



“Girls are dancin’”: *shōjo* culture and feminism in contemporary Japanese art¹

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Abstract

This article explores the gender-transgressive expressions found in *shōjo* culture in order to highlight the potential for feminist analysis in the prevalence of the *shōjo* motif in contemporary Japanese art. *Shōjo* culture is a fascinating cultural space, within contemporary Japanese culture, which fosters creative expressions of gender that negate or make complex hegemonic categories. Departing from stereotypes of Japanese girls, this article will pay particular interest to an emerging wave of figurative contemporary art practices in which the figure of the *shōjo* is utilised for a new generation of feminist critique. Aoshima Chiho, Kunikata Mahomi, Takano Aya, Sawada Tomoko and Yanagi Miwa are among the current artists who feature the *shōjo* motif in contexts that foreground female subjectivities found paralleled in *shōjo* culture. These works will then be contextualised in the greater picture of current trends and themes in global contemporary feminist art.

Keywords

shōjo, feminism, gender, contemporary art

Introduction

This article will examine the prevalence of the *shōjo* (girl) motif as an emerging trend in contemporary Japanese art and analyse its significance to new discourses in feminist art. In the closed, girl-only space of *shōjo* culture, girls negate and make complex the dominant gender stereotypes that exist in contemporary Japanese society through creations of gender that transgress hegemony. In the past two decades of contemporary art, transnational (especially Asian) perspectives have become more conspicuous. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the recent trends of contemporary feminist art, in which anti-sexist themes frequently intersect with other identity politics to find more inclusive and pluralistic expressions. Found throughout the practices of many young Japanese artists, the *shōjo* motif is key to understanding some of Japan’s best recent contributions to contemporary feminist art.

¹ The title, *Girls are dancin’*, is taken from a key collection of young female photographers edited by Iizawa Kohtarō. In the book, Iizawa celebrates the fact that, despite the many pressures of the contemporary urban environment, girls are still “dancing”. (Iizawa, *Shutter and love: girls are dancin’ on in Tokyo*.)

The present age—the global age—is a prevailing paradigm for the production, exhibition and reception of what is broadly called contemporary art.² The Asian contemporary art boom of the past two decades, of which Japan has been one of its leaders, exemplifies how international—or rather, global—contemporary art has become.³ As Asian artists gain more and more presence on the world stage, and the world stage has increasingly been opened to the Asian region, Japan has strengthened its relationship and identity as a part of Asia. While Japan is one of the earliest Asian regions to be exposed to European and American Modernism, the effect is by no means a simple one-way importation of Western art to the East. As Jen Webb recognizes, contemporary art does not always succumb to Westernisation as a “totalising force”.⁴ Rather, “local cultures have always been supremely good at picking up just enough of a colonising or influencing culture to enhance their own practices and worldviews”.⁵

The cultural construct of girlhood in Japan typifies the country’s typical absorption of foreign cultural influences and embracing it as uniquely “Japanese”. In its hybridity and historical progression, it is unique. *Shōjo* culture originates with the Meiji government’s push for modernisation in light of the country’s new interactions with the West. The Girls’ Higher School Order, implemented in 1899, led to the national spread of girls’ schools and high literacy among girls. The schools’ homogenous physical space was complemented by the development of text-based and illustrative magazines made specifically for girl readers. As it was then and is now, the school environment and the emergence of girls’ fiction had mutually reciprocal influences on building the girls’ identity as *shōjo*.⁶

The Japanese term “*shōjo*” is particularly useful to gender discussions of the Japanese girl. It is a way of referring to someone as feminine, but with a distinct suggestion of youth. Kotani Mari defines *shōjo* as the ‘juvenile existence....prior to the adoption of adult femininity’.⁷ The *shōjo* is ‘free and arrogant, unlike meek and dutiful *musume* [daughter] or pure and innocent *otome* [maiden]’.⁸ “Daughter” and “maiden” both suggest the presence of a male authority in determining the girl’s identity, while the concept of *shōjo* has neither of these connections.

In contemporary Japanese society, the figure of the *shōjo*, if not simply dismissed, is heavily scrutinised by broader Japanese society. Words like “infantile”, “selfish”, “superficial” and “unproductive” are typically used to criticise the social role of

2 Webb, ‘Art in a Globalised State’, p. 30.

3 Turner, ‘Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific’.

4 Webb, ‘Art in a Globalised State’, p. 37.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

6 Kawasaki, ‘Osaki Midori and the Role of the Girl in Shōwa Modernism’, p. 294.

7 Kotani, ‘Doll Beauties and Cosplay’, p. 55.

8 Aoyama, ‘Transgendering *Shōjo Shōsetsu*: Girls’ Inter-text/sex-uality’, p. 53.



shōjo.⁹ Writers such as the widely quoted Japanese sociologist Ôtsuka Eiji have shaped stereotypes by discussing the *shōjo* as representing ‘an exotic and longed-for world of individual fulfillment, decadence, consumption and play’.¹⁰ It is only in the closed world of *shōjo* culture that girls negate these wide-held stereotypes.

The exclusivity of *shōjo* culture is one reason why a *shōjo*’s gender transgressions are typically not a politically didactic public statement. The intriguing, even paradoxical politics evident in young Japanese women’s lives are a potent source of artistic critique. They are a generation who are described by feminist curator Kasahara Michiko as having little awareness or contact with women’s rights campaigns in comparison to their awareness of its very public backlash in the media.¹¹ While “feminist” per se is not a widespread political allegiance for Japanese youth, some characteristics of *shōjo* culture share in common tactics found in contemporary - or what is called “third-wave” - feminism.

Similarly, contemporary feminisms reflect a similarly subtle or ambiguous politics. Second-wave feminism is generally regarded as one of the largest political movements of the twentieth century, but in the past two decades, feminist discourse has clearly shifted and adapted to intersect with the emergence of many other identity politics such as post-colonialism, queer theory and globalism. This shift to a third-wave of feminism is present in many contemporary feminist art works being made today. In a globally outward-reaching contemporary art world, the ‘freewheeling pluralism’¹² of contemporary art responds to the pluralistic politics of third-wave feminism.

This article will introduce six young Japanese contemporary artists. Their use of the girl motif will be subject to some brief textual analysis before going on to present the discursive framework used to understand the importance of the girl motif in Japan and the world today.

***Shōjo* motif in contemporary art**

The *shōjo* motif is a distinct, recurring graphic figure found in many contemporary Japanese artists’ works within the last two decades. The artists chosen for mention in this article are far from the only current Japanese artists interested in the *shōjo* motif, but what differentiates them from others is their use of the *shōjo* motif in reference to the gender-transgressive expressions found in *shōjo* culture. A celebration of femininity

9 Orbaugh, ‘*Shōjo*’, p. 459.

10 Ôtsuka in Kinsella, ‘Cuties in Japan’, p. 244.

11 Kasahara, ‘Contemporary Japanese Women’s Self-awareness’, p. 96.

12 Heartney, et al., *After the Revolution: Women Who Transformed Contemporary Art* (2007), p. 12.

and girliness is one theme that overlaps in third-wave feminist thought and *shōjo* culture. By assembling arguments about the gender-transgressive nature of *shōjo* culture along with the prevalence of the *shōjo* motif in contemporary Japanese art, it is possible to contextualise the *shōjo* motif in the world stage of contemporary feminist art.

The *shōjo* motif is seen frequently in art, but some of the most prominent uses of the *shōjo* motif in contemporary art exist decidedly outside of a feminist dialogue. Some exploit the well-known schoolgirl stereotype. For example, Araki Nobuyoshi is widely known for his particular use of women and girls in his photography. Sado-masochist scenarios, as found in his *Sexual Desire* series, and a schoolgirl uniform variation in the *BONDAGE* series, are purposely, unashamedly, objectifying. From the highly staged to the seemingly spontaneous, Araki is a narrative agent who points the camera at what “catches his eye”. In Ozaki Manami’s words, ‘we [the viewer] are always aware that it’s him that is looking’.¹³

Aida Makoto often depicts violence as he explores various representations of *shōjo*. His *Harakiri School Girls* combines two Japanese stereotypes – the samurai and the schoolgirl, to eroticise the exotic picture of ritual suicide that has often horrified and intrigued the West. Cute girls in short uniforms wink at the viewer while inflicting fatal violence on their bodies and spraying blood in a style reminiscent of traditional Japanese ritual suicide. *The giant member Fuji versus King Gidora* (1993) appropriates a famous erotic *ukiyo-e* woodblock print of the embrace between a female pearl diver and an octopus,¹⁴ but combines it with additional appropriations of a monster from the *Godzilla* films and a girl character from a famous *anime* series to produce an especially violent rape spectacle. In a video performance, the artist masturbates to the word *girl*, written in pink pen on a wall. Aida identifies the sexualisation of *shōjo* in contemporary Japanese culture and makes comment through an exaggeration of his powerful position as a man and “pervert”.

Six artist profiles

The following artists’ works exemplify the artists’ awareness—even self-consciousness—of the proliferation of girl images in contemporary Japanese visual culture, but negate dominant cultural perspectives on the topic. Specifically, these artists use the *shōjo* motif to reference elements of *shōjo* culture that focus on her subjectivity over the male gaze. These young women ‘present approaches to female gender and identity that have little in

¹³ Ozaki, ‘Shanshinjinsei: Nobuyoshi Araki’s Photo Journey’, p. 18.

¹⁴ *The Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife* c.1820 by Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849).



common with such objectifying and otherwise predominant tropes.¹⁵ They go beyond the sexual objectification of *shōjo*, as seen in the work of Araki, or ironically presented by Aida, to make reference to the creative uses of the fantastic, girlish aesthetics or gender-transgressive concepts found in *shōjo* culture.

Young, female Japanese artists' careers are almost unavoidably contoured by their gender. Women artists often struggled to find an acceptable place inside Japanese post-war society,¹⁶ and even some recent local art critical frameworks have focused more on young, female artists' femininity rather than the value of their art.¹⁷ However, the increasingly global reception for art from Japan and Asia has meant that women artists can also transcend their often confining, local context. The following artists have had varying levels of success in Japan and internationally. They come from different art schools and different cities, with some cross-over in their influences and mentors.¹⁸ However, despite their separate stories, these artists are all brought together (for the first time in a critical analysis) because they have all treated the *shōjo* subject in a context that is sympathetic to *shōjo* culture. Unintentionally, the selected artists are all women. I do not wish to stress an essentialist argument about the insight women can bring when depicting female subjects, but the chances are these young, female artists have all experienced some aspects of *shōjo* culture personally. Some use this personal background more than others. While the following art work analyses may result in some insight to the artists themselves, the main focus will be the art and the references to *shōjo* culture they provide.

Sandra Buckley declares “aaa, kawaiiiiiiii!” as the ‘rallying cry of the *shōjo*’.¹⁹ Although not exclusive to *shōjo* culture, *kawaii* (cute) finds a special place with youth and especially girls. When defining the phenomenon of *kawaii* and its role in contemporary Japanese art, Vartanian focuses on how it is not necessarily shallow because ‘cuteness, though ostensibly devoid of irony, does not negate darkness, and can in fact be a means to accessing darkness, as characters become loci of emotion and identification.’²⁰

Aoshima Chiho, in a sense, illustrates Vartanian’s speculations. Through a cute aesthetic (which can double as a *shōjo* aesthetic), including girls with big doe-eyes and small faces, she makes the *shōjo*’s body cute as well as ugly, abject, scary, funny or epic. In *The Divine Gas*, a giant *shōjo* farts clouds on which a Buddha meditates; in *Zombies*

15 Vartanian, *Drop Dead Cute: The New Generation of Women Artists in Japan*, p. 8.

16 Yoshimoto, *Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York*, p. 2.

17 Borggreen, ‘Gender in Contemporary Japanese Art’, p. 179.

18 It may be telling that five out of the six artists presented got their break in the art world thanks to the support of established male artists. Aoshima, Kunikata and Takano were/are supported by Murakami Takashi; Yanagi’s first international show was at the invitation of Morimura Yasumasa; and to a smaller degree, Miyashita has a connection with Tsuzuki Kyoichi.

19 Buckley, S. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of contemporary Japanese culture*, (2002), p. 250.

20 Vartanian, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

in *the Graveyard*, the *shōjo* become ghosts and zombies; in *Ero pop* she is half-skeleton and her internal organs have become flowers and hearts; in *Renaissance, Snake Woman* (2001) *shōjo* are being consumed and digested by snakes; and in *Mountain Girls* they amalgamate with the environment around them. When Kotani describes *shōjo* culture as a place of ‘aesthetic and sexual magic’,²¹ she could have illustrated her point with an Aoshima landscape. The physical transgressions and abject presentations challenge what is cute and beautiful about the objectified *shōjo*, and Aoshima makes this point via a flowery, cute *shōjo* aesthetic.

Kunikata Mahomi’s violent fantastical imagery expresses anxieties about the vulnerable state of girlhood through a *manga*-esque drawing style. Her colouring is made up of strong, primary colours—mostly in red—combined with a disorienting arrangement of narrative to confront the audience with its disturbing violent content. Kunikata was included in curator and art critic Matsui Midori’s exhibition, *The Age of Micropop: The New Generation of Japanese Artists*. The exhibition picks up on the common characterisation of contemporary Japanese artists with ‘amateurism, childishness, and cheap-looking production’.²² Micropop is ‘the approach of those who invent, independent of any major ideology or theory, a unique aesthetic or code of behaviour by reorganising fragments that have been accumulated from diverse communicative processes’.²³ It is developed not out in the “world”, but from the perspective of one’s private room and ‘everyday life’.²⁴ Despite being argued to be marginalised from politics, Kunikata is also described as an artist who:

...expresses the fantasies of the adolescent feminine unconscious but gives them violent forms....Kunikata adopts their sadomasochism but intensifies the nightmarish atmosphere by placing her adolescent characters in violent situations that involve murder, beheadings, cannibalism, and disintegration. Her works evoke both the horror of losing one’s identity and the erotic pleasure of such submission.²⁵

Kunikata is not the first artist to critique the relationship between *shōjo*, sexual desire and violence. Aida Makoto, introduced before, is an artist troubled by questions about sex and exploitation,²⁶ but instead of seeking a visual language outside of dominant patriarchal culture, his art exaggerates and sensationalises his own powerful position as a man. Similarly, Kunikata’s *shōjo* are often bleeding, in pain, or dying, but this is where

21 Kotani, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

22 Vartanian, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-16.

23 Matsui, ‘*The Age of Micropop: The New Generation of Japanese Artists*’, p. 6.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

26 Maerkele, ‘Makoto Aida: No More War; Save Water; Don’t Pollute the Sea’, p. 133.



their commonalities stop. In contrast, Kunikata foregrounds the *shōjo*'s psychological state, and her personal anxieties.²⁷ Kunikata makes critique by expressing her own seemingly powerless position as *shōjo*.

Takano Aya's paintings and drawings refer to the girl-only spaces imagined in *shōjo* culture combined with her inspiration from science fiction. As a *Micropop* artist, and a self-confessed science-fiction fan, Takano's art is described by Matsui as works made by an "adolescent" mind.²⁸ Placed in science-fiction backgrounds, Takano's *kawaii shōjo* become like aliens. The artist often has her *shōjo* as 'interstellar immigrants',²⁹ transiting through environments such as space, the sky, or underwater. In *It was under the Lucid Midday Light* (2001), the *shōjo* floats above the urban sight of power lines. *Yoshi & Meg on the Earth, Year 2036* (2002) is a painting in which two nude, waif-like *shōjo* fall from the night sky past the billboards and skyscrapers of one of Tokyo's urban centres. Contrasting the soft, thin bodies of the *shōjo* against the hyper-urban background shows the vulnerability and shock of these figures. There is a shape in the sky, perhaps a spaceship, which further suggests that they are fantastical aliens in this environment.

Takano visually refers to a fantasy (specifically, science-fiction) convention often found in *shōjo manga* and fictions. In Matsui's words, Takano is a creator of 'subversively feminine visions of Utopia'.³⁰ Separatist, female-only worlds found in fantastic *shōjo* fiction share in the tradition of feminist science-fiction and depictions of Utopia.³¹ Girl-only spaces, as found in *shōjo* fiction and other aspects of *shōjo* culture, are important because they expel the dominant patriarchal hegemony and thus allow for the expansion of the "girl consciousness" and a "community of fantasy". Takano and the aforementioned works of Aoshima Chiho also populate their landscapes exclusively with girls. Matsui reads this as a reference to the subversive qualities of *shōjo* science-fiction, because 'pursuing the question of women's place in an indifferent universe... became an especially vital medium of spiritual healing and empowerment for Japanese adolescent girls'.³²

Sawada Tomoko works with female identity in all its variable forms, including exploring the various signifiers for *shōjo*. She pushes definitions of what it is to be a self-portraitist through multiple acts of costume or role-play. At first glance, works such as *School Days / A* may look like an entire class of school-age *shōjo* and their teacher,

27 Lubow, "The Murakami method."

28 Matsui, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 158.

30 Matsui, 'Beyond the Pleasure Room to a Chaotic Street: Transformations of Cute Subculture in the Art of the Japanese Nineties', p. 211.

31 Baccolini, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

32 Matsui, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

but on closer inspection the faces, despite their different hair-cuts and expressions, have a certain sameness that suggests the masquerade that is actually happening: all figures are played by the artist. The *School Days* series brings up the essential role of schools to the formation of early *shōjo* culture and the hidden world of girls discussed by Kotani and Honda.

Sawada's transformations are domestic in their scope—her focus is exclusively on the human, and more specifically, on her many, many variations of the feminine. In her *Costume* series, this transformation is achieved by changing her attire in each photograph to suit different jobs. Eleanor Heartney positions Sawada as one of many artists who 'deal in a humorous way with the multiplication of identity, which might be read as a commentary on the kind of narcissism that makes all other humans an extension of oneself'.³³ This would be the case except for Sawada's more exclusive interest in female representation and 'specific feminine dilemmas'.³⁴

Yanagi Miwa consistently has women, and often *shōjo*, as her subject. Yanagi shows a recurring interest in the shifting dynamics of physical age and girlhood in the *My Grandmothers* series. As well as presenting images of ambiguity and contradiction, *My Grandmothers* disrupts conventional images of old age through fantastic narratives. This is achieved by her conscious selection of young women's fantasies of the future that go against the idealised image of the fragile, conceding and conservative elderly woman.³⁵ Yanagi presents young women—specifically, the *shōjo*—as a status far removed from social conventions such as marriage and child-rearing.

In *My Grandmothers*, real girls and young women are hypothetically projected into the future, as they speculate on what they think (or want) their future to be like in fifty years. As shown in the unexpected visions of the many *shōjo* subjects, the dreams of independence and her opposition to dominant gender conventions remain with them even though they are imagining their lives in their 60s, 70s and 80s. The "old girls" are unmarried and unattached to any conventional family structure, as if still in a state of girlhood. In Linda Nochlin's words, the women have held on to their 'self-determination and pleasure'³⁶ reminiscent of the *shōjo* lifestyle. To mention a couple of pieces, *Minami* (2000) imagines her older self as the eccentric owner of a Disney-style theme park being tended to by carers, while *Yuka* (2000) enjoys a ride on a sidecar speeding across the Golden Gate Bridge.

33 Heartney, 'Worldwide women', p. 154.

34 Zohar, *PostGender: Gender Sexuality and Performativity in Contemporary Japanese Art*.

35 Wakasa, 'Miwa Yanagi'.

36 Nochlin, 'Black, White, and Uncanny: Miwa Yanagi's *Fairy tale*', p. 232.



Feminist critic Ueno Chizuko notes that most of the *shōjo* subjects just imagine an extension of themselves ‘as they are now’³⁷ because ‘several of the grandmothers appear as cheerfully active and carefree as they are today’.³⁸ ‘As products of Japan’s affluent society, these women refuse to relinquish the privileges afforded them as children, even as they approach their thirties. So children they will remain, into old age’. Despite some subjects’ active and cheerful appearance, some others show serious cynicism about the future and have accordingly rejected heterosexual reproduction.³⁹ The expected vision of an 80-year-old granny sharing stories with her grandchildren is absent. So are men, or if they are represented at all, like Yuka’s boyfriend on the motorbike, they are as background.

Feminism and Contemporary Art

The artists mentioned above are typical contemporary artists. They move (with varying frequency) between Japan and other locations in order to sustain their international art careers. This, and other stories of successful Asian artists on the world stage, support the image described by Joan Kee of the globally mobile contemporary artist, who moves with relative ease between countries and cultures.⁴⁰ In some cases, such as Yanagi Miwa, it has also meant becoming bi-lingual or multi-lingual in order to discuss their work in foreign countries. In a statement that could apply to the hybridity of contemporary Asian art generally, Yanagi considers her art practice to be different to artists who come from a Western background because ‘my knowledge of the origins and history of what is referred to as Western fine art, and of modernism, was grafted later on to a base of novel, movie and manga subculture’.⁴¹ Despite this, Yanagi’s works have appealed to non-Japanese audiences as a significant part of the ‘world stage’⁴² of contemporary art and, more specifically, contemporary feminist art.

While its definition is often contested, third-wave feminism has come to shape contemporary feminism and feminist art through its emphasis on concepts such as intersection, contradiction and self-conscious politics. Third-wave feminism is historicised by Carisa Showden as a discourse informed by various notions of “new feminisms”, or so-called postfeminism, neo-feminism, etc., that began emerging in the 1980s and found momentum at the start of the 1990s.⁴³ The 1990s was a time when feminism’s interest in sexual and gender difference between men and women made way

37 Ueno, ‘Miwa Yanagi’, p. 61.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

39 Ueno points out that, statistically, men die younger than women, so the lack of male peers (i.e. husbands) is accurate as well as socially revealing (*Ibid.*, p. 61).

40 Kee, ‘Intersections: Issues in Contemporary Art in Asia’, p. 604.

41 Yanagi in ARTIT, ‘Interview with Yanagi Miwa’, p. 56.

42 Shohat, *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*, p. 9.

43 Showden, ‘What’s political about the new feminisms?’, p. 178.

for ‘an emphasis on the differences *among* women,’⁴⁴ shown by the popularity of referring to feminism as a plural, and best articulated with the terms second-wave versus third-wave feminism. By the beginning of the 1990s many theorists and artists were revising how feminist discourses relate to and align with other social and cultural revolutions such as queer studies, anti-racism and the post-colonial movement. Showden describes third-wave politics as:

...a committed focus on intersectional identities and multilayered discrimination. While intersectionality is not itself a “politics”, it is an attempt to shift the epistemological standpoint of feminism, providing a new subject position from which feminist critique is articulated.⁴⁵

In Showden’s analysis of the politics behind the new feminisms, she focuses on postfeminism’s popularist role as the forerunner for so-called “girlie” or girl power feminism (the catch-cry for iconic 1990s pop group The Spice Girls). It is a movement described as ‘the best known and largest group of third wavers.’⁴⁶ Girls, as opposed to women, have been embraced as a youth category as well as a state of mind in third-wave feminism. The following is third-wave feminists Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards’ definition of girlhood: ‘those grown women on *Sex in* [sic] *the City* who in their independence, their bonds with female friends, and their love of feminine fashion invoke a sense of eternal girlhood.’⁴⁷ In a key third-wave text, *Manifesta*, girlie feminism is defined as consisting of feminist principles ‘based on a reclaiming of girl culture (or feminine accoutrements that were tossed out with sexism during the Second Wave), be it Barbie, housekeeping, or girl talk.’⁴⁸ Jennifer Eisenhauer notes how, for a long time, the figure of the girl has been a ‘repeatedly othered subject within feminisms,’⁴⁹ but in third-wave feminism girls are often positioned as the “daughters” of second-wave feminism. While reference to daughters (in English or Japanese) can imply the seniority of a father over his child, in the third-wave context she comes from a patriarchal lineage. Therefore, as well as being a critique of racial hegemony and Western bias, third-wave ‘came to be specifically associated with a “young” feminist generation’⁵⁰ of self-described girls. Third-wave feminism is ideally positioned as the discourse for *shōjo*.

44 Friedman, *Mappings: feminism and the cultural geographies of encounter*, p. 69.

45 Showden, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

46 Showden, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

47 Baumgardner & Richards, ‘Feminism and Femininity: Or How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Thong’, p. 60.

48 Baumgardner & Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, p. 60.

49 Eisenhauer, ‘Mythic Figures and Lived Identities: Locating the “Girl” in Feminist Discourse’, p. 80.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 82.



Gender in *Shōjo* Culture

While Japan's popular culture has often mythologised the figure of the *shōjo* as an embodiment of contemporary Japanese culture's many vices and sexual anxieties, *shōjo* culture operates in a different space that is dictated only by Japanese girls' subjectivities and creative agency. Contemporary *shōjo* culture encompasses many different formats and levels of interaction. It is possible (but outside the limitations of this article) to explore many interesting gender-transgressive aspects of contemporary *shōjo* culture. *Kawaii* style, mentioned briefly above, has been analysed as a female-centred rejection of adulthood.⁵¹ Laura Miller presented cases of girls using photographic technologies, specifically the print-club sticker booths, to resist stereotypes.⁵² The famous Shibuya and Harajuku fashion revolutions involve girls who reject mainstream beauty standards in order to stand out.⁵³ In the world of *shōjo* fiction, including "boys love" genre and science fiction, there exists some outrageous narratives preoccupied with bodily transformation, gender homogeneity, and sexual autonomy.⁵⁴

Shōjo manga is an especially rich subject to draw out girls' expressions of gender transgression. To illustrate with an example, *The Rose of Versailles*—possibly the most iconic *shōjo* manga—was called a "revolutionary romance" by Deborah Shamoan.⁵⁵ Its narrative owes in part to the tradition of cross-gender roles already established in *shōjo* favourites Takarazuka Review and Osamu Tezuka's *Princess Knight*. It is about a female protagonist dressed as a male aristocrat (called Oscar), here set in lush, decadent, Rococo France. The "revolutionary" part comes from the way that Oscar, as captain of the royal guard, does not deceive others about her gender/sex. The manga also featured unprecedented "boudoir" scenes. At the time, with this type of content, Ikeda and her peers were pushing the limits of Japan's media censorship laws.⁵⁶ Throughout Oscar's various love affairs, with men and women, Ikeda consistently shows Oscar's inability or resistance to identify as either gender.⁵⁷ *Rose* signified the start of generations of *shōjo* manga creation and consumption inspired by bold experimentations with gender unlike anything else in contemporary Japanese culture.

The *shōjo* has built a communal space that negates girls' gender roles and its criticisms in the dominant, patriarchal Japanese society. Although the social position of the *shōjo* was determined by the Meiji government's efforts to raise "good wives and wise

51 Kinsella, 'Cuties in Japan'.

52 Miller, 'Bad Girl Photography'.

53 Kinsella, 'Black Faces, Witches, and Racism Against Girls'; Mackie, 'Transnational Bricolage: Gothic Lolita and the Political Economy of Fashion'.

54 Shamoan, 'Revolutionary Romance: The Rose of Versailles and the Transformation of Shōjo Manga'. Orbaugh, 'Busty Battlin' Babes: The Evolution of Shōjo in 1990s Visual Culture'.

55 Shamoan, *op. cit.*

56 Shamoan, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

57 Shamoan, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

mothers” (*ryōsai kenbo*), the resulting community is only for ‘*shōjo* interests’⁵⁸ and not the interests of future husbands or children. It is located within a broader sphere of “female culture”, developed in Japan’s often gender-segregated society. Inside the exclusively feminine realm of *shōjo* culture, girls have developed a creative space in which they are often awarded a special level of agency. This, Mari Kotani argued, reflected and fostered a more “pleasant” and independent time of a girl’s life not offered to girls or women in the greater society.⁵⁹ Kotani also suggested that, even beyond the period of girlhood (defined commonly in Japan as a state of pre-marriage and motherhood), women can still identify with some aspects of *shōjo* culture and continue to pursue their *shōjo* interests. It is the *shōjo*’s distinctive culture existing in defiance of her public association with vice that makes her a subject of intense interest from a gender studies perspective.

Socially, one of the key factors that shapes girls’ culture is the bedroom. Honda describes the girls’ bedroom as a place where ‘she spins a small cocoon around herself wherein to slumber and dream as a pupa, consciously separating herself from the outer world.’⁶⁰ The concept of the bedroom is not dissimilar to Virginia Woolf’s famous essay, *A Room of One’s Own*, in which Woolf espouses a modern woman’s need for a room as a symbol of privacy and income.⁶¹ It is an essential space for generating ‘new forms of art and of life.’⁶² In the cyber age, girls’ bedroom culture could also include online formats such as chat rooms and networking sites.⁶³ Most importantly, the social realm of the bedroom characterises *shōjo* culture as a private space, in which girls are shut away from the outside world. Furthermore, it is a social space in which only those who share similar interests (i.e. other girls or those with a girl consciousness) can participate.

Concluding Statements

Despite the strong creative expressions of gender subversion, *shōjo* culture is far from being perceived as a political movement. Honda explained this when she wrote, ‘girls...never assert themselves against those who deride them. Neither do they declare a clear “No” against the everyday order. Instead, they remain self-sufficiently in a corner, where they merely lithely continue to protect their own being.’⁶⁴ Her politics are mostly without consciousness. However, within the girl-only community, manga, fashion, and other creative outlets often provide *shōjo* participants with the expressive agency to say, “No”. As argued previously, *shōjo* culture may have been created by the

58 Kotani, ‘Alien Spaces and Alien Bodies in Japanese Women’s Science Fiction’, p. 55.

59 Kotani, ‘Doll Beauties and Cosplay’, p. 55.

60 Honda, ‘The Genealogy of Hirahira: Liminality and the Girl’, p. 20.

61 Black, ‘Virginia Woolf as Feminist’, p. 114.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 115.

63 Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, ‘Girls’ Web Sites: A Virtual “Room of One’s Own”?’, p. 173.

64 Honda, *op. cit.*, p. 36.



patriarchal system in pre-war Japan, but it ended up paradoxically being a space that barred the patriarchy to make a subversive culture of ‘aesthetic and sexual magic.’⁶⁵

In the very spirit of *shōjo* culture, the critique contained within the works is often a quiet, private protest heard only by other girls. In order to “unlock” the gender critique, one must have knowledge of *shōjo* culture and its preoccupations with gender-transgressive themes such as bodily transformation and girl-only worlds. Curator Kasahara Michiko had her own theory as to the invisibility of feminist expression in contemporary Japanese art, and society generally; ‘to defend themselves, the women appear to adopt the values of society, enjoying the benefits while pretending to do what they are told, when in fact they reject those values and seek a haven within a tiny world of their own.’⁶⁶ In other words, the women (and by this term Kasahara was especially speaking of the young generation of women/girls) hide their unrest to all but their own culture. Indeed, *shōjo* often appear ‘outwardly compliant as their way of dealing with their society when actually they are voiding its values.’⁶⁷

Similarly, the artworks analysed above have been presented in the past with little or no reference to the possibility that they may contain critique. Kasahara’s concept of the self-conscious female goes far to explain why feminism is not an overt activism in many contemporary practices in Japan. In fact, some young women artists (including Aoshima Chiho) deny any such political association.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, while contemporary Japanese art is hardly ever discussed through feminist discourse, there is at least one key third-wave characteristic, girlishness, in the practices of the featured young female artists who use the *shōjo* motif as a strategy of critique. If girls have a special role in third-wave feminism, then *shōjo* culture—with all its regionally specific gender-defying expressions—can be a potential site for global feminist art.

Literary scholar Takahara Eiri’s theory of the marginal girl consciousness also enforces this subversive role of *shōjo*. For Takahara, the *shōjo* is far more than a chronological reading of one’s age, gender and social status, but a specific identification with a creative community of girls.⁶⁹ It makes explicit the subversive consequences of a rejection of hegemonic gender in favour of the *shōjo*’s subjectivity. *Shōjo* are positioned as champions of fantasy and gender transgression. Despite outside perceptions, gender defiance is rife within *shōjo* culture. Most importantly, a girl consciousness is a peripheral position outside of the dominant gender system. He argues, ‘although there

65 Kotani, ‘Doll Beauties and Cosplay’, p. 57.

66 Kasahara, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

67 *Ibid.*, p. 101.

68 Kandel, ‘Chiho Aoshima: Oops I Dropped My Dumplings’, p. 41; Maerkele, ‘Miwa Yanagi Makes the Personal Public.’

69 Takahara, ‘The Consciousness of the Girl: Freedom and Arrogance.’

is nothing special per se about being a girl, the ability to view the world with the eye of the girl positions the person involved outside accepted gender categories.⁷⁰ The girl consciousness ‘is a view that valorises the fantastic... and through her consciousness of this, she will be astounded to discover a world that permits anything imaginable.’⁷¹

Three themes—Japanese girlhood, contemporary art, and feminism—have been combined here to argue for the important place of the *shōjo* motif in contemporary feminist art. The *shōjo* motif, if understood in its regional hybridity unique to Japan, can be considered a significant example of a gender issue affecting the global scope of contemporary feminist art today. *Shōjo* culture facilitates feminist interpretation due to its creative use of gender transgression in narratives, imagery and practices. The *shōjo* motif’s unique function in contemporary Japanese art “speaks the language” of contemporary, third-wave feminism. With her ambiguous, even contradictory, gender politics and creative expressions, the *shōjo* will continue to be at the centre of continuing cultural studies and feminist debate.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 189.

71 *Ibid.*, p. 193.



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