

Chapter 9

Between Fans: History and National Identity in Online Debates on Axis Powers Hetalia

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Transnational fan communities have become a hot topic in Media Studies scholarship due to their increasing influence on the mainstream media of numerous countries around the world. Partially because of the success of international crowdfunding platforms such as Kickstarter and the awe-inspiring efforts of social media users to promote various project campaigns, anime and manga fans have begun to exert a powerful influence on mainstream media properties. For instance, in the United States, we can see clear traces of the landmark anime series *Revolutionary Girl Utena* (1997, *Shōjo kakumei Utena*) on Rebecca Sugar's designs and storyboard work for the wildly successful *Adventure Time* animated television series. To give another example, based on the overwhelming popularity of her animated YouTube short *Bee & PuppyCat*, which also exhibits an obvious anime influence, *Adventure Time*'s Studio Frederator helped creator Natasha Allegri launch her own highly successful Kickstarter campaign. The convergence of anime and manga influences on mass-market media in America with the rise of crowdfunding as a legitimate method of media production is illustrative of a global media landscape in which fans shape media mix ecosystems through their involvement and participation in transnational fandom cultures.

Fandom communities are far from frictionless, however, and differences arising from historically weighted national identities still manifest themselves in supposedly borderless online discussion forums. As Sandra Annett (2011) reminds us, "Transnationalism is not simply another word for postnationalism, or the flow of information and people across the fading borders of a globalized world, just as a transnational fan community is not necessarily a blissfully multicultural group where people of all nations are (supposedly)

united in equality” (p. 173). In the context of anime fandoms in particular, attitudes towards Japan and Japanese history have the potential to become an especially fraught point of contention, as many fans in the United States and other countries outside of Asia may express sentiments regarding Japan that occupy a spectrum between respectful and worshipful (Napier 2007, Schodt 2013). Japan is a site of longing and a perceived country of dreams, after all, and it is the home of everything from Studio Ghibli to Hello Kitty to the Honda Accord. In contrast, to citizens of Japan’s neighbors in East Asia, the appealing aspects of Japanese popular culture that Susan Napier, following Arjun Appadurai’s theory of mediascapes, has dubbed “fantasyscapes” (p. 11) cannot remain entirely separate from Japan’s past military aggressions and more recent economic imperialism.

In this essay I will demonstrate how South Korean and Korean-American fans, as a loosely linked community, have emerged as a major voice in the critique of Japanese popular media among North American and European fan communities. Online debates surrounding the media franchise *Axis Powers Hetalia* (Akushisu Pawāzu *Hetaria*), which humorously lampoons the nations that acted as major players in World War II, have emerged as a watershed moment in this process. Although the *Hetalia* franchise contains many subversive themes and can easily be read as a bonfire of the militaristic grand narratives that shaped the rise and clash of nations over the course of the twentieth century, Korean and Korean-American commenters have encouraged their fellow fans to break out of the pattern of postmodern play that characterized fan activities inspired by the franchise at the height of its popularity from roughly 2009 to 2011. In doing so, they alerted fan communities to several of the more problematic aspects of contemporary Japanese and American historiography, including the consequences of erasing the Korean peninsula from our understanding of the stakes, causalities, and casualties of the Pacific War. I will first offer a brief summary of the *Hetalia* franchise before summarizing its initial fan reception. I will then outline the history of the controversies surrounding the franchise while invoking specific comments that served as catalysts for online debates. Finally, I will widen the scope of the essay to include several related online debates in order to outline a sketch of how active fan engagement has changed and shaped mainstream discourse concerning the portrayal of Asian national identities and the legacies of the Pacific War in contemporary popular media.

Rich Nations, Strong Armies, and Public Outrage

In the manga *Axis Powers Hetalia*, World War II is a game played by two teams of handsome men. The *Hetalia* franchise, which began as an amateur webcomic written by Himaruya Hidekaz, anthropomorphizes the major world powers of the early twentieth century as attractive young men. America sports a bomber jacket and guzzles hamburgers, Germany enjoys making cuckoo clocks and is serious to a fault, and Italy, the namesake of the series,¹ is a pasta-loving coward who depends on Germany to protect him. Although the original webcomic plays with national stereotypes and caricatured reenactments of historical events, later incarnations of the franchise (such as several seasons of an animated series, a feature-length film, and drama CDs featuring the voice actors of the anime) focus less on historical jokes and references and more on the homoerotic tensions that arise between the masculine representations of countries in heated competition with one another.

In *Between Men*, Eve Sedgwick argues that the intense relationships of the men involved in the creation and administration of the British Empire were characterized by homosocial desire, a “pattern of male friendship, mentorship, entitlement, [and] rivalry” (p. 1). The members of many fandom communities² centered around *Hetalia* have interpreted the international homosocial rivalries and conflicts between the men of the twentieth century as overt homoeroticism between anthropomorphic avatars of national identity. Germany defends Italy like an senior student with a crush on an incoming freshman in a boarding school novel. England, having introduced America to the allure of international politics, is now frustrated to find himself in position of subordination to his younger charge, a situation that parallels the triangular relationships common in Victorian romances. In the eyes of fans, these character dynamics directly allude to forbidden longings and stolen kisses behind closed doors.³ The *Heta-*

1 The title is a portmanteau of *heta*, a Japanese word meaning “incompetent,” and “Italia.” “*Hetalia*” also plays on the word *hetare*, meaning “loser.” These connotations are appropriate, as the manga portrays Italy and his buddies Germany and Japan as being highly idiosyncratic, if not overtly antisocial.

2 Although anecdotal evidence suggests that the majority of members of *Hetalia* fan communities tend to identify as female, there are a number of male fans in Japan and other countries who participate in the slash fan cultures associated with *Hetalia*, as demonstrated by their participation in practices such as cosplay masquerades (in which fans dress up as anime characters and enact dramatic performances or dance routines in front of an audiences at a fan convention) and the production of AMVs (anime music videos).

3 The fan response to *Hetalia* calls to mind Henry Jenkins’s assessment of the “slash” subcultures of female fans in America who create homoerotic parodies of popular television shows. According to Jenkins, “Slash confronts the most repressive forms of sexual identity and provides utopian alternatives to current configurations of gender; slash does not, however, provide a politically stable or even consistently coherent response to these concerns” (1992, 190). The artists drawing romances involving the

lia anime in particular, which targets the demographic of adult women who enjoyed “shipping” the characters of the original webcomic,⁴ plays on and emphasizes the homoerotic themes of homosocial modernity to such a degree that they are apparent to even a casual viewer.

The levity with which the major events of modern history are portrayed in *Hetalia* betrays a surprisingly liberal understanding of history. Not only does the franchise render the supposedly great deeds of men as trifling, but it also critiques the ambitions of homosocial modernity. For example, by representing the Sino-Japanese Wars as a series of quarrels between two brothers (or lovers) who can’t communicate properly, *Hetalia* and its fans are not engaging in a process of forgetting or downplaying the impact of historical events, but rather of gently mocking the grave seriousness of masculine-gendered modernist pursuits such as colonization, war, and the formation of national identity. In effect, by highlighting the textual homoeroticism that arises between the anthropomorphized nations of *Hetalia*, fans use the franchise as a vehicle for queering the notion of history itself. By discrediting both heterosexuality and conventional masculinity (especially as it is represented by military ideals) as the basis of normative identity, *Hetalia* fans challenge the heteronormative phallogocentrism underlying the construction of history as it is presented in state-sponsored narratives such as secondary school textbooks and period dramas serialized on public television.

Nevertheless, *Hetalia* has frequently come under criticism for reinforcing national and ethnic stereotypes and turning a blind eye to wartime atrocities such as the Holocaust and the Japanese occupation of Nanking. There has been a significant outcry against the franchise on Korean-language internet discussion boards, where posters decry the treatment of Japan’s wartime history as a laughing matter. Online commenters have also been offended by Korea’s characterization as nursing a one-sided crush on Japan in the *Hetalia* webcomic. In January 2009, this online activity escalated into a formal petition, reported to have gained over ten thousand signatures in three days, being issued to the Japanese satellite television channel Kid’s Station, which specializes in animation and had, in the July of 2008, announced its plans to

countries represented in *Hetalia*, like the women publishing slash fiction in America, are not attempting to make an overt political statement, but I might argue that, based on so-called “meta fandom” posts on fannish social networking sites such as Pixiv and Tumblr, many fans are fully aware of the social and historical critique of their activities.

4 The expression “to ship” describes the fannish activity of imaging two (or more) characters in a romantic or sexual relationship. The Japanese linguistic equivalent of “shipping” is *kappuringu*, or “coupling.”

air an animated version of *Hetalia* (Anime News Network, 2009). In a January 14, 2009 diplomacy council of the South Korean Congress, congresswoman Jeong Mi-Kyeong stated that she considers the comic *Hetalia* “to be a crime on a private level.”⁵ The Japanese producers of the *Hetalia* animation took these protests quite seriously, eventually resolving to completely delete South Korea from the anime altogether, which was to be broadcast online instead of on television.

Fandom Wank and Social Justice

Despite South Korean protests regarding the historical and cultural insensitivity of the *Hetalia* webcomic, the franchise continued to grow in popularity throughout 2009, aided in no small part by the successful launch of the anime on January 24.⁶ Due to the efforts of fans posting unofficial translations of the *Hetalia* webcomic and unlicensed subtitled versions of the *Hetalia* anime, the franchise attracted a large international English-language fanbase. Roughly speaking, until around the end of 2012, the most active English-language *Hetalia* fan communities were hosted on the blog-based social networking site LiveJournal. Even despite the decline in fan participation on the site, the main *Hetalia* community on LiveJournal had almost forty thousand members as of April 2014, with an additional eighteen thousand watchers.⁷ There were also dozens of branch communities across LiveJournal and its sister site Dreamwidth that focused on one particular character or romantic pairing between characters in *Hetalia*.⁸ Although fans came together from all corners of the world when these communities were first created, the number of active

5 Jeong’s speech was posted onto YouTube, along with an English translation, at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yo_btids9-kM.

6 Due in part to the aforementioned backlash against the webcomic, the television broadcast of the animation was cancelled, but the show, which consists of five-minute self-contained episodes, was still made available to viewers through various online and mobile platforms. Being removed from television airwaves did not seem to impede the popularity of the anime, as three more seasons were produced in 2009 and 2010. In early 2010, the North American distributor Funimation acquired the rights to all of the seasons of the animation, which it streams on its website, as well as on Hulu, an online television subscription service.

7 This data was collected on April 25, 2014, from the LiveJournal “*Hetalia*” community’s profile information page at <http://hetalia.livejournal.com/profile>. In a community on LiveJournal, a “member” has posting access, while a “watcher” merely receives community updates through the site’s internal feed tracking service.

8 The pairing between America and England was quite popular, as were the pairings between Germany and Northern Italy, between Spain and Southern Italy, between France and England, and between America and Canada.

participants who could understand Japanese was relatively small, and the number who could understand Korean was even smaller. As a result, many people found it difficult to understand the South Korean protest against Hetalia, especially since the Chinese-language fandom seemed, to the many English language fans who found pirate translations of the manga, anime, and drama CDs on Chinese websites, to have enthusiastically embraced the series.

This lack of linguistic proficiency and historical context led to the sort of ill feelings that may easily arise over seemingly arbitrarily criticism. In an August 2010 post titled “Korea and China” on the LiveJournal community Hetalia Wank (“wank” meaning, in this context, “unpopular or problematic opinion”), user Galael wrote that Hetalia creator Himaruya Hidekazu did not, to my knowledge, address the topic of Korea’s colonization by Japan. No, he probably won’t. Why? Because Hetalia is a funny comic. Such a recent event, which continues to tear apart the two countries and include the death and suffering of hundreds of people, is not funny. The fact that Hidekaz acknowledges Japan’s aggression and bad behaviour toward China is already a big thing, but he is seeking to make people laugh and love the characters – not to address such big issues, especially with characters that are, explicitly, stereotypes. Showing Japan and Korea as enemies would have constantly reminded the reader of hate, death and war.

Galael thus justifies the webcomic’s lack of acknowledgement of Japan’s colonial past by stating that topics directly portraying “the death and suffering of hundreds of people” are not appropriate for the humorous tone of the four-panel gag comic, and that, by not making light of Japan’s wartime atrocities, Hetalia’s creator is in fact demonstrating respect. This post attracted dozens of comments offering explanations and putting the reaction into the context of disputes over Japanese textbooks and the Dokdo/Takeshima islands. More abrasive posts, such as an essay titled “Korea Is Retarded” on the blog Anime Might, attracted hundreds of comments, with commenters debating each other and clarifying their positions across lengthy comment threads, which included scattered links to global news media outlets such as The Guardian, Al Jazeera, and Haaretz.

Commentary on the relationship between Korea and Japan as expressed through Hetalia continued throughout early 2012 in online essays such as “Why Hetalia is bad and you should feel bad,” in which the author decries the reduction of the complexity of history to shallow anime stereotypes. She introduces her post by stating that “the fact that [the nations involved in World War Two] are characterized as shallow little giggly turdlets instead of deep characters with complex relationships and varying motivations is [...] insulting

to the reality of the countries and history.”⁹ This post also attracted hundreds of comments, which ranged from lighthearted jokes about Sarah Palin to strongly worded personal attacks. Commenters defending Hetalia as “nothing more than entertainment” that “wasn’t meant to be offensive” were met with a range of well-considered responses concerning the legacy of the Pacific War in Asian countries, especially Korea. Other responses challenged the privileged position Japan seems to occupy as a producer of popular media. As one anonymous commenter points out, Hetalia is a good example, that Japan is allowed to be more ignorant than other countries. I’m sorry, but that’s what it is. When a POP star mistakes Chinese traditional clothes with Japanese – we have a [media] war. When Japan shows Victorians dressed as kawaii lolitas exposing almost all their legs or shows other countries as nothing but mix of awful stereotypes- it’s completely okay. That’s not fair, is it?¹⁰

Although the verbally aggressive and scornfully mocking attack-and-counterattack format of these discussions may not seem to lend itself to either Henry Jenkins’s (2006) model of the “scholar-fan” or Matthew Hills’s (2002) model of the “fan as intellectual,” fans contributing comments such as the one quoted above to online debates on Hetalia are engaged in forcibly inserting an awareness and acknowledgement of history and national identity into discourses surrounding Japanese cultural products.

Online discussions concerning Hetalia were intense, informative, and far from limited to the Pacific Theater of World War II, ultimately delving into topics such contemporary ethnic conflicts and racial representations in entertainment media. These discussions occurred within the broader awareness of social justice issues within online communities sparked by the infamous “RaceFail 2009” debates on the representation of otherness and people of color in English-language science fiction and fantasy novels, especially those

9 The tone of this statement, which has been edited to remove its more caustic profanity, is typical of the blog, a forum on which readers are invited to mock the more ridiculous tropes of *yaoi* (homoerotic) anime, manga, and English-language slash fan fiction. The title of the blog, *Rape Is Kawaii!*, refers to one such trope, wherein nonconsensual sex is equated with overpowering romantic love, *kawaii* being a Japanese word well-known to anime fans as meaning “cute” or “adorable.” Although the prevailing attitude of the blog and its commenters is sarcastic amusement, both the original post on *Hetalia* its comments are quite serious.

10 The spelling mistakes of the original comment have been preserved in this quotation. Although English is the lingua franca of many anime blogs, even those not hosted or maintained by people from territories in which English is a dominant language, the English language proficiency of readers and commenters can vary widely, and “perfect” English is neither expected nor even necessarily desired in such discursive spaces. This is not to say that all or even most online discussion of anime outside Japan is in English (as a great deal of said discussion occurs in Chinese or Russian), but rather that popular anime blogs and news sites attract a range of readers from all over the world.

originating in the United States.¹¹ Over time, such online discussions and debates have resulted in a shift in fandom attitudes towards racism and cultural insensitivity, a trend that has escalated as fans have jumped aboard social media platforms like Twitter and Tumblr, which enable instant sharing of information and opinions across interrelated fandom communities.

To give an example, on April 21, 2014 the Canadian pop star Avril Lavigne released a music video for her new single “Hello Kitty,” a mishmash of Japanese nonsense words and decontextualized pop culture images that Billboard magazine’s Jason Lipshutz wrote “is an embarrassment in any language” (2014). The backlash against the “positive racism” of the video was immediate and overwhelming, which serves as a significant contrast to the positive reception of Gwen Stefani’s 2004 single “Harajuku Girls,” which featured an almost identical presentation of “Japaneseness” as something unique yet culturally odorless and ready for consumption. The online uproar in response to Lavigne’s video was not an isolated occurrence, as Justin Bieber also found himself in hot water after visiting the Yasukuni Shrine two days later, on April 23. According to The Washington Post, Bieber received thousands of angry messages in English on his Facebook post commemorating his visit, which shocked fans from around the world (Taylor 2014). The vehemence of the outcry was startling to many critics tracking the pop star’s career, as even his unfortunate behavior at the Anne Frank Museum in April of 2013 was not met with the same degree of outrage and disappointment (Duke 2013). These two incidents demonstrate a strong awareness of the social, political, and historical issues implicit in mainstream media generally considered to be harmless, even among fans in their early teens.

The roots of this broad shift in fan attitudes are deep and tangled. Regardless, because of the spread of international fandom communities over various social media platforms, no single debate on issues concerning cultural sensitivity and social justice occurs in a vacuum. As fans jump from one fandom community to another, and as they shape the emerging communities through which younger fans enter online fandom, they carry their knowledge regarding social justice with them. While discussions of issues such as the international controversy over the Yasukuni Shrine may have once been limited to academic journals, university classrooms, and second-page news stories, they now take place on heavily trafficked webpages and fan blogs, which can be accessed at all times via popular smartphone apps. The popularity of the Hetalia franchise has faded, but it engendered debates that are representative of an important

11 For a summary of these debates, a selection of key quotations, and a list of relevant links, see the “RaceFail '09” page of the *Fanlore* wiki.

moment in transnational fandom communities surrounding Asian popular cultures. These discussions are illustrative of how fans who work together across national borders are able to challenge received knowledge, address gaps in what they have learned about history and culture, and influence public discourse concerning problematic representations of nationality and national history.



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Chapter 10

Lost and Found in "Cool Japan"

Heather Bowen-Struyk

Ōtomo Katsuhiro's epic anime *Akira* (1988) is set in Neo Tokyo in a dystopian future in which neglected youth blow off school, drag race and get into fights with other biker gangs while corrupt adults including scientists, religious leaders, the military, politicians and business men fight among themselves for the power to control a world collapsing in uncertainty. The year is 2019, one year before Japan is due to host the Olympics in the anime as in real life. In the anime, Tokyo proper had been destroyed during WWII in 1988 by a great power called Akira, a power that is at once reminiscent of a nuclear explosion but also described as a psychic power cultivated by scientists who lost control of it. The young antihero Tetsuo randomly encounters one of the escaped psychic test subjects and this unlocks his own extraordinary psychic and physical transformation. As teen-aged Tetsuo's power grows, not only does he turn against his girlfriend Kaori and best friend Kaneda who had befriended him at the orphanage when they were younger, he also unleashes destruction on Neo Tokyo and by the end, apparently causes a new star system to be born.

Metaphor for adolescence, Tet-

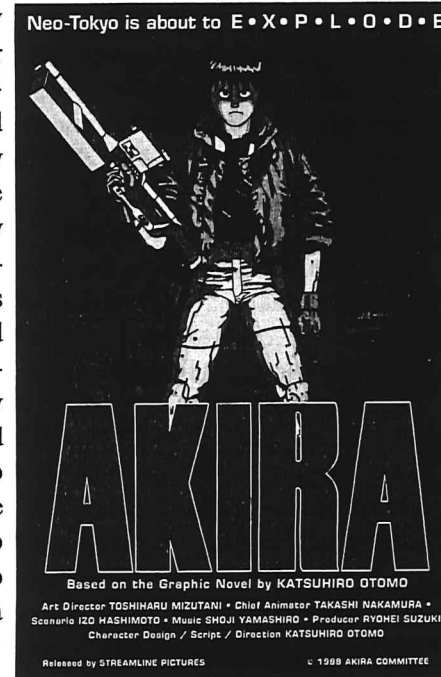


Fig. 1. Poster for Akira

The Korean Wave

**from a Private Commodity
to a Public Good**

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