

# Yaoi as Fanwork:

## *Cultural Appropriation in Modern Japanese Culture*

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### Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the generation of Yaoi fanwork, one of the forms of cultural appropriation in modern Japanese culture. The concept of appropriation as used in this paper refers to a cultural practice of the people belonging to a subculture, who redefine the dominant meaning to suit their own purpose. Yaoi fanwork is defined as a female-oriented production that focuses on the depiction of male bonding in popular media and develops it into a romantic relationship. Through this cultural practice, female fans adapt and appropriate dominant texts. This paper investigates how Yaoi fans subvert authorship and canonicity by examining self-published works. Thus, it is concluded that Yaoi fanwork is an alternate form of creativity in modern popular culture.

**Keywords:** *Popular Culture, Cultural Appropriation, Manga, Yaoi Studies.*

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## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the generation of Yaoi fanwork and to examine the cultural impact of these alternative texts on modern Japanese culture. The paper focuses on Yaoi adaptations of manga (Japanese comics). Yaoi is a female-oriented media, comprised mostly of manga and novels that deal with romantic relationships between male characters. It has become highly popular around the world and created an enormous fandom (fan community) among females. It has also attracted academic interest in the fields of feminism, gender studies, and psychoanalysis since the mid-1980s. Previous studies have mainly focused on the sociological or psychological meanings of Yaoi for female audiences and connected these to social institutions or feminine psychology. They have frequently discussed the reasons why (heterosexual) women find male love stories engrossing: Females are liberated from the oppressive gender–power relationship, and thus can safely enjoy the story of an equal relationship (See Ueno 1998, Nobi 2003).<sup>1</sup> Few studies, however, have thus far examined the textual mechanisms themselves. Analyzing Yaoi novels from the viewpoint of literary studies, Yōko Nagakubo protests that Yaoi studies should focus on not only “the outside of text” but also on its content (Nagakubo 2005, 2). This paper aims to investigate how Yaoi fanwork appropriates large popular cultures and generates alternative meanings.

It focuses on Yaoi fanwork, especially *dōjinshi* (self-published work). Yaoi is generally classified into two genres: original work and fanwork. The former is commercial or self-published work, which focuses on romantic and/or erotic relationships between males.<sup>2</sup> The latter is produced by amateur fans. It borrows male characters from popular media and develops their male bonding into a romantic relationship. It is distributed as *dōjinshi* or exhibited on websites, and functions as a communication tool for the fans. *Dōjinshi* is regarded as a materialized a personal interpretation of the source text by fans.

First, an brief examination and survey the history of Yaoi followed by an analysis of how female fans develop their interpretations of the source text by examining the conventions of Yaoi will be presented. Third, details demonstrating how they appropriate the existing text in the process of creating fanwork. The concept of “appropriation” mentioned here refers to a cultural practice, mostly by oppressed people, that redefines the dominant meaning by displacing the cultural element in the social system into another context for their own purposes.<sup>3</sup>

## The Brief History

Yaoi is currently defined as a product, including both original work and fanwork, which focuses on human and/or romantic relationships between male characters by and for females. The original usage, however, was rather different. Yaoi has

<sup>1</sup> Citations from Japanese works have been translated in English by the author. Their titles have been romanized, translated into English, and indicated within parenthesis.

<sup>2</sup> The first successful commercial publication of Yaoi was in a magazine entitled *June*, which was launched in 1978. Boys' Love (BL) was established as a new genre of Yaoi in the early 1990s.

<sup>3</sup> The term has been used in anthropology, cultural studies, and other related fields to describe contemporary social resistance.

being developing among female manga fans since the late 1970s. The term “Yaoi” was first used by a group of amateur female manga artists. In Japanese, Yaoi is an acronym for “**Y**ama nashi, **O**chi nashi, **I**mi nashi” (No Climax, No Resolution, and No Meaning). It was originally employed to criticize stories that were considered to lack any storytelling technique. Akiko Hatsu, one of the proponents of the term, describes it as follows: “As the editors strictly controlled the composition of stories by artists, we always considered climax, resolution, and meaning in our works” (Hatsu 1993, 136).

The subjects of the early Yaoi works were clearly influenced by the manga artist group Niju-yonen Gumi (the Year 24 Shōwa Era Group), which consists of professional female artists. The group mainly published love stories about beautiful boys in shōjo manga (comics for girls). Eiji Ōtsuka argues that the works reflect the problem of how the female authors came to terms with their femininity and their feminine bodies as sexual objects (Ōtsuka 2001, 78-79). The younger generation, which was influenced by them, also tried to create male-male love stories. They were, however, rarely accepted in commercial manga magazines at that time. Hatsu states that they “could publish them only in *dōjinshi*” (Hatsu, op. cit.). Thus, as a genre, Yaoi were male-male stories composed by young females and brought out in self-publishing media. As Yaoi was divided into various subgenres throughout the 1980s, it gradually lost its negative denotation.

Yaoi fanwork is now defined as a product that deliberately interprets the relationship between male characters in the source text as a romantic one. The source text is selected from different popular media such as manga, anime (Japanese animation), video games, novels, and movies. Yaoi adaptations became popular in the 1980s, in the background of the Japanese bubble economy. The Comic Market (the Comiket) is the largest manga convention in the world. The first Comiket was held in 1975 by manga fans; it is now a three-day long event that is held twice a year at the Tokyo Big Sight venue. It attracts 35,000 *sākuru* (circles), retailers of fanworks, and approximately 500,000 attendees. According to the research by Akashi Sugimoto in 2004, 71.2% of the circle participants in the Comiket are females (Sugimoto 2005, 290). The Comiket is primarily a place to distribute or sell not only fanwork but also original work by amateur artists. However, fanwork, especially Yaoi fanwork, has a major presence today (Ibid., 296-297).

## How Do Female Fans Interpret and Appropriately the Source Text in Yaoi?

### *a. Adapting the Preferred Meaning*

It is significant that Yaoi fans find a social bond between male characters in the source text. Consider, for example, *Katekyō Hitman Reborn!* (Reborn!) by Akira Amano. *Reborn!* is one of the popular shōnen manga (comics for boys). It has been serialized since May 2004 as *Shūkan Shōnen Janpu* (Weekly Shōnen Jump), one of the most popular weekly boy-oriented manga anthologies. Today, it has generated an enormous fandom, consisting mostly of Yaoi fans. The Comic Market Catalog, which includes the list of participating circles and general information for attendees, indicates an increase in the number of *Reborn!* fan circles since its anime adaptation

premiered in December 2006. Chart 1 shows the changes in *Reborn!* fan circles in the Comiket from December 2004 to December 2008 (Comic Market Junbikai, 2004-2008).

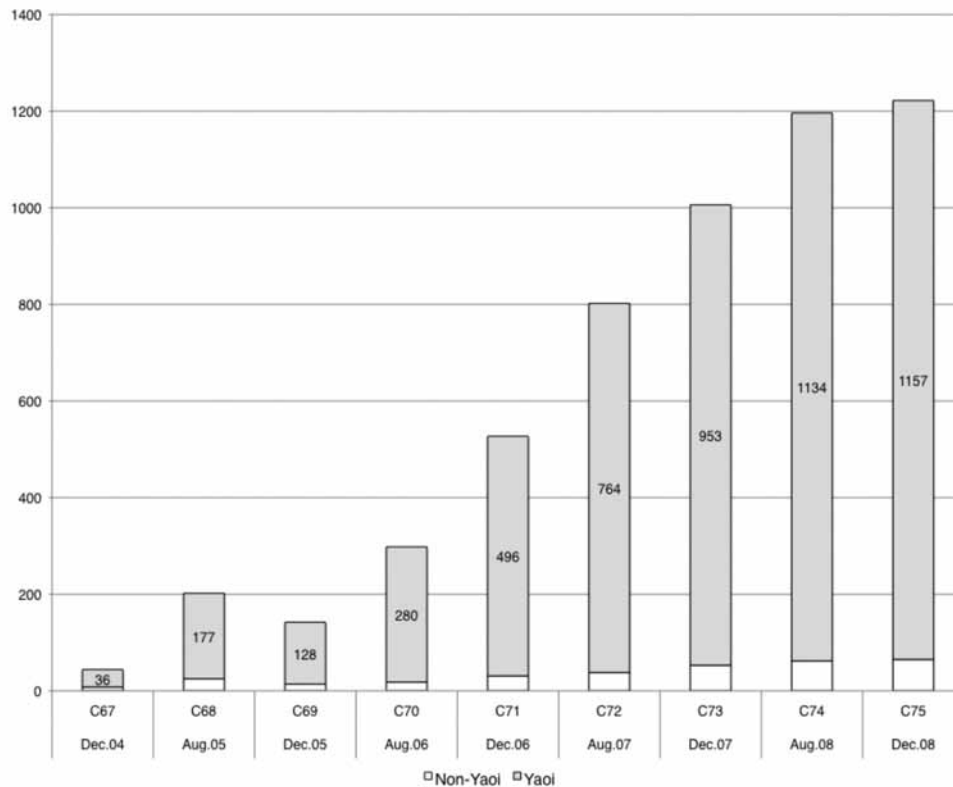


Chart 1: Changes in *Reborn!* fan circles in the Comiket from December 2004 to December 2008.

It indicates that Yaoi circles account for an average of 91.9% of all the *Reborn!* fan circles.<sup>4</sup> Examining this in detail, the male-homosociality foregrounded in the source text tends to be preferred as the main subject of Yaoi fanwork. More specifically, the fellowship, rivalry, and the master/disciple relationship in the source text are popular in the Yaoi adaptations of *Reborn!*. Mari Nishimura points out that a source text should fulfill three conditions in order to be suitable for adaptation as Yaoi fanwork: a bond between male characters, rivalry, and a sense of isolation from private domains (Nishimura 2002, 75). Nishimura also maintains that the popular source texts of Yaoi fanwork often possess these characteristics (Ibid.).

Relationships in Yaoi fanwork are based on *kappuringu* (coupling). Coupling, the fundamental convention in Yaoi, refers to a pairing that indicates a romantic relationship. The two participants in the relationship are referred as *seme* (the top, the penetrator) and *uke* (the bottom, the penetrated), and this role is generally fixed. Nobita Nobi, a Yaoi fan artist, states that the main thesis of Yaoi fanworks is the narrative of the fans' favorite coupling (Nobi 2003, 233-234). Yaoi fans find

<sup>4</sup> The criteria for identifying a Yaoi circle are the following:

- (i) Two male characters and/or male-kappuring (coupling: mentioned later) are drawn in *sākuru katto* (circles cut: the information of participating circles with pictures drawn by sellers).
- (ii) Male character is referred to as *uke* (the bottom in coupling) in circle cut.
- (iii) Considering the custom of arranging circles at the convention layout, even if a circle has no information of (i) or (ii), the circle surrounded by two Yaoi circles is identified as Yaoi.

some romantic and/or erotic factors in the original homosocial relationship and develop another narrative according to the code of coupling. Yaoi fanwork adapts, redefines, and manipulates the preferred meaning of the source text by means of conventions established by fans.

However, female fans are not the primary target of the market strategy of source texts such as *Reborn!*. Male or boy-oriented media are often selected as the source text of Yaoi. Past Comikets indicate that the source text, having an enormous Yaoi fandom, tends to belong to young male-oriented media such as *Kyaputen Tsubasa* (*Captain Tsubasa*), *Suramu Danku* (*Slam Dunk*), and *Tenisu No Ōjisama* (*The Prince of Tennis*) (Comic Market Junbikai, 2005a). In this sense, female fans subvert the dominant meaning system from the viewpoint of the marginalized reader through Yaoi adaptations.

*b. Subverting the Boundaries between the Canon and Fanwork*

Female fans not only adapt the relationship between male characters in their interpretations, but also appropriate the source text by actively creating an alternative text. Yaoi fans, which are not always the authors' ideal readers, appropriate the source text as their own. This appropriation is practiced through the physical activity, drawing. Consider, for example, a fan artist's remark. Yun Kōga, who began her career as a Yaoi fan artist in the 1980s and is now well known as a professional manga artist, says that she derives an egotistical sense of satisfaction by assimilating the source text and drawing fan works (Yonezawa.ed. 2001, 81). Kōga's remark shows that there is a complicated distance between the source text and fanwork. The objective of Yaoi fanwork seems to be the assimilation of the source text rather than "repetition with critical distance" (Hutcheon 2000, 18). An interpretation as a passive act is linked to a drawing as an active act in the process of creating Yaoi fanwork. Female fans, readers of the source text, become the authors of fan texts through this process. These multiple authors collectively refer to both the source text and fan texts as many variations in Yaoi fandom. Thus, the source text is accessible to female fans as an open resource; they generate personal interpolations by referring to the interrelated texts. Fans read the source text and the fan texts, and then create new ideal versions of the stories; these reinterpretations are then read by other fans. Thus, fan texts propagate themselves through an interconnected network. This intertextual interaction indicates the constant open-cycle relation between reception and reproduction (see *Chart 2*).

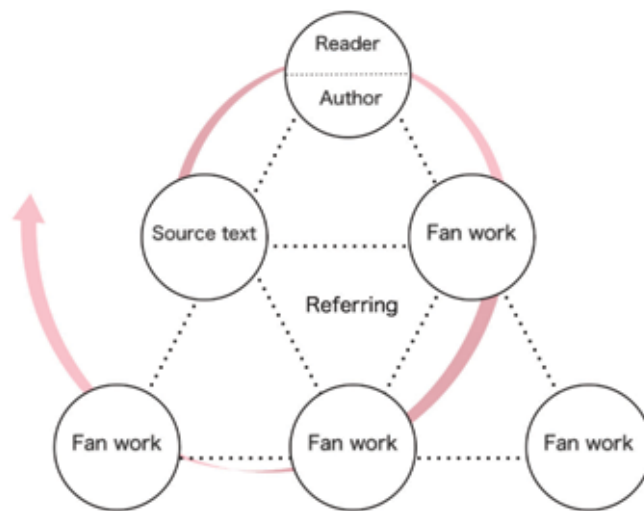


Chart 2: The open-circulation of generating narratives in Yaoi fandom.

This cultural practice raises various social issues: copyright infringement, opposition to Yaoi fanwork that poaches the canonical writings, criticism of Yaoi for not being a truly creative act, and so on. There is space here only to discuss the reaction of authors and critics to Yaoi fanwork. For example, an editor has expressed his disgust toward the movement of Yaoi fanwork based on *Captain Tsubasa* as follows: “Fanworks of *Captain Tsubasa* seem to be highly popular among young females, but the stories are terrible.... Hyu-ga and Wakashimadu [author’s note: male characters of CT] are angered by it, exclaiming ‘We are not queer!’” (Shūeisha 1987). The publisher’s remark suggests that he objects to the violation of the canon in Yaoi fanwork, rather than copyright infringement. Related to this issue, a critic has stated that Yaoi fanwork is “not a parody”: “Female fans are not interested in parody. They only poach characters and the basic settings of the source text to create homosexual stories” (Ajima 2004, 104). The problem here is neither the representation of homosexual relationships in Yaoi, nor whether or not they may be called parodies, instead, it is the subversion of the distance between the canon and the derivative text.

## Conclusion

The main points in this paper can be summarized as follows: First, appropriation in Yaoi fanwork refers to the act of adapting the preferred meaning of the source text. Such appropriation focuses on the original homosocial relationship and develops another narrative through an alternative interpretation of this relationship. Second, Yaoi fanwork also appropriates the source text itself through the drawing of fan texts that assimilate it. The process of the creation of fanwork opens up the possibility of subverting the distance between the canonical and the derivative text. Third, the fan community participates in this process. Yaoi fans read both fan texts and the source text; they then collectively and constantly produce their own ideal versions of the story of two male characters. The source text is relativized as one of the variations in Yaoi fandom. Thus, Yaoi fanwork calls into question the

boundaries we unconsciously take for granted, such as “the canon/the derivative text,” “the author/the reader,” and “mainstream/heterodox.” The appropriation in Yaoi fanwork not only reflects a significant movement against the dominant culture by marginalized females, but also prompts discussion on the boundaries between class structures. Yaoi fanwork is an alternative form of creativity in modern society.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The issue of copyright infringement and the mechanism of desire among Yaoi fans (why their interpretations are focused on male relationship) are still to be discussed in further research.

<sup>6</sup> The references written in Japanese have been romanized, translated into English, and indicated within parenthesis by the author.

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