影響を受けジェンダーを作り上げていくか、そしてどれくらい無意識にジェンダーを演じているのかを、理解する手助けをするだろう。この分析によって、教員は生徒を新しい観点から見ることができるだろう。そして彼らにとってより良い学習環境を作ることができるだろう。日本のアニメーション作品におけるジェンダーの多様性を理解することは、生徒内のジェンダーの多様性を理解するのに役立つだろう。

Key words: masculinity, gender, representation, Japanese animations, herbivorous boys
日本のアニメ、草食系男子, 男性性、ジェンダー、表象分析

Introduction

In my presentation at the Creating Community: Learning Together 2 conference, I focused on new images of male characters in Japanese animations. Recently, some Japanese young men have been categorized as *soushokukei-danshi*. This means *herbivorous boys* in English. Men who are categorized like this appear weak, both physically and mentally. Also their character is far from the traditional male stereotype—namely that men should earn money to provide for their family. Before the 2000s, these traditional male images were dominant, so almost all Japanese animation characters looked like that. For example, Son Goku in *Dragon Ball* (1984) and Hyuma Hoshi in *Kyojin no Hoshi* (1986) look energetic and have strongly muscled bodies. At the same time, some kinds of soushokukei-danshi boys also appeared, but they were not as popular as traditional male characters and were never depicted as main characters. However, with the publication of *Evangelion* (1990), soushokukei-danshi boys suddenly became popular as heroes. This animation's main

character, Shinji Ikari is a soushokukei-danshi boy. After this animation, many other soushokukei-danshi characters appeared and became popular.

When I studied about gender in my seminar last year, I started wondering why these images had changed in animations and how gender roles come to change generally. Through my reading, I learned that these changes are related to the images that mass media give us. So, for my graduation thesis, I researched soushokukei-danshi in Japanese animations from the perspective of representation and gender performativity. My main questions were about new gender performance and how male gender roles have changed and are changing. By sharing my research here, I hope the ideas I discuss will help teachers think about gender issues and become more aware of gender identity among students.

Gender Performance

When we think about gender, we label people as male, female, and transgender, and when we think about sex we use labels like LGBTQ. In giving these labels, we are convinced that these gender roles are natural. However, Judith Butler, a leading expert on feminism, claims gender is created by behavior. If a behavior is enacted repeatedly, it becomes "natural" for us. That is, gender is not present or inherent, but is a performance.
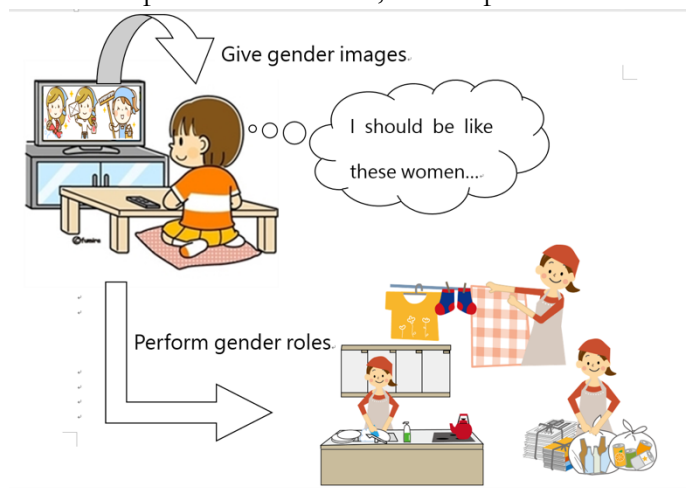

Figure 1. Gender Performativity (Author's Representation).

It is constructed by society and culture and we are pushed to behave in certain ways by social power (Salih, 2003, p. 113). For example, a TV commercial shows a wife cleaning her family's clothes in the middle of the day. The woman in this commercial represents an image of a "traditional wife". That is, women have to do housework and they are supposed to stay inside the home.

In another commercial, a man is shown coming back at night to his home where the dinner is on the table ready for him. He sees a letter written by his wife. He reads it and thinks, "I will work hard tomorrow also." The man in this commercial represents the "traditional male" image. That is, men should work for their family and should always be strong. We see these images created by the mass media again and again in our lives and we construct our gender roles accordingly, consciously or unconsciously. So, we perform being a "man" or "woman" using the roles that are given to us by these media. Soushokukei-danshi are also a sort of gender role that is created by behavior that is promoted by society and culture. They represent a new kind of role for men, and this depiction allows new ways of performing masculinity for young men in Japanese society.

Representations of New Gender Roles

In the Japanese animations of the 2000s, we can find many soushokukei-danshi characters. In the three animations that I focus on in this short article various types of attractive characters are represented. As I will show here, they may both reflect and provide role models for new ways of performing being a boy in actual life. That is, soushokukei-danshi in animation provide new gender roles for today's society.

I will continue by looking at the main soushokukei-danshi character in each of the three animations. The first one is *Konjiki no Gash Bell*, which was published in 2003. The main character is Kiyomaro Takamine, a soushokukei-danshi boy. He is an intelligent high school student, but he is a usually timid and negative.

One day he meets a strange boy called Gash Bell. He and Gash Bell overcome their enemies who tend to be traditional types, "strong male" as well as the less traditional

Figure 2. Kiyomaro Takamine: Soushokukei-Danshi Boy (Makoto Raiku, 2003).

"strong girl," to become the kings of hell. In this animation, Takamine acts as a new kind of animation hero. Before the 1990s the main characters in animations such as *Son Goku (Dragon Ball)* had powerful bodies and strong minds from the very first story. However, Takamine does not have a powerful body and does not have a strong mind. He looks thin and is far from powerful physically. In the first of the stories he always thinks in a negative way, saying things to himself like, "I cannot beat him" or "I cannot make friends." At the end of the story, his character changes a little, but his looks and his character never become like the traditional male stereotype. In other words, his character grows, but he does not change his gender performance.

Figure 3. Eyeshield 21: Sena Kobayakawa (Riichiro Inagaki/ Yusuke Murata, 2005).

Eyeshield 21, which was published in 2005, is a sports animation. Ordinarily, sports animations' main characters are energetic and they have muscular bodies. However, Sena Kobayakawa, the main character in this animation, looks thin and small like a girl and he has a negative attitude about everything. However, he has one outstanding sports ability, and that is he can run fast. Because of this skill, he joins the American football team at his school, and he fights against other teams to go to the "Christmas Ball."

Figure 4. Hyo-ka: Hotaro Oreki (Honobu Yonezawa, 2013).

Using his talent, Sena challenges various characters who represent conventional gender stereotypes. Playing the game, Sena fights with many traditional male characters and defeats them. In this animation gender diversity is promoted. Usually, we imagine American football players as stereotypes. That is, a player has a muscular body and thinks, "a man has to be strong any time" or "a man must not cry," but in this animation many characters that have new gender roles are depicted. Soushokukei-danshi boys in this animation look like traditional males, but they do not behave like traditional males. Before the 1990s, these kinds of soushokukei-danshi boys were usually minor characters and they always only supported traditional characters. However, in the different stories of this animation, almost all the characters are the main characters. So, this animation represents gender diversity.

The last animation is *Hyo-ka*. This work was released in 2013 and is based on the novel of the same title. The main character,

Hotaro Oreki, is a high school student who is a member of the classical literature club. One of his characteristics is that he doesn't like moving more than necessary.

In the story he and his club members spend their school life solving mysteries that happen around them like a robbery, the true character of a ghost, and the secret of the school. Hotaro Oreki doesn't have a special talent like Sena or Takamine or Gash. He is just an average boy. Oreki represents the new stereotype of a boy who is not energetic or masculine. Oreki's attitude and behavior are close to how many young male people behave today.

Discussion

The main characters in these animations have some common points. They are different from older ones. These images represent new types of gender roles. That is, they are not bound by traditional male images. Sara Kuon, the psychologist, has noted that young people nowadays cry easily. They sometimes cry in front of their boss. The men who conform to traditional male images would not do this because of the gender role assigned to them by society (Kuon, 2011, p. 19). However, soushokukei-danshi boys have different gender roles and behave differently. In the three animations, there are some scenes where the main characters start to cry. Sara also claims that youth have become very passive (Kuon, 2011, p. 19). This image of passivity is also represented in these three animations. Finally, the audience can empathize with these characters because these animations are made for youth and young people are near to these characters. Because of this, the authors of these animations popularize new gender images of men crying in public and not doing more than necessary.

There are other reasons for the increase of soushokukei-danshi in recent Japanese animations. One of these is the appearance of "strong girls." Some girls bravely save the main characters. Others fight to make their dreams come true. They represent woman's social advancement. These animation characters break down the stereotype of "weak and passive woman." Before 1990, very few girl characters were strong. They always performed a support role for the main male characters. However, *Evangelion* (1995) introduced two female characters, Ritsuko Akagi and Misato Katsuragi, who showed new gender images where "strong woman" is performed. These strong woman characters have a high position in their communities. They also direct other people to achieve goals, and in many cases they get a position near traditional male position. After them, strong girl characters became popular in animations. The increase of soushokukei-danshi characters happened at almost the same time. So it was interesting for me to examine how men's roles and women's roles are related. Similarly, it may also be interesting for readers of *Learning Learning* to consider differences of students' motivation to learn, the different actions that students take in some group works, and the different attitudes that individual students have for teachers in terms of gender roles.

Finally, I want to point out that there is more diversity in the present-day Japanese animations. As I said, both boys and girls are now represented in a new way. Before the 1990s, traditional strong boys and weak girls were "natural", but they are not so now. The "energetic man" took the hero role 30 years ago, but now the soushokukei-danshi boys present a different major role for young generations. So, the traditional man has become out of date.

In this short article, I presented some animations to explore the rise of soushokukei-danshi in Japanese animations. It is worthwhile looking at animations because the audience is largely young people, so they are influenced by those soushokukei-danshi characters and may unconsciously adopt the kinds of roles that are depicted. In particular I analyzed the image of soushokukei-danshi boys. They are typical of the new masculinity. Gender is created by culture. As culture changes, so gender changes. In the near future, soushokukei-danshi, today's new gender role, will in turn transform into other gender roles.

Future Research Directions

In the Creating Community/Learning Together conference, I received some questions and was also given some advice about the theme that I presented. One student asked, "Strong women are increasing, on the other hand, strong men are despairing. So why can't the strong girls and the strong boys live together?" One possible response to this question is that they already do live together but we young people are not aware of this. Mass media always focuses on prejudiced images. Since we see those images repeatedly, we become convinced that the images that the mass media reproduce are real. In response to this question, I can only say the culture is changing so now we can feel the strong women are popular. More specifically, I said traditional male (strong man) is out of date, but in the near future they may become popular again. Another question I was asked was, "What do you think about doing some kind of survey?" This advice was impressive for me. My research focuses on only animations so I cannot know what the audience really thinks about these gender roles. If I do some survey research, I may see a new perspective, so I want to include the results of a survey in the future.

While I was researching my study, I also had some questions. My first question was, "Do Japanese animations influence readers in other countries?" Today, Japanese animations are read by many people outside Japan. As I said, animation images are related to our performance of gender roles. Soushokukei-danshi boys are popular in Japan, but is it also the case that animations may give the new gender images to people in other countries? In many ways Japanese culture and foreign culture are different. Do other cultures make new gender images that include Japanese gender images—or do they refuse to do so? I cannot imagine how gender images work in other countries so I also wanted to research this. My second question was "How can this research be included in education?" As I mentioned earlier, animations' audience consists of young boys and girls, so it is possible that students in school and university can become aware of gender roles through their reading. If teachers and students understand and adapt to new roles, some students may find it easier to stay in school. Recently, some teachers don't accept new gender roles. They always believe that their view of gender roles is correct and any other gender role must be wrong, but this is not good for making a better learning environment. Understanding gender diversity could thus make better learning environments.

In conclusion, at the conference I could talk about, consider, and discuss many interesting puzzles and questions. If I hadn't taken part, I could not have found such puzzles and questions. In the future, I will use this experience to develop my research further and write my graduate thesis on soushokukei-danshi boys.

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