Queering Popular Culture: A Cultural Studies Approach Towards Recent Television Series in Japan and Taiwan

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Abstract

“Queer” can function as a noun, an adjective or a verb, but in each case is defined against the “normal” or normalizing, particularly the “heteronormativity” the society has constructed. Queer theory itself is a collection of intellectual engagements with the relations between sex, gender and sexual desire. That is, the Queer theory is what is against the social norm and the analyses of the power relations in the gender system and sexuality construction. Throughout the world, there is an increasing visibility of queer representation being perceived in mass media and popular culture. This paper focuses on how queer representation can be read in popular culture and media context especially in recent television and drama series from Japan and Taiwan. The case studies for examination include Hanazakari no Kimitachi e: Ikemen Paradise (2007), a Japanese drama based on the same-titled manga produced by Fuji Television and Two Fathers (2012), a Taiwanese drama produced by SET Television. Its purpose is to see how these two television products employ queer ideology under different cultural contexts and themes, including gender bender and homosociality concepts.

Keywords: Queer Theory, Queer Representation, Popular Culture, Television Series
Introduction

“Queer”, once an abusive and insulting term towards gay and lesbian, has recently been a marker for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community. It was even quite a “queer year” around the globe in 2013 as there were several debates and protests on legalization of same-sex marriage in different countries. Taiwan is one of the countries and the only one in the East-Asian region making its hard steps towards marriage equality\(^1\). Throughout the world, there is also an increasing visibility of queer representation being perceived in mass media and popular culture. However, what exactly “queer” actually is goes beyond the context of liberation and identity of gay and lesbian, as the term is not a fixed ideology. Queer theorists in academic disciplines embrace the term for its fluidity, not simply as a fixed and demarcated category (Raymond 2003). In general, “queer” can function as a noun, an adjective or a verb, but in each case is defined against the “normal” or normalizing, particularly the “heteronormativity” the society has constructed. Queer theory itself is a collection of intellectual engagements with the relations between sex, gender and sexual desire (Spargo 1999: 8-9). That is, the Queer theory is what is against the social norm and the analyses of the power relations in the gender system and sexuality construction.

This paper focuses on how queer representation can be read in popular culture and media context especially in recent television and drama series from Japan and Taiwan.

\(^1\) Executive Yuan of Taiwan government proposed legislation granting same-sex marriage under Human Rights Law in 2013. However, this action has arisen large controversies and debates in the country.
Also, it considers how this queer representation in visual media shows the perspectives reflecting on the term “queer” itself.

**Sex, Gender and Desire**

Before going further, it is essential to look at how the idea of sex/gender is constructed to define what is the normative and how queer studies has been developed since early 1990s. Queer theory employs a number of ideas from poststructuralist ideologies, including Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic models of decentered and unstable identity. Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction of binary conceptual and linguistic structures and Foucault’s model of discourse, knowledge and power also contribute to the knowledge of Queer theory (Spargo 1999: 40-1).

Judith Butler (1990) suggested that there is a compulsory order of sex, gender and desire. The distinction between sex and gender is that sex is to be fixed based on biological and scientific discourse. One is a male is because he is given a phallus, and that the other lacking of it, hence, to be a female. Whereas, gender is culturally constructed from what the sexed body is assumed. Gender is a performativity experienced by the individual as a naturally identity (Spargo 1999: 53). By given a male sex body, one performs or practices masculinity to be identified as a man. This duality of sex and the cultural construction of gender become problematic when it comes to intersex and transgender practice. If gender is the cultural extension of chromosomal sex, then the existence of XXY body and man performing femininity

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2 XXY body, known as Klinefelter Syndrome, is a genetic disorder resulting from additional X
body just prove that sex/gender construction is more ambiguous and complicated than the simple binary concepts and identification of sexuality.

The ambiguity and complexity have greater potential in arguing on sexual desire. Under heterosexual matrix and hegemonic society, sexuality is always constructed within the terms of discourse and power, where power is partially understood in terms of heterosexual and phallic cultural conventions (Butler 1990: 40). This power relations and hegemony notion are about men performing hegemonic masculinity to hold a certain power and control over the others who lack the phallic signifier. Heterosexuality and homophobia are the bedrock of hegemonic masculinity and any understanding of its meaning. The fundamental idea of the power relations in this heterosexual norm is treating women as sexual objects for men (Donaldson 1993: 645). In phallic cultural convention, performing masculine body signifies desire for social power, wealth and dominance.

As the term queer implies the quality of fluidity, it is a utopia conceptual of deconstructing all the binary coding of sex/gender/desire as a unity and ambiguity. The masculine hegemony and heterosexual power are being subverted, through the practices of different and “abnormal” gendered playing. As feminism liberation challenged dominance constructions of female as inferior and passive, so do LGBT liberation contested the representation of same-sex desire as unnatural and deviant (Spargo 1999: 28). Gender system itself is a trouble. A trouble indicates that there

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generic material in males.
might not be a standard norm. If the heteronormativity would collapse, then to what extent queer implicitly represents abnormal and odd in a subversive context.

**Queer Readings in Popular Culture**

Queer theorists have been reading both connotative and denotative meanings in popular culture context as the challenge to heterosexual hegemonic structure of mainstream opinion and representation. Like all marginalized minorities, gays and lesbians often found their cultural experience and participation constrained by a dominant culture in which they are generally ignored or oppressed. However, marginalized identities are not just oppressed by power, they are also constructed by that very same power relations. Historically, gays and lesbians have also related to mass culture in different ways, through an alternative and negotiated reception of the products and messages of popular culture (Creekmur & Doty 1995; Raymond 2003). The relationships between queerness and popular culture are not just about queer representation and queer identity, but the fundamental ideas of the complexities of gender trouble as well. The produced queer popular discourse might not target at the minority itself. Some of its purpose is to reach the fantasy of those heterosexual norm audiences.

In next sections, this paper looks into the readings of queer representation in popular culture and media context in recent television and drama series from Japan and Taiwan. The case studies for examination include *Hanazakari no Kimitachi e: Ikemen Paradise* (2007), a Japanese drama based on the same-titled manga produced
by Fuji Television (it is so popular that it has both Taiwanese and Korean adaptation and a remake in Japan in 2011) and Two Fathers (2012), a Taiwanese drama produced by SET Television. It is interesting to see how these two television products employ queer ideology under different cultural contexts and themes, including gender bender and homosociality concepts.

**Hanazakari no Kimitachi e: Ikemen Paradise (2007)**

Hanazakari no Kimitachi e: Ikemen Paradise, also known as Ike-para, is based on Hana-Kimi, a popular manga written by Hisaya Nakajo that has huge reception around the world (Figure 1, 2). The storyline in Ike-para is about how the protagonist, Mizuki Ashiya, cross-dressed as a boy in order to attend a all-boys’ boarding school so that she can approach to her athletic idol, Izumi Sano. Mizuki and Izumi then room together in the dorm and develop a deep relationship, and eventually to a romance as the narrative goes when Izumi discovers her true gender.

Manga is Japanese style of comic novel that usually is printed in black and white, and anime is usually the derivative animation version of the same manga. Shojo (literally ‘girls’) manga is a huge theme in Japanese manga generally includes young, sexy, feminine and subordinate female protagonists. “Gender Bender” is a subgenre under those shojo manga that features cross-dressing characters in a series or the cross-dressing character being the protagonist (Kornfield 2011: 214). While the narrative itself is not focusing on any homosexuality theme, Gender Bender genre consists of the element that gender is indeed troublesome. This reflects on the concept
of performativity of gender. Gender is a performance of what we do, rather what we are (Sloop 2004: 6). This subgenre is such a success in the market, and therefore some TV production companies start to take this concept to the television.

This cross-dressing practice is quite queer in a sense that throughout the narrative, some other male characters are even attracted to the feminine side of Mizuki. So even in the heterosexual narrative, Gender Bender still implicitly portrays homosexual relationship. However, this kind of relationship is again a trouble that makes the gender system more complicated. The narrative also tries to make certain tension on whether a punishment would happen after the true gender of the cross-dressing character is revealed. Well, at least in Ike-para, everyone seems to have happy ending in the end. So this actually ties to a fantasy that probably would not happen in the real world and maybe in Western social construction.

Gender bending in Japanese entertainment is historically linked to Kabuki Theater, where woman has been impersonated by male actor called onnataga (Figure 3) (Kornfield 2011: 217). The core idea is still on that performativity of gender. Boy can enact femininity and girl can enact masculinity, subverting the concept of gender norm. This seems to be acceptable and understandable in Japanese popular culture as not just Gender Bender, other Japanese pop art has been utilizing cross-dressing and transgender concept a lot such as Visual Kei (Figure 4) or some other cosplay performances. This creates a hybridity confusing the stereotypical gender identity and construction. From traditional Kabuki to heavy metal Visual Kei, Japanese society is comfortable to let their imaginary about gender go free and beyond the norm. But
somehow, the society itself is constructed in patriarchal sense; the imagination of hybridity could only be read and imagined through gender performance in artistic form. Rooted in this culture, Gender Bender manga and adapted TV dramas provide a more accessible and vivid way for audience to imagine gender negotiation and subversion. This Japanese television series provides the audience to experience the identity troublesome within the conventional gendered system. Moreover, it actually allows a certain fantasy realm for audience to explore the intrinsic desire and identity.

**Two Fathers (2012)**

*Two Fathers* is a typical “idol drama” series that casts popular actors in the entertainment industry in Taiwan as one of the production and promotion strategy (Figure 5). The storyline is about two single men forming a family and raising a daughter together. Even though there is no apparent gay or same-sex oriented content in the plot, the series still raise several discussions towards family unit constitutes two fathers and how traditional Taiwan society respond to it.

In a wider concept, this could also reflect on the homosociality ideology as mainstream media playing along with “bromance” context either in the West or East culture. Some scenes showing an intimacy of two males could be interpreted either as a couple by homosexual gaze or as homosocial brotherhood by heterosexual gaze. However, in conventional hegemonic discourse, could this same-sex friendly intimacy and family constitution maintain its power balance between the homosocial males, or could its subversive encodings destabilize the power relations, blurring the powers
and desires in an absurd way so that it could make the heterosexuals feel their queer desires while viewing it (Leonard 1998).

It is somehow obvious that this production targeting at certain audience that fancy “boy love” plot line. Apart from Gender Bender that generally subverts gender norm in heterosexual narrative, yaoi or Boys’ Love manga is another queer subversion directly narrating homosociality and homosexuality. Yaoi, implying acronym for yamanashi, ochinashi, iminashi which means “no climax, no point, no meaning” in Japanese, is a genre depicting erotica about male-male sexuality without a classical style of plot structure (McHarry 2010: 185). Surprisingly, this genre is mainly written by female Japanese artists and primarily markets at teenage girls and young women as well. It gains a huge popularity among heterosexual women in East-Asia region, as well as in the West, making it a presence in mainstream popular culture.

Even though the two protagonists in Two Fathers are straight, but the setting of the characters is deliberately designed to be seen as a gay couple sometimes. Audience still can see who plays the traditional father role and who plays the mother. One is much more masculine and the other tends to be feminine and housekeeping. There are several scenes the two perform like a couple, arguing, accidentally kissing, tying for each other, and massaging. It is queer in terms of airing this concept in the nighttime family television in Taiwan, challenging traditional ideology of normal family.

Interesting phenomena can also be seen in the fan-art creation or remake of the Two Fathers (Figure 6). Some of the fans have idealized two main characters as real
gay couple and make several fan-art based creation. This may lead to another fantasy depicting how the young audience escapes from that patriarchal reality into the world of drama story, subverting that gender identity into one of the effeminate male bodies that perhaps resemble the femininity figure in real life. This gives them the ability to dispossess the power they subconsciously long for. Furthermore, as LGBT community fights for their marriage equality right, this series serves as a model for them to show how different family structure could be as normal as others.

**Conclusion**

Besides television series, there are other media in mainstream worth to be explored on how queer and gender representation work, such advertising, film and music. In both Japan and Taiwan mainstream television media; Queer theory representations can be depicted in different contexts and contents. Both have their own historical cultural backgrounds that they follow. Different cultural construct and media strategy have assisted this evolution to make the queer ideology present in the mainstream. Whether it is gender performativity or same-sex family structure debate, mainstream television provides the opportunity for the society to discuss and pay some awareness to the diversity of sex and gender identity.

The relationship of these dramas with Japanese manga culture is also a potential to be further discussed and explored. Japanese manga and anime, perhaps, is the one that could bring the audience easily away from the reality, constructing a non-hegemonic norm fantasy in the animated world. It then attracts television producers and talents to
remake or adapt it to television broadcast. Unlike several other television productions in the West, the East-Asia region television productions still lack of some comedy dramas that tell gay and lesbian stories. The film and television that really depict homosexual stories in Japan and Taiwan are usually more serious and tragic. However, it is interesting to see how queer representation appears in the stories in different ways.

Popular culture keeps on challenging the conventional structure of sex and gender, and with queer identity is rising to draw more attention in mainstream media nowadays, it would probably just be more and more. After all, queer representation has existed in popular culture for quite a while and has destabilized the heteronormativity discourse. What is insightful behind this is the respect to the diversity within the gendered system. Whatever is norm or queer, both exist in the society. To what extent, this existence really causes a trouble and to whom that trouble is. It is the challenge to the hegemonic social construction to be more open-minded and pay awareness to the diverse sex, gender and desire.
Bibliography


**Figures**


Appendix

Figure 1. Actress Maki Horikita as protagonist Mizuki. (Source: Horikita Collection)

Figure 2. Ike-para soundtrack. (Source: Amazon Japan)
**Figure 3.** Bando Tamasaburo, a famous and celebrated *onnataga* in Japan. *(Source: Amazon Japan)*

**Figure 4.** Holy Grail by *Versailles*, a Japanese *Visual Kei* Band. *(Source: Amazon Japan)*
Figure 5. Two Fathers. (Source: SET)

Figure 6. Fan-art creation of Two Fathers. (Source: Apple Daily)