

## History as Sexualized Parody: Love and Sex Between Nations in *Axis Powers Hetalia*

[AU1]

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### INTRODUCTION: POP NATIONALISM, YOUTH, AND J-CULTURE MEDIA MIX

[AU2]

Following the publication of revisionist manga series such as *Sensōron* (On War, 1998–2003, 3 vols.) by Yoshinori Kobayashi, Japanese comics and popular cultures have attracted increasing attention within the heated public debate surrounding issues of history, national identity, and youth (Sakamoto 2008). Public discussion on historical revisionism and school textbooks has been so far to a large amount shaped by political or ideological interpretations about the past, present, and future of the nation. However, some commentators have pinpointed the emergence of radical changes within new generations in Japan in regard to their self-perception and identity, and to their relationship with the nation as an *imagined community*, noting the emergence of a post-ideological or post-modern sensibility, increasingly indifferent to modernist, content-based, true versus false or good versus evil dialectics, which continues to inform the evaluative horizon of both conservative and progressive institutional discourses (Honda 2007).

Within such context, this chapter examines the specific transformation over the past two decades that has contributed to elevate *J-culture*, the transmedial constellation of manga, anime, video games, character design,

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25 youth subcultures, and so forth, to an emergent arena for re-defining  
 26 Japan and its post-imagined communities. Put differently, since the 1990s,  
 27 popular cultures have become the strategic site where renegotiation of  
 28 the significance attributed to the past, present, and future of the nation  
 29 as well as its socialization are articulated through the fluid intersection of  
 30 hegemonic trajectories from “above” and “below,” both of which are dis-  
 31 seminated across the proliferating circuits of the Japanese “media mix”:

32 The “media mix” is a term that refers to the media environment whereby  
 33 a particular franchise releases interconnecting products for a wide range of  
 34 media “platforms”—animation, comics, video games, theatrical films, sound-  
 35 tracks—and commodity types—cell-phone straps, T-shirts, bags, figurines,  
 36 and so on. It is a state of what we might call the “serial inter-connection of  
 37 commodities”—wherein commodities (including media types) do not stand  
 38 alone as products but interrelate, generally through the existence of a prin-  
 39 cipal character or narrative.

40 (Steinberg 2009: 191)

[AU3]

41 Based on a fieldwork conducted on the multimedia platform originated  
 42 by the webmanga *Axis Powers Hetalia* (2006–) and its fandom, where  
 43 nations and world history are personified as cute boys, in this chapter  
 44 I explore the complex mobilization of emotions, pleasures, and desires  
 45 reconfiguring relations between history, nation, and youth. Particular  
 46 attention will be given to emergent hegemonic articulations from “below”  
 47 stimulating so-called *moe* affect: an ambiguous neologism difficult to  
 48 define, but which under the sign of light-hearted parody, polymorphous  
 49 pleasure, and cross-gendered sexuality has become in the last decade a  
 50 dominant paradigm among more or less subcultural young prosumers,  
 51 both male-oriented *otaku* (fans of manga, anime, video games, etc.) and  
 52 female-oriented *fujoshi* (litt. “rotten women, girls”; fans of male-to-male  
 53 homosexual fantasies).

#### 54 POP NATIONALISM “FROM ABOVE”: COOL JAPAN

55 Institutionalized pop nationalism is strongly shaped by recent govern-  
 56 mental policies aimed at promoting cultural or creative industries under  
 57 the umbrella term of “Cool Japan”: a slogan influenced by the concept  
 58 of “Japan’s Gross National Cool,” as first formulated in an article pub-  
 59 lished on *Foreign Policy* in 2002. The author, Douglas McGray, suggested

that the post-bubble 1990s decade of economic stagnation had not been completely negative for Japan, because during the very same period the nation had arisen to global cultural superpower status thanks to the global spread of its popular culture products, which came to dominate consumption, tastes, and trends of younger generations across the world. More importantly, McGray argued that this international success offered enormous potential that was still to be explored and implemented in terms of economical and geopolitical opportunities, especially in relation to the nation's "soft power" policies. A term coined by political scientist Joseph Nye, soft power refers to a kind of power that, unlike hard power, does not rely on coercive methods in the realm of politics, military might, and economic incentives and sanctions, relies instead on the increasing strategic importance of nation-states to influence and control other nation-states through persuasion and consent, thanks to their own ideology, values, and culture (Nye 2004).

The concept of "Cool Japan" was subsequently adopted enthusiastically by politicians and bureaucrats as a panacea against post-bubble stagnation, becoming a national strategy of the new millennium, both as an economical-industrial programme to increase profit on the international market, and as a politico-diplomatic programme to improve Japan's image in the world. The annual reports of the Program for the Promotion of Intellectual Property (*chiteki zaisan suishin keikaku*), that began to be published in 2003 under the Koizumi government, and even more so the following reports issued by the powerful Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI), advocated a new national policy promoting cultural and intellectual production, instead of the previous manufacturing sector (cars and electronic consumption goods). Moreover, the reports suggested that these cultural and intellectual goods should be invested with "Japaneseness" and contribute to a strategy of nation branding, relying on national symbolism in order to create added value. In 2010, this strategy was further implemented through the foundation of a specific Cool Japan Office within METI, aimed at coordinating all other ministries, cultural industry, and emergent creative professions, towards the production of nation branding tactics (METI 2010).

Following the establishment of the "Cool Japan" institutional strategy, manga, anime, and youth cultures were elevated to the status of new official face of Japan. This was also the result of the joined mobilization of a number of national agencies and ministries, from the Japanese National Organization of Tourism (JNTO), advertising for foreign visitors

99 “Pilgrimages to Sacred Sites” that were featured in manga, anime, video  
 100 games, or television dramas (JETRO 2005, 2015), from the national tele-  
 101 vision channel NHK broadcasting since 2006 more than 100 episodes  
 102 of the series “Cool Japan. *Hakkutsu kakkōii Nippon*,” to the kind of pop  
 103 diplomacy inaugurated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’s nominating  
 104 the atomic-powered cat character Doraemon as “Anime Ambassador of  
 105 Japan” (2008) and three fashion trendsetting girl as “Ambassadors of  
 106 *kawaii* (cute)” (2009) to be paraded in Japanese diplomatic and cultural  
 107 institutions across the world (Daliot-Bul 2009; Iwabuchi 2008).

108 Regardless of the effectiveness offered by this kind of nation branding  
 109 in terms of increased international competitiveness for the cultural indus-  
 110 try or of increased soft power for the state, what is of particular interest  
 111 for the purposes of this chapter is the fact that a strategic alliance is taking  
 112 place under the slogan of “Cool Japan” between neo-conservative and  
 113 neo-liberal forces. This has contributed in the last decade to a nationwide  
 114 rhetoric on popular and youth cultures, mobilizing politics, bureaucracy,  
 115 industry, and mass media, in order to improve the nation’s image on the  
 116 international arena, to revitalize a stagnating economy and to find again  
 117 pride in its own culture.

## 118 POP NATIONALISM “FROM BELOW”: J-CULTURE 119 AND YOUTH PANIC

120 While “Cool Japan” is a concept mainly deployed in institutional discourse,  
 121 I describe as “pop nationalism from below” the cultural strategies more  
 122 directly related to the younger generations and how they experience the  
 123 nation. I use the concept to reflect on how Japan as an “imagined com-  
 124 munity” is being re-produced among those who have been acculturated  
 125 and socialized within the transmedial constellation of J-culture. Whereas  
 126 Cool Japan is an institutional response to the post-ideological instability  
 127 and traumatic economic slowdown induced by the end of the Cold War  
 128 and the post-bubble stagnation, pop nationalism from below stems from  
 129 internal changes, in particular in the sociocultural spheres.

130 On the one hand, we see the crisis of the “Japan, Inc.” model  
 131 (*kigyōshakai*) nurtured by the rapid post-war economic growth and  
 132 prosperity, and the consequent decline of the idea of a corporate nation,  
 133 symbolized by the social icons of the “white collar worker” (*sararīman*)  
 134 and the “full-time housewife” (*sengyōshufu*), working in concert to form

the basis of the collective myth of “one hundred million middle class” (135  
*ichioku sōchūryū*) of a homogenous nation. On the other hand, we see the 136  
 intensification of neo-liberal capitalism shaped by information technology, 137  
 advanced consumerism, and ludic entertainment, where the increasing 138  
 impoverishment of the middle classes and precarization of the labour 139  
 market have introduced the idea of an “unequal society” (*kakusa shakai*) 140  
 (Yoda and Harootunian 2006). 141

Within this scenario, the new generations who appear no longer willing 142  
 to contribute actively to the social reproduction anchored on the modern 143  
 paradigms of study, work, and family, have become the centre of public 144  
 preoccupation and alarmed discussions. The sources of this public con- 145  
 cern range from young people who avoid social interaction and seclude 146  
 themselves in their private rooms (*hikikomori*) to students refusing to go 147  
 to school (*futōkō*), young adults, particularly women, who postpone mar- 148  
 riage and continue to live in their parents’ home (*parasite single*); mascu- 149  
 linizing “carnivore women” who are assertively independent, dedicated to 150  
 work, and reject marriage and motherhood; feminized “herbivore men” 151  
 who are passive, don’t invest on their career, and don’t seek a partner 152  
 to marry; “free young workers” who seem to prefer self-realization to 153  
 stable employment (*freeter*); and young people who are “not in education, 154  
 employment, or training” (NEET), to name but the most significant. 155

Japanese mass media have fabricated in the last two decades an endless 156  
 list of such negative stereotypes, contributing to the social construction 157  
 of the alarming, disturbing, or simply weird nature of Japanese youth, 158  
 which was subsequently amplified by international journalism and schol- 159  
 arship. However, it can be argued that this public rhetoric, rather than 160  
 documenting a concrete shift towards asociality of the new generations, 161  
 represents instead a kind of social panic; it reveals the growing anxiety of 162  
 adult society about its future, which is further enhanced by their reliance 163  
 on obsolete categories in order to make sense of these ongoing transfor- 164  
 mations (Goodman et al. 2012). 165

It is in this wider context that the more specific intersection between 166  
 national identity, youth, and history is being negotiated and reconfigured. 167  
 On the institutional side, neo-conservative forces are intensifying their 168  
 efforts towards a more nationalistic and patriotic turn, including proposals 169  
 for revision of article 9, the “peace article” of the Japanese Constitution, 170  
 participation of the so-called “Self Defence forces” in international peace- 171  
 keeping missions, visits to the Yasukuni shrine by prime ministers and diet 172  
 cabinet members to commemorate Second World War soldiers, including 173

174 A-class war criminals, and new moral and patriotic guidelines for public  
 175 education, such as the formal recognition in 1999 of the national anthem  
 176 *Kimi ga yo* and the *Hi no Maru* national flag to be celebrated in public  
 177 schools, or the adoption of “patriotic” textbooks such as *Kokoro no nōto*  
 178 (Notes for the Heart) for primary and junior high school students pro-  
 179 moted by the Ministry of Education (MEXT) in 2002 (Rose 2006).

180 In addition, revisionist or negationist discourses on the nation’s mod-  
 181 ern history have intensified, especially in order to revise collective percep-  
 182 tions of the atrocities committed by the Japanese Imperial forces following  
 183 the invasion or occupation of neighbouring Asian countries during the  
 184 Pacific War. Among the most influential is the Japanese Society for History  
 185 Textbook Reforms (*Atarashii rekishi kyōkasho o tsukuru kai*) that was able  
 186 to obtain ministerial approval for its revisionist school textbook in 2002,  
 187 while more openly xenophobic statements, especially anti-Chinese and  
 188 anti-Korean ones, have become pervasive through online dissemination  
 189 on less institutional message boards, like “2channel” or on right-wing  
 190 websites (*netto uyoku*), such as “Sakura Channel” (Children and Textbook  
 191 Japan Network 21 2013).

192 It comes as no surprise that within these right-wing efforts, national  
 193 and international public opinion have become particularly sensitive to the  
 194 growing historical revisionism and negationism, and especially to popu-  
 195 lar publications such as manga targeting younger audiences. Yoshinori  
 196 Kobayashi is the author of the manga series *Gōmanism Sengen* (9 vols.,  
 197 1995–), including *Sensōron* (On War, 3 vols., 1998–2003), that ostensibly  
 198 aims at correcting the “distorted and masochistic vision” of Japanese mod-  
 199 ern history that Kobayashi argues was fabricated by the US Occupation  
 200 Forces and Japanese leftists. According to Kobayashi, current historiogra-  
 201 phy is a kind of brainwashing that has been imposed upon the Japanese  
 202 people by the US-sponsored individualistic values of anti-militaristic paci-  
 203 fism, human rights, equality, and feminism, becoming the main obstacle  
 204 for the development of patriotism and a healthy nationalism in post-war  
 205 Japan. His *mangaesque* revisionism relies on a selected historic documen-  
 206 tation, and advocates, among other things, denial of the “fabricated” his-  
 207 toriography on the Nanking Massacre or of the forced sexual exploitation  
 208 of “comfort women”; to contrast this, he urges to re-discover the heroic  
 209 self-sacrifice of kamikaze and other soldiers condemned by the Tokyo War  
 210 Crimes Tribunal, such as general Hideki Tōjō, who all fought inspired by  
 211 their love for their families, nation, and emperor in order to free Asia from  
 212 racist “white” colonialism.

Even more controversial has been the publication of the series *Manga Kenkanryū* (Hate the Korean Wave, 4 vols., 2005–2009) and *Manga Kenchūgokuryū* (Hate the Chinese Wave, 2008) by Yamano Sharin, that displays an explicit anti-Korean and anti-Chinese rhetoric. This xenophobic discourse strongly resonates with growing online hate-speech against Asian foreigners or *Zainichi* Koreans (ethnic Korean permanent residents in Japan), resulting in anti-immigrant groups rallying in the streets, such as the case of the Zaitokukai (Association of Citizens against the Special Privileges of the Zainichi). Yamano’s first manga series can be seen as a reaction to the “Korean Wave” (the rise in popularity of South Korean TV fiction and pop music) and to Japan–Korea disputes (Japan–Korea Annexation Treaty, Liancourt Rocks, comfort women, etc.), while the second manga addresses Japan–China disputes (anti-Japanese nationalism in China, the Nanking Massacre, Chinese food safety, etc.) (Liscutin 2009). Similar to Kobayashi’s *Gomanism* series, Yamano’s manga employs a first person narrative to explain to its young audience the “real” historical and political truth of the nation’s relationship with Korea and China by resorting to the same revisionist historiography.

Both authors had close relations with the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reforms, Kobayashi even being a founding member in 1996, while Yamano’s manga include revisionist essays of its academic affiliates. Both employ the manga in an instrumental way in order to popularize an ideological discourse with assertive and clear revisionist messages, by resorting to some extent to argumentative demonstration. However hard they try to employ the expressive, symbolic, and affective potentiality of the manga as medium, they do not exceed in a significant way other institutionalized political and historical commentary that is still confined by the communicative restraints of modernist, serious, and contents-based nationalism.

Both series represent the most successful examples of revisionist manga, as demonstrated by their good sales: 600,000 copies for Kobayashi’s first volume of the *Sensōron* trilogy and 450,000 copies for Yamano’s first volume of *Manga Kenkanryū*. However, two considerations should be made on those numbers. Firstly, while these sales are high in absolute terms, we must remember that manga bestseller status is usually measured in terms of millions of copies sold for a single volume, and of tenths or even hundreds of millions for a whole series; compared to those figures, neither manga series has been as outstanding a success as media coverage seemed to imply. Secondly, we must remember that the manga have necessarily

252 been purchased exclusively not only by supporters of historical revision-  
 253 ism but also by a large number of students, teachers, intellectuals, and  
 254 journalists, who were curious or alarmed by its controversial contents. In  
 255 other words, although the texts do represent the ideological perspectives  
 256 of its authors and have therefore spurred alarmism in public opinion,  
 257 the real effectiveness of this kind of *mangaesque* effort in popularizing  
 258 historical revisionism among a wider range of the younger audience is  
 259 questionable.

## 260 YOUTH PATRIOTISM AND NATIONALISM

261 In this battle to conquer the hearts and minds of the younger genera-  
 262 tions, are Japanese youth really becoming more patriotic or nationalistic?  
 263 If we pay attention to empirical findings offered by national surveys in  
 264 the past two decades, a rather ambivalent picture emerges. According to  
 265 these reports, from a cross-generational point of view, the average “strong  
 266 love for the nation” appears to have remained relatively stable, decreas-  
 267 ing from 52.8% in 1995 to 51.5% in 2005, with a low of 48.4% in 2000,  
 268 and increasing again from 51.5% in 2010 to 55.4% in 2015.<sup>1</sup> Very similar  
 269 findings are offered by Dentsu’s national surveys, Japan’s biggest PR and  
 270 advertisement company: a decrease in the number of interviewees answer-  
 271 ing that they are “proud of being Japanese” from 60.1% in 1995 to 57.4%  
 272 in 2005, and a new increase to 65.4% in 2010. More importantly, even the  
 273 supposedly higher rate of patriotism of more recent years is still very low  
 274 when compared to similar surveys on an international scale. According to  
 275 the World Values Survey 2010 and the European Values Study 2014 in  
 276 2010, 71.5% of Japanese prided themselves in their own nation, one of  
 277 the lowest results in the whole world, more precisely 56th out of 58 coun-  
 278 tries surveyed, far behind the US score of 91.4%, UK score of 91.1%, or  
 279 South Korea’s 90.8% and China’s 89.6%.<sup>2</sup>

280 Most importantly, besides the slight cross-generational changes and  
 281 comparatively low level of attachment to one’s nation, clearly constant  
 282 is the gap in patriotic sentiment between older and younger generations.  
 283 In 2015, the 55.4% statement of “strong love for the nation” drew an  
 284 approval rate of 69.6% rate among the population aged 70 and above, but  
 285 only 42.3% among respondents under 29.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in 2010, 65.4% of  
 286 respondents stating to be “proud of being Japanese” was averaged between  
 287 74.3% for respondents over 50 and 54.4% for respondents under 29. In



other words, not only patriotism appears to be inversely proportional to youth, but pride or love for the nation among the younger generation is significantly below the national average.<sup>4</sup> Finally, in order to complete the international perspective, it may be useful to compare survey results on “the willingness to fight for one’s own nation.” In this case, there is a slight increase in the decade 2000–2010, from 13.4% to 15.2%; but the 15.2% of respondents willing to fight for their own nation placed Japan as the most pacifist among 78 countries surveyed, with even greater differences compared to China’s 74.2% and South Korea’s 63%, or the USA’s 57.8% and UK’s 55.4% (World Values Survey 2014).<sup>5</sup>

It may be therefore useful to stress that the increased media visibility of neo-conservative initiatives by the government and of revisionist or xenophobic manga, movies, blogs, and so forth has not resulted, at least in the past two decades, into a significant increase of patriotism or nationalism among the wider population and, in particular, among the younger generations. To be more specific, if there has been an increase in patriotic pride or broader love for the Japanese nation, this process is not measurable and recognizable through the conventional ideological or political paradigms that have been employed to make sense of the modern “imagined community” of post-war Japan. On the contrary, I argue that most right-wing discourses and practices in contemporary Japan are best interpreted as a defensive reaction in the face of the younger generations who appear to be indifferent or reluctant to identify with a nation-state that offers them much less than what it gave their parents or grandparents. In this perspective, I see institutionalized nationalism and revisionist popular culture as associated with what has been defined as “therapeutic nationalism” (*iyashi no nashonarizumu*) or “anxious nationalism” (*fuangata nashonarizumu*), and as an expression of compensatory and defensive efforts in regard to the increasing uncertainty induced by neo-liberal capitalism, global competition, in particular with China and South Korea, flexibility or instability of the domestic labour market, and the transformation of Japan into a more fluid, consumerist, and ludic society (Oguma and Ueno 2003; Takahara 2006).

Psychiatrist Kayama Rika, one of the most important voices in the recent academic debate about Japanese youth nationalism, described it as a “petit nationalism” (*puchi nashonarizumu*) or “naïve nationalism” (*mujakina nashonarizumu*), to distinguish it from the more ostensibly ideological forms of the past. Phenomena like the renewed craze for the

326 national football team, the passionate participation in singing *Kimi ga yo*,  
 327 and the proliferation of subcultures interested in national history obvi-  
 328 ously express a rekindling of concern for something akin to the idea of  
 329 nation, but in Kayama's view such interest is rather dehistoricized and  
 330 depoliticized. Others, like sociologist Takahara Motoaki, integrate this  
 331 interpretation with the concept of "hobbyfied nationalism" (*shumika shita*  
 332 *nashonarizumu*), which they see as produced by a society where more  
 333 and more young people prefer to define themselves through new media,  
 334 consumption, and especially their hobbies, rather than through traditional  
 335 areas of socialization such as study, work, and family. Finally, cultural critic  
 336 Kitada Akihiro called the phenomenon a "funny nationalism" (*warau*  
 337 *nashonarizumu*), and saw its origin in a kind of "cynical romanticism"  
 338 (*shinikaruna romanshugi*), which is born of two seemingly opposite social  
 339 developments. On the one hand, cynical formalism, ironic detachment,  
 340 and indifference towards the values and meta-narratives of modernity,  
 341 which result in an obsession with formal aspects, and a lack of concern  
 342 for depth, substance, and historical consciousness. On the other hand, an  
 343 almost romantic emotional strain of intimacy, which leads to a search for  
 344 close relationship and a need to share with others. The two are complicit  
 345 in forming an image of the nation that is apparently formal and external-  
 346 ized, but at the same time becomes a simulacrum invested with a high  
 347 level of affect, which can stimulate new relationships and social networks.

#### 348 NEW SENSITIVITIES "FROM BELOW": *MOE*

349 Within the context of such increasingly publicized, hobbyfied, and ironic  
 350 acculturation and socialization, great attention has been paid to a distinc-  
 351 tive form of emotional investment which appears to be shared by many  
 352 emerging youth subcultures of the past decade. *Moe* is a neologism that is  
 353 difficult to translate; the term itself refers to a strong passion, and is linked  
 354 to the idea of germinating but also to that of caring for something or  
 355 somebody. Its contemporary use arose in the 1990s within the subculture  
 356 of male *otaku* (fans of video games, manga, anime, etc.), in the Akihabara  
 357 electronics shops district of Tokyo. It indicates a spontaneous transport, or  
 358 "burning passion," for Japanese fictional characters that are young, pure,  
 359 and sexy. The *kyara*, as these characters are called, are very *kawaii* (cute,  
 360 adorable, innocent), but at the same time have clear sexual connotations.  
 361 Some aspects of their recurring iconography are huge eyes without pupils,

soft contours and disproportionate heads, pale skin, cat ears, maid uniforms, sweet voices, and innocent personality. 362  
363

These elements can be split, recomposed, and multiplied in the trans- 364  
media galaxy of manga, anime, video games, and toys, to reconfigure new 365  
*kyara* characters that exist independently of any narrative or individual per- 366  
sonality. Narrative and personality, however, are essential features for the 367  
more conventional fictional characters, which therefore end up function- 368  
ing as hypotexts for the *kyara*: they are reduced to a repertoire from which 369  
to plunder to create parodies and unusual combinations (for a detailed dis- 370  
cussion of the shift from character to *kyara* in post-1990s manga, see Itō 371  
2005). The creation of *kyara* is therefore a form of bricolage that draws 372  
on a database made up of diverse and dynamic code elements. Similar to 373  
online browsing, *kyara* culture does not require a modern grand narrative, 374  
paradigm, or unified perspective to guide the choices, readings, and inter- 375  
pretations of its production–consumption in a cohesive fashion. Azuma 376  
Hiroki, the most influential theorist of otaku *moe*, has gone so far as to 377  
argue that this kind of “database consumption” is the key existential and 378  
epistemological feature of post-modern Japan (Azuma 2009). 379

This type of rhizomatous logic, which is reminiscent of the “cynical formalism” 380  
examined by Kitada, is supported by a “romantic” affect which 381  
is as intense as it is ambiguous. *Moe* in its original meaning within male 382  
otaku subcultures can be read as a combination of the *rorikon* (Lolita com- 383  
plex) and *bishōjo* (beautiful girls) tropes, but is made more complex by the 384  
ambivalent overlap of infantilized innocence and adult desire (Galbraith 385  
2009). It builds on the stimulation of polymorphic-idealized feelings of 386  
protectiveness towards cute characters, presented as infantilized and help- 387  
less, combined with attraction towards eroticized girls. 388

As it became more widespread, however, *moe* was also appropriated by 389  
women, especially by another emerging subculture known as *fujoshi* (liter- 390  
ally “rotten girls”). This is a self-deprecating term in use among teenagers 391  
and young women who read and write Boys Love manga and anime (sto- 392  
ries about erotic and romantic relationships between male gay men), and 393  
in particular a subgenre called *yaoi*, an acronym for “no climax, no end, no 394  
meaning” (*yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi*) which includes adaptations 395  
and parodies of original mainstream works, often without plot and sexu- 396  
ally explicit, bordering on pornography. These adaptations are produced 397  
and consumed by the millions of prosumers, mostly women, who make 398  
up the wide world of *dōjinshi*, the circuit of amateur manga, novels, and 399



The term Hetalia of the title is a combination of the slang neologism *hetare* (inept, pathetic wimp) and *Itaria* (Italy), and could be roughly translated as “Loser Italy.” The web manga contains a long series of very brief vignettes that describe the international relations between the three countries of the Axis Powers (Italy, Germany, and Japan) and the Allied countries (USA, Britain, France, Russia, China). Over the years, more than forty nations have become personified, almost entirely as a *shōnen*, pretty but incompetent boys. The setting is that of the First and Second World Wars, but also includes episodes of ancient history and some contemporary geopolitical events.

Of particular interest with regards to *moe* is the polymorphous configuration of the main characters. Italy is usually personified as a *shōnen* boy type, but also appears as a more adult and virile version (grandfather Roman Empire) and a *chibi* Italy version (premodern Italia), a feminized mini-Italy that is threatened by the attentions of the physically more aggressive and masculine *chibi* Austria (premodern Austria).

Hetalia is a highly successful intersection between the worlds of *otaku* and *fujoshi*, something that is particularly unusual in Japan given the clear gender segregation of the cultural industry and youth subcultures. The male author, Himaruya, explained that the creation of the work was inspired by otaku online discussions on the web forum 2channel that revolved around weapons, armies, and nations, from which it emerged that Italy was always the weakest, and therefore the natural “Loser.” However, he chose to personify the nations not in the form of cute eroticized girls, as one could expect in the male otaku context, but rather as pretty boys. Interestingly, his success was determined by female online fandom, especially after the appropriation, imitation, and adaptation in the field of *dōjinshi*, the vast sea of amateur Japanese manga, which ultimately supports the whole Japanese cultural industry.

In the world of female *dōjinshi*, especially among teenagers and young women, *Hetalia* emerged between 2009 and 2011 as the most adapted and parodied work, with almost 10,000 different titles, distributed through amateur circuits and at large exhibitions devoted entirely to it (“Hetalia Only Events”), in bookstores in Akihabara and in Ikebukuro’s Otome Road to (the centre of *fujoshi* subcultures) and through countless message boards on the internet.<sup>6</sup> The net was also the vehicle of the manga’s extraordinary popularity overseas, thanks to the work of amateur scanlation (online translation of *manga*) and fansubbing (amateur subti-

474 tling of *anime*) by non-Japanese fans, which were circulated even before  
 475 the official translations. Finally, the official English translations, published  
 476 at the end of 2010, made the first two volumes of *Hetalia* the bestselling  
 477 manga on the North American market.

478 This success may seem surprising considering that *Hetalia* was from the  
 479 beginning an amateur work, with no narrative complexity or aesthetic and  
 480 graphic sophistication. Much of its appeal is based on a combination of  
 481 comedy and male personification of nations, whose relations are mediated  
 482 by primordial impulses of attraction and repulsion, with admittedly hilari-  
 483 ous effects, and deployed in brief episodes inspired by real events in world  
 484 history. The Japanese readers of the original manga listed the following  
 485 key terms as their main objects of interest, in order of preference: 1. Love,  
 486 2. Nations, 3. Pleasure, 4. Moe, 5. Laughter.<sup>7</sup>

487 Within the context of *dōjinshi*, on the other hand, readers, authors,  
 488 and event organizers mention two main reasons for their attraction to the  
 489 comic. First, *Hetalia* and its *shōnen* characters extended the *moe* anthropo-  
 490 morphism of nations, so far confined to a male audience of *otaku* attracted  
 491 by *shōjo* personifications, to a female audience. Second, compared to other  
 492 original works adapted within *dōjinshi*, the stories and characters in *Hetalia*  
 493 are not bound by narrative structure, environment, or psychological char-  
 494 acterization. This opens up endless possibilities for adaptation and parody.  
 495 In other words, it stimulates a more intimate and affective imaginative  
 496 approach to the readers' favourite nations and pairings of characters.

#### 497 SEXUALIZING THE “WEST” × “JAPAN”

498 But what are the fantasies about nations that *Hetalia* helped spur within  
 499 amateur *dōjinshi*? They are typically structured according to the code of  
 500 sexualized fantasies of *yaoi*, a pivotal genre in *fujoshi* subcultures, which  
 501 was only hinted at in the original version but becomes central in the adap-  
 502 tations. The main dynamic of romantic and sexual relationships in *yaoi* is  
 503 declined according to the grammar of so-called *seme* and *uke*. While the  
 504 *seme* (literally the one who penetrates or attacks) is the dominant charac-  
 505 ter and is characterized as active, stronger, and more masculine, the *uke*  
 506 (literally the one who receives) is more submissive, passive, and feminine  
 507 (Hori 2009).

508 The most parodied character is Japan (Nihon in the original, Honda  
 509 Kiku in the parodies), portrayed as a *shōnen* but feminized as *uke* in a  
 510 plethora of different forms, from the most childish, to versions that

are merely *kawaii*, to more sexualized ones, bordering on paedophilia, and more adult androgynous ones. The most popular *seme* partners he is paired with in *dōjinshi* fairs dedicated specifically to the character of Nihon are all Caucasians characters representing the “white” nations of Euro-America; in order of preference, England, the USA, France, Prussia, Italy, and Russia (StadioYou 2010a, p. 1). The most commonly recurring pairings at other fairs are America (*seme*)/England (*uke*), England (*seme*)/Japan (*uke*), France (*seme*)/England (*uke*), and Germany (*seme*)/Italy (*uke*) (StadioYou 2010b: 1, 8).

The imagined geography underlying these inter-national couplings in *dōjinshi* are already explicitly represented in the original *Hetalia*-printed manga volumes, including world maps based on Eurocentric cartography (Himaruya 2010: 10–11). Besides Japan, almost all the main characters in the original manga and anime versions are cute and attractive white male Caucasians: Axis Powers Italy and Germany, together with Allied forces USA, England, France, Russia, and the “Five Nordic Nations” (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, Denmark). Most of the episodes are inspired by events that occurred between First and Second World Wars, and centre on intimate quarrels between European characters, the American character, and Japan. If we consider Japan’s international relations in this period, we find that most of the real historical and military events actually involved very dramatic and tragic contacts between Imperial Japan and its Asian neighbours. However, the series only includes a few Asian characters, of which the most important is China, with some independent episodes centring on the character of Korea in the web manga, while Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, and Vietnam appear mainly as sketch characters in Himaruya’s webpage and blog.

In addition to the textual and visual level, the modern cultural history of national identity as regards “Japan” versus the “West” is confirmed by readers’ preference for white Caucasian characters. A poll carried out by *Hetalia* publisher Gentōsha on readers’ most loved characters looks like a kind of *gaijin akogare* (fascination for western foreigners) ranking. In fact, the nineteen most popular characters after top-ranking Japan are England, Germany, Russia, Switzerland, Austria, Italy, Greece, USA, Sweden, with China as the only character from the ‘Rest’ of the world voted in 17th place.<sup>8</sup>

This kind of *mangaesque* attraction for the “white male” is further confirmed by the *dōjinshi* amateur scene. Maps of *Hetalia*-only conventions show how the distribution of tables and fan circles are structured

550 according to the BL or *yaoi* code of male-to-male *seme/uke* pairings. The  
 551 most popular is the America (*seme*)/England (*uke*) pairing, followed by  
 552 the England (*seme*)/Japan (*uke*) pairing, the Prussia (*uke*) corner, the  
 553 France (*seme*)/England (*uke*) pairing, and the Scandinavian characters  
 554 corner (StadioYou 2010b: 8). Japan is not only the most popular char-  
 555 acter among general readers of the original, but also very popular as a  
 556 completely feminized or infantilized male *uke* character on the *dōjinshi*  
 557 scene. Exhibition layouts of *Hetalia* conventions centred exclusively on  
 558 Japan as a *uke* character show that the most popular *seme* partners are all  
 559 white Caucasians: first England, followed by the USA, France, Prussia,  
 560 Italy, and Russia (StadioYou 2010a: 1).

561 I suggest that the internalization of a Eurocentric history and cartogra-  
 562 phy plays a prominent role in the popularity of *Hetalia* not only in Japan,  
 563 but also worldwide, especially in Euro-American contexts. Eurocentrism  
 564 and whiteness contribute to the immediate familiarity and direct appro-  
 565 priation of the *Hetalia* world and characters by Euro-American readers,  
 566 without any need for complex mediation imposed by displacing differ-  
 567 ence or otherness. This familiarity is further enhanced by the specific  
 568 stereotyping of characters according to modern clichés of the so-called  
 569 national characters, adopted by the author Himaruya in response to the  
 570 ethnic jokes common among his American friends when he was studying  
 571 in New York. For instance, Japan is shy, well mannered, loves the changes  
 572 of seasons and technological gadgets, but is clumsy in communicating his  
 573 feelings and thoughts. On the contrary, Italy is a light-hearted, idler, and  
 574 pizza–pasta–music-loving coward. America is an energetic, self-confident,  
 575 always hamburger-eating character who loves to play hero, but is supersti-  
 576 tious and afraid of supernatural beings.<sup>9</sup>

577 In addition to its wider Eurocentric cartography and fascination  
 578 for whiteness, it is also important to pay attention to more position-  
 579 ally specific differences introduced by *Hetalia*'s recontextualization of  
 580 Occidentalism, and to acknowledge other intersections related to more  
 581 ambivalent spheres of identification and nuanced modes of appropri-  
 582 ation. According to the aforementioned Gentōsha survey, “nation” is the  
 583 second most appreciated aspect among general readers.<sup>10</sup> Nations are  
 584 anthropomorphized as *shōnen* (cute boys) characters, and, in the absence  
 585 of a supporting narrative and graphic sophistication, are condensed as  
 586 the exclusive focus of the short episodes. This means that, on the one  
 587 hand, Eurocentrism, whiteness, history, and geopolitical asymmetry are  
 588 clarified and essentialized, considering the wide use of stereotypes related



to nation, ethnicity, and language, and that characters, at least in the original, are only known by nation names (“Japan,” “Italy,” “Germany,” etc.).<sup>11</sup> Entire nations are personified through a unified human body, personality, and name, contributing to the erasure of internal diversities and historical complexities. For instance, Occidentalism is enhanced by personifying USA, Russia, or Germany as strong, blond-haired, active characters, while self-Orientalism is reaffirmed by Japan as a shy, passive, insecure, and feminized boy or kid.

At the same time, it is the very anthropomorphic and caricaturized incarnation of modern nationhood, as seen in the insistence upon childish and intimate male-to-male relations, that introduces a fundamental ironic slippage to conventional images of world history, international relations, and national politics. This contributes to exhilarating effects, and stimulates a polymorphous range of symbolic associations and emotions, both of which have been crucial in mobilizing such widespread readings of the original manga and so many parodies among amateur *prosumers*.

#### DOUBLE PARODY OF THE “WEST”

As far as the pleasure of parodying *Hetalia* is concerned, it is important to stress that the original is not a mere personification of Euro-American nations or of Japan, but already a parody of them: a pastiche, which may oscillate between an homage to Eurocentric history and fascination for whiteness, and a mocking caricature of their national stereotypes and their infantile behaviour. In this regard, Occidentalism functions in the original as a kind of discursive hypotext. The hegemonic *grand narrative*, so familiar in both Euro-American and Japanese contexts, is transfigured by resorting to an effective bricolage of highly popular icons, borrowed strategically by both male-oriented *otaku* and female-oriented *fujoshi* subcultures.<sup>12</sup>

Boys Love and *yaoi* fantasies, on the other hand, are dominant in *dōjinshi* works, displaying in many cases a male homoerotic and very sexually explicit, often pornographic version of Occidentalism. Anthropomorphized Eurocentrism and geopolitical hierarchy may be further enhanced due to the *yaoi* code of *seme* and *uke*, focusing on a far more restricted relation and narrative than in the original. This makes the hierarchic and dualistic dialectic of identity and otherness imposed upon historical relations between nations even more evident. As Nagaike Kazumi has highlighted in her study on the racialized tex-

626 tuality of Boys Love magazines, this hierarchic dialectic emerges in the  
 627 “masculine” superiorization of the Euro-American other as *seme*, the  
 628 “feminine” inferiorization of the Japanese self as *uke*, and the exotic  
 629 Orientalization or erasure of the “Rest” of the world (Nagaike 2009).

630 However, unlike commercial Boys Love works, these *dōjinshi* are  
 631 amateur works, parodies of the original *Hetalia*. If Himaruya’s work  
 632 is already itself a parody of the hegemonic hypotext of Occidentalism,  
 633 then these *dōjinshi* are a parody of a parody. Due to the different posi-  
 634 tionality of the mostly female *dōjinshi* authors living in Japan, the dis-  
 635 cursive distance concerning Occidentalism as well as Euro-American  
 636 material referentiality is therefore further enhanced and diluted. When  
 637 Himaruya composed *Hetalia*, he was living in New York, and he was  
 638 mostly inspired by Euro-American friends and students in modelling his  
 639 manga characters. *Dōjinshi* authors, on the other hand, live in Japan, and  
 640 their recontextualization is shaped both by different gendered positions  
 641 and by referentiality to different people, and to different material, social,  
 642 and institutional conditions.

643 According to my interviews, *dōjinshi* authors and readers are actu-  
 644 ally not very fond of Euro-American history and nations, whiteness, the  
 645 original work and its author, or male homosexuality. That is, *Hetalia*  
 646 authors and cosplayers are not necessarily interested in foreign countries  
 647 or concrete persons per se. Most of them have never been to Europe  
 648 or North America, have never met a Caucasian boy or man, and do not  
 649 necessarily express interest in doing so. Instead, they focus on how to  
 650 use these settings and icons according to the visual grammar and estab-  
 651 lished conventions of the Boys Love and *yaoi* genres in order to share  
 652 and enjoy them with other fans. Much time may be invested in study-  
 653 ing the preferred nation character’s history, language, customs, dress,  
 654 food, and architecture, all in the most minute detail. This includes  
 655 bibliographic research, online or in libraries, and in some cases even  
 656 short trips to European cities, which may become on their return the  
 657 setting for their own *dōjinshi* adaptation. Interestingly, this acquired  
 658 knowledge can also be used to legitimate what might be perceived as  
 659 an embarrassing hobby. What matters to these fans are the specific and  
 660 concrete needs of a teenager or young woman in relation to the gen-  
 661 dered and sexualized norms informing external relations with other  
 662 teenagers, men, and adults, as well as their internal relations with the  
 663 *dōjinshi* or *Hetalia* fandom.<sup>13</sup>

I must specify here that not all female *dōjinshi* fall within the genres of “pornographic” (for 18+ readers) and “sex” (for 15+ readers), although in the case of the adaptations *Hetalia* those are prevalent. What they all have in common however is the grammar of *yaoi* “sexualised parody.” The text must be a *parody*, which requires the existence of an original or hypotext in which the characters are male (in this case the original manga by Himaruya); and *sexualized*, because the adaptation is done according to a more or less eroticized cross-gender logic, mostly male gay, sometimes queer or paedophile, in many cases just hinted at, in others explicit and highly detailed.

### CONCLUSIONS: JAPAN AND “POST”-JAPAN 674

Returning to the initial question, what can *Hetalia* and its extraordinary success in the field of women’s subcultures reveal about the relationship between national identity, history, and young people? As with any multimedia platform, that cannot be reduced to a single work and reception, it would be misguided to attempt a single unified interpretation. This is even more true for the media mix started by *Hetalia*, which, together with its reverberation in the amateur sphere, was able in a few years to generate a wide range of diverse and conflicting reactions.

On the one hand, the Japanese fandom has tried to limit its consumption within the tested channels of hobbified, private intimacy, typical of the female *dōjinshi* circuit. On the other hand, its online visibility has inadvertently exposed the world of *Hetalia* to a series of reactions, including those of the indignant male netizens of South Korea who objected to the stereotypical representation of the character Korea. This led in 2009 to a petition to Parliament to stop (successfully) the announced television broadcasting of the *anime* version of *Hetalia*, on grounds of “criminal discrimination” against the Korean people.<sup>14</sup> Such unexpected public resonance, amplified by the national and international media, further contributed to the spread of the manga in the international manga and anime fandom community, originating new accusations from within the fandom, especially against its superficial discussion of world history and its appropriation of serious history in the mode of *yaoi*, finally mobilizing the attention of scholars and academics.

It would be easy to conclude with a relativist view, intent on legitimizing any single interpretation as attributable to specific locations, often irreconcilable: Japanese fangirl, anti-Japanese Asian, post-feminist

701 or post-modern academic, international fandom, and so on. There is  
 702 no doubt however that *Hetalia* exemplifies a new phase of the “cyni-  
 703 cal romanticism” theorized by Kitada as the cypher of contemporary  
 704 Japanese youth nationalism. The modern paradigms of “White West,”  
 705 “Nation,” “History,” but also those of “love” and “(hetero) sexual cou-  
 706 ple” continue to provide essential reference points for identity formation,  
 707 although as transfigured surrogates. They are not, however, as Kitada  
 708 rightly suggests, only empty and formal simulacra, but representations  
 709 and practices that require, and induce, a high level of emotional invest-  
 710 ment. In the case of *Hetalia*, these translate into an idea of nation and  
 711 history that is further dispersed in the already globalized Japanese media  
 712 mix, and, at the same time, becomes even more intense and passionate  
 713 because of the mobilization of *moe* biopolitics that is able to activate the  
 714 most intimate aspects of parodic, polymorphous, and eroticized pleasure.

715 In conclusion, lest we overstate the impact of *Hetalia*, we must remem-  
 716 ber that it is a subcultural phenomenon; both the original versions and  
 717 the thousands of adaptations are essentially parodies of modern ideas of  
 718 Nation and History that are still very present in the institutional arena.  
 719 However, the parodies are characterized by an ambivalent status, a para-  
 720 doxical double bind with their hypotextual original that sees them engage  
 721 in both repetitive confirmation and subversive critique. And this concerns  
 722 youth subcultures all over the world in their attempt to relate to their past  
 723 and present societies:

724 As the postwar finally “ends”, the task in Japan and elsewhere is therefore  
 725 to reconceive the modern, which is less an idea than an episteme, less a con-  
 726 cept than a condition [...]. We all seem to suffer from a kind of conceptual  
 727 insufficiency, in that we are facing the twenty-first century armed with the  
 728 notions of the nineteenth. We are still moderns, which explain our obses-  
 729 sion with “ends” and the caesura of 1989, but ours is a “nontopia”: we are  
 730 without a vision of the future. The millennial challenge therefore is less a  
 731 question of ends or of overcoming the modern than to avoid being over-  
 732 come *by* the modern and drifting visionless into the next millennium. And  
 733 this problem is not Japan’s alone, but all of ours (Gluck 2003: 312)

[AU4]

## NOTES

- 734
1. For the full results of the survey, see <http://survey.gov-online.go.jp/h26/h26-shakai/zh/z02.html>. Accessed June 10, 2015. 735
  2. For the combined results and analysis of these two surveys, see <http://www2.ttcn.ne.jp/honkawa/9465.html>. Accessed June 10, 2015. 736
  3. <http://survey.gov-online.go.jp/h26/h26-shakai/zh/z01.html>. Accessed June 10, 2015. 737
  4. In addition to the generational gap of patriotism, gendered differences are also an important variable. According to the 2015 Ministry survey, 60.9% of male respondents express “strong love for the nation,” in contrast to 50.6% of female respondents. 738
  5. <http://www2.ttcn.ne.jp/honkawa/5223.html> 739
  6. Yahoo Auctions Japan online lists 8443 Japanese *dōjinshi* and 2565 cosplay items related to *Hetalia* [http://auctions.search.yahoo.co.jp/search?p=percentA5percentD8percentA5percentBFpercentA5percentEApercentA5percentA2&aucatt=0&tab\\_ex=commerce&ei=euc-jp](http://auctions.search.yahoo.co.jp/search?p=percentA5percentD8percentA5percentBFpercentA5percentEApercentA5percentA2&aucatt=0&tab_ex=commerce&ei=euc-jp). Accessed June 10, 2015. 740
  7. Survey conducted in 2010 by Gentōsha Comics: [www.gentosha-comics.net/hetalia/enquete/index.html](http://www.gentosha-comics.net/hetalia/enquete/index.html). Accessed June 10, 2015. 741
  8. [www.gentosha-comics.net/hetalia/enquete/index\\_02.html](http://www.gentosha-comics.net/hetalia/enquete/index_02.html). Accessed June 10, 2015. 742
  9. For a detailed description of all character nations, see [http://hetalia.wikia.com/wiki/List\\_of\\_Axis\\_Powers\\_Hetalia\\_characters](http://hetalia.wikia.com/wiki/List_of_Axis_Powers_Hetalia_characters). Accessed June 10, 2015. 743
  10. [www.gentosha-comics.net/hetalia/enquete/index.html](http://www.gentosha-comics.net/hetalia/enquete/index.html). Accessed June 10, 2015. 744
  11. In contrast to the original manga and anime series, personal names suggested by Himaruya himself are widely used in *dōjinshi* adaptations (Italy = Feliciano Vargas; Germany = Ludwig; Japan = Kiku Honda; USA = Alfred F. Jones, etc.). 745
  12. The sexualized and male homoerotic overtones of Himaruya’s *Hetalia* characters remain mostly implicit, allowing for appreciation by a wider readership, who are not interested or even detest *yaoi*-inspired homoerotic and sexually explicit representations. 746
  13. Among fandom in Italy, these needs and problems are very similar, attesting to the globalized structure of heteronormative and patriarchal norms, as well as the potential of *Hetalia* and *yaoi* fantasy to cope with them and to stimulate liberating pleasures, expressions, and practices. What differs is the specific way of expressing and performing the *Hetalia* world. Compared to Japan, there is less manga parody and much more emphasis on collective cosplaying and fan fiction, as well as some involvement of male manga/anime 747
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- 775 fans. For a public, collective, and joyous performance, see the *Hetalia* Cosplay  
 776 Group at Rimini Comics 2010 ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-fLxG98T4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-fLxG98T4)).  
 777 14. The news can be seen online at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=yo\\_btde9-kM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yo_btde9-kM).  
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