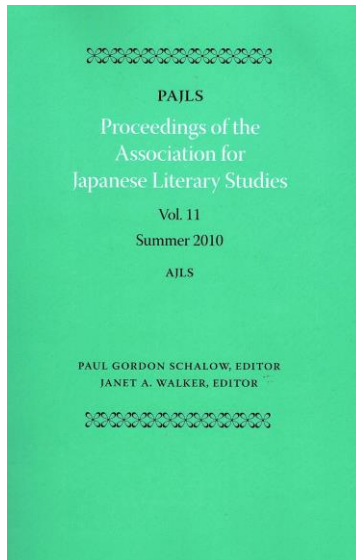


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# Cultural Politics of the “Girl” in Postbubble Japan

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The research presented here is part of a larger project on postbubble culture and national identity. As part of this project, I have begun working on young Japanese women writers, such as Kanehara Hitomi 金原ひとみ, who won the Akutagawa Prize 芥川賞 to tremendous fanfare in 2004 with *Hebi ni piasu* 蛇にピアス; her co-winner, Wataya Risa 綿矢りさ; and the 2007 winner, Aoyama Nanae 青山七恵. This research is in the exploratory stage, and below I discuss new developments and directions.

The predominance of young women as decorated writers of pure literature in recent years echoes the emergence of “girl power” in both elite and popular culture of postbubble Japan (1990s–2000s). Despite the excitement this has generated, questions remain as to the efficacy of girl power beyond the limits of commodity culture, as scholars of photography, manga, anime, fashion, and the beauty industry lament the lack of agency on the part of the girl to change gender and power structures.

I have been intrigued by the similarities in the discourse surrounding women, and their power, in these different cultural fields, and have begun wondering how we can gauge their power, be it real or symbolic. We can ask how the lens of “girl” in postbubble Japanese literary and visual culture challenges both our inherited set of questions about the construction of social power and political engagement, and our attempts to redefine politicality in recessionary postbubble Japan. In gauging power, we can look to the frameworks of social and political engagement inherited from the postwar rise of the left and the expression of high culture. Yet the old left has seemingly lost its voice and stature in this new age of postbubble, postmodern cultural politics, which has reconfigured the relationship between the intellectual and the masses. We have to ask if the postwar model of public intellectual, as a politically engaged social critic, is still a valid one, especially in a recessionary era dominated by conservative, some would say nationalist, policies and politics.

I am interested in evaluating the discourse on the girl in light of the socio-economic and cultural changes in postbubble, recessionary Japan, changes that present a different set of conditions than existed during the bubble economy years. I have been influenced by new research addressing similarities between the girl and the freeter フリーター, specifically recent work on this new economic class as *the* site of political awareness in twenty-first-century Japan. In a recent article, Mark Driscoll labels Kanehara a “good freeter” and her book *Hebi ni piasu*, “reality fiction,” arguing that it sold well because it was a reaffirmation of the neo-liberal and neoconservative policies regarding the freeter.<sup>1</sup> Anne Allison has also been working on the freeter, specifically on the contradictions between the lauded national youth brand of Japan’s “Gross National Cool” (GNC), and the condemnation of those same youth as unproductive failures.<sup>2</sup>

Before talking about the postbubble era, I briefly consider the ways in which the discourse on the girl has changed over the past couple of decades. An example can be found in an article about the 2004 Akutagawa Prize recipients in the *Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 日本経済新聞 that starts with the following quote: “Besides all the attention give to their youth, what’s going on here that’s new?” (*nenrei bakkari ga chūmoku sare, doko ga atarashii no ka, wakaranai* 年齢ばかりが注目され、どこが新しいのか、わからない).<sup>3</sup> This comment points not only to questions about the content of the novels written by the two young female recipients in 2004, Kanehara Hitomi and Wataya Risa, but also to questions about the dominance of women in Japanese culture since the bubble economy.

Certainly “girls” have been in the public eye since the 1980s and earlier. During the bubble economy, the *shōjo* 少女 was emblematic of a passive, narcissistic, empty, infantilized consumerist society. Anthropologist and cultural critic Ōtsuka Eiji 大塚英志 famously remarked in 1991 that the Japanese had become *shōjo* in their desire for the consumption of “things” that are “only signs without any direct utility in life,” “signs without substance.”<sup>4</sup> Ōtsuka was one of a number of influential male critics who decried the “girlification” of Japan. Yet at the same time, other critics countered that the nonproductive space of the *shōjo* could be a site of freedom, transformation, and resistance.<sup>5</sup>

The discourse continues to be conflicted as we move into the postbubble era. Laura Miller argues in *Beauty Up* that: “Japan’s girl-culture beauty rebellion is contained within a sociocultural context that affords little real social power. Even so, they are subverting gender norms, if only within the restricted level of the symbolic.” “While this allows a modicum of autonomy or serves a minor ritual

<sup>1</sup>Driscoll 2007.

<sup>2</sup>Allison 2009. The term “Gross National Cool” is from McGray 2002.

<sup>3</sup>Nihon Keizai Shinbun 2004, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup>Quoted in Orbaugh 2003, p. 204.

<sup>5</sup>Orbaugh 2003, pp. 204–6. Orbaugh cites critics John Treat, Honda Masuko, Sharon Kinsella, and Jennifer Robertson on the issue of *shōjo* resistance.

of rebellion, it does little to effect changes in gender relations or power structures."<sup>6</sup>

In 2008, at a conference hosted by UCLA on the "J-wave," Nakamura Hiromi, curator of the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, commented on the emergence of young female photographers in 1990s Japan.<sup>7</sup> All were born around 1970, and this boom "heralded a new chapter in the distinctive history of Japanese photographic art."<sup>8</sup> Within the art world, these women were discussed as having a "vibrant essence of that feminine strength," and "more masculinity than men these days."<sup>9</sup> The boom of girl photography peaked in 2000 when the most important yearly award, the 26th Kimura Ihei Award 木村伊兵衛写真賞, was given to three women photographers: Nagashima Yurie 長島 有里枝, Hiromix ヒロミックス, and Ninagawa Mika 蜷川実花. Nakamura talks about the ubiquitous photographs of the "three sisters frolicking at the podium."<sup>10</sup> However, Nakamura lamented that these 'girls' were "consumed, used up, and quickly became yesterday's news," all part of the "painful reality of the expiration date on 'girl.'"<sup>11</sup>

We have not yet reached the expiration date on "girl" in the case of young women writers. We could trace this trend back to the emergence of Yoshimoto Banana よしもとバナナ and her global success in the late 1980s–early 1990s, a time when Japan was at the height of its bubble economy. But the success of young women was not limited to Banana; John Treat remarked that "half the submissions to Japan's many literary prizes reportedly come from adolescents, and nearly all the new writer prizes in 1991 were awarded to writers who were simultaneously young, female, and—in a testament to the power of both Japan's heralded 'internationalization' and its hyper-valued yen—living abroad."<sup>12</sup>

The writers discussed in this paper were born in the early 1980s, and are referred to as the "Second Generation of Banana Girls." They came of age after the economy crashed, and are seen as the successors to writers like Banana and Yamada Eimi 山田 詠美.

In a round-table discussion in March 2007 in the literary journal *Bungei shunjū* 文芸春秋, Ishihara Shintarō 石原慎太郎, Wataya Risa, and Murakami Ryū 村上龍 discuss their Akutagawa Prizes. Murakami comments on the "era of the girl" (*josei* 女性), an era starting in the 1980s during which women, unlike men, had the "power to choose."<sup>13</sup> Ishihara notes the weak male characters in Wataya's

<sup>6</sup>Miller 2006, pp. 38–39.

<sup>7</sup>Nakamura 2008, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup>Nakamura 2008, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup>Nakamura 2008, p. 10. These comments were made by Araki Nobuyoshi 荒木 経惟, Japan's most famous international photographer.

<sup>10</sup>Pictures of Kanehara Hitomi and Wataya Risa at the Akutagawa Prize ceremony were also widely circulated in the press.

<sup>11</sup>Nakamura 2008, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup>Treat 1995, p. 298 note 1.

<sup>13</sup>Ishihara et al. 2007, pp. 126–27.

book *Keritai senaka* 蹴りたい背中, which he sees as both a reflection of the state of contemporary Japan and a sharp contrast to the protagonist of his own award-winning *Taiyō no kisetsu* 太陽の季節 from 1956.<sup>14</sup>

Kanehara, Wayata and other young women writers have been credited with the power to create an age, and have enjoyed tremendous success. They have been the recipients of literary awards, such as the Akutagawa Prize, the Subaru Prize すばる文学賞 (Kanehara), the Kawabata Yasunari Prize 川端康成文学賞 (Aoyama), and the Bungei Prize 文藝賞 (Aoyama and Wataya). They have garnered media attention, and achieved financial success; Kanehara and Wataya sold a record number of copies of the issue of *Bungei shunjū* that featured the prize-winning novels. Kanehara sold almost one million copies of her book in six months. However, they have been dogged by questions about the value of their literature, a criticism that hounded Banana as well.<sup>15</sup>

These women are part of a new generation of writers who have revitalized literature at the cost of becoming commodities themselves. There is still an expectation in Japan that writers will take on serious social issues, and these women are doing that in their writing, where they represent a postbubble Japan that has lost social hegemony, a world of the unemployed and socially disconnected. Yet the media have focused more on their age and gender than on the significance of their writing. These women contradictorily give voice to those on the margins of society, while holding positions at the center of a media spectacle and the literary establishment.

These women are changing the face of literature, yet in an era dominated by cell phone novels, gaming, and the internet, we must ask if literature has the power to shape the formation of a political consciousness in twenty-first-century Japan. Even if we find that it does, many of these young women do not express any desire to take up the role of social critic, and the media are more than content to treat them as the latest fad of a disengaged and apolitical youth culture.

What does this continued dominance mean in an era when the Japanese public is wringing its hands over the dissolute youth culture, yet crowning these young women with literary accolades? We can find a similar tension in the condemnation of an unproductive freeter generation that powers the lucrative postbubble economy of Japan's Gross National Cool youth culture.

Critic Mōri Yoshitaka 毛利嘉孝 sees the formation of a new cultural politics in the freeter generation, a development that has gained attention in the vacuum left by the loss of power of the intellectual left of the postwar era.<sup>16</sup> In his work, we can

<sup>14</sup>Marc Driscoll connects Ishihara's desire for a remasculinization of Japan to the reversal and degradation of the traditional gender paradigm for work (part time = female, full time = male) propagated by the freeters, who in their rejection of or inability to obtain full-time work have feminized employment. He also connects this perceived loss of masculinity in the workplace to the neonationalist call for return to tradition, as embodied by Ishihara. Driscoll 2007, pp. 176–77.

<sup>15</sup>Treat 1995, p. 276.

<sup>16</sup>Mōri 2005. For more on the freeter and cultural politics, also see Hayashi and McKnight 2005.

see a number of places through which to connect the discourse of the "girl" and the freeter. Mōri discusses freeters as "global currency," and these young women writers are also being traded as currency on the value of the Akutagawa Prize and on their youth.<sup>17</sup> The two groups are also easily characterized as "useless" (*dame* だめ) with respect to their positions in mainstream society. In the context of the freeter, Mori discusses the *Dame-Ren* だめ連, a non-political association to support the *dame* that started in 1992 when freeter became a problem.<sup>18</sup> There are ways we can see Kanehara and her female protagonist Lui, in their position as representatives of dissolute Japanese youth, as fitting into this category of *dame*. Lastly, both groups share a disillusionment about organized politics; neither has grown up with a model for a public intellectual who has been able to create cultural or political hegemony in the last two decades, excepting those figures on the far right such as writer and politician Ishihara Shintarō or manga artist Kobayashi Yoshinori 小林よしのり.

These points support Mark Driscoll's argument that *Hebi ni piasu* was a best-seller "because it portrays freeters as acceptable within a neoliberal and national hegemony." It is a "neoliberal utopia, where young people can exist without complaint but minus any social support."<sup>19</sup> He contrasts Kanehara the "good freeter" with the "bad freeters"—namely, the politically active freeters who were taken hostage in Iraq in April 2004. His provocative argument that *Hebi ni piasu* is a reaffirmation of the neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies raises questions about taking Akutagawa-Prize-winning novels as examples of either the mindset of the nation's youth or of hegemonic power's attempt to alter the social contract. Driscoll argues that: "Naturalizing these [neoliberal social] changes requires fictional portraits of 'at risk' freeters like those who appear in *Hebi ni piasu*."<sup>20</sup>

However, another way to see Kanehara's novel is by linking it to the loss of sociality characteristic of postbubble Japan. Mōri mentions that the atomization and fragmentation palpable in postbubble society have kept freeters from organizing along the lines of other economically disenfranchised groups. Young women authors like Wataya have discussed the isolation and loneliness experienced by her generation, and the lack of a professional community of writers.<sup>21</sup> Ishihara supports her claim by confirming the demise of the *bundan* 文壇, the Japanese literary establishment that provided community for writers for decades. This sense of isolation is also felt in Aoyama Nanae's *Hitori biyori* ひとり日和 and in Kanehara's *Hebi ni piasu*.

It is possible to see this isolation, as does Driscoll, as the "absence of sociality," a dominant stereotype of freeters in Japan that encodes neoliberal ideology, such as the nonreliance on government institutions.<sup>22</sup> Driscoll talks about the fact that

<sup>17</sup> Mōri 2005, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Mōri 2005, pp. 23–25.

<sup>19</sup> Driscoll 2007, p. 184.

<sup>20</sup> Driscoll 2007, p. 185.

<sup>21</sup> Ishihara et al. 2007, pp. 127, 131.

<sup>22</sup> Driscoll 2007, pp. 183–84.

these freeters “seem to be able to function and find pleasure without any society,” because their need for pleasure is found in the “highly differentiated consumer market.”<sup>23</sup> This “consumer market” is Japan’s virtualized postbubble market of Gross National Cool, and, as Anne Allison argues, this market “offers a palliative for healing” the ill effects of the loss of sociality.<sup>24</sup> But this “virtualization of social existence” has not eased the tremendous sense of “abandonment, loneliness and futility” amongst this group, and Allison talks about the difficulty of “stitching a fabric of sociality out of the daily struggles and diverse resources of strangers.”<sup>25</sup>

The effects of this loss of sociality are on display in these prize-winning novels, and although the material consumer market appears in the form of the subcultural commodities of body piercing and tattoos in *Hebi ni piasu*, the virtual market of the Gross National Cool does not feature in these novels.

These young women writers actualize isolation and the loss of sociality in the realm of everyday practice by talking about and depicting their inability, or lack of desire, to integrate into mainstream society; their lack of social networks; their lack of control over their economic situations; and their lack of belief in politics or in the public intellectual. Anne Allison discusses well-known activist Amamiya Karin 雨宮 処凛, who, in talking about her own experience of being bullied, wrist cutting, attempting suicide, and working as a freeter, invites her audience to “step out of the isolation that so confines and haunts victims of depression and social withdrawal, and *fretta* with their labor insecurities.”<sup>26</sup> In the same way that Amamiya “produces affects—of ease, connectedness, and community,” Murakami Ryū argues that literature’s strength lies in its ability to unsettle the reader and force them to confront reality, and Ishihara Shintarō adds that the average reader looks to literature to give voice to those experiences that escape their own power of expression.<sup>27</sup> Works like *Hebi ni piasu* and *Hitori biyori* do have this power of expression in the very grounded nature of the isolation and everyday reality that the characters experience. This is not a virtual world, and is definitely not the lauded Gross National Cool. Rather, it is a place where the characters struggle to find sociality. There is value, and not just literary value, in experiencing these struggles as we read their novels. This actualization may be where we can find awareness and resistance, and a political role for literature in twenty-first-century Japan.

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<sup>24</sup> Allison 2009, p. 100.

<sup>25</sup> Allison 2009, pp. 100–101, 105.

<sup>26</sup> Allison 2009, p. 104.

<sup>27</sup> Allison 2009, p. 104; Ishihara et al. 2007, p. 130.

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