Jingai Characters in Japanese Popular Culture and Their Function as Proxies for Representing and Questioning Otherness

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Abstract: The present paper takes an interest in *jingai* characters as a meta-motif encompassing a wide array of nonhuman characters, the modern *jingai* genre that makes use of the motifs, and their relationship with human protagonists. Despite their often-emphasized entertainment value and eroticization, *jingai* titles chiefly revolve around questioning the relationship between the self and the Other in a society that still values homogeneity and conformism. We will see not just how declinations of otherness are approached through a variety of *jingai* archetypes, but also how they can be used to bypass taboos that are often related to the expectations of conformism. Two of the genre's recurring themes are sexuality– notably, taboo female homosexuality and sexual education–and the place of foreigners in a society that is still very ethnically homogeneous; however, the genre is not limited to these two, and while societal inquests are a core aspect, we will also need to underscore the liminal relationship between this function and the genre's eroticized, sometimes pornographic, aspects. While an insufficient exploration of the genre, this paper constitutes its first overview in academia.

Introduction

Japanese fantasy currently dominates most literary and graphic popular culture media, occupying the better half of the top 10 sales rankings in recent years (Escande, 2021a, pp. 76–77). Many of its motifs are borrowed from various mythologies, mostly Western. They are now part of the local cultural landscape, and Western elements have become a prominent feature of Japanese fantasy (Escande, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b; Shimokusu, 2016; Date, 2013), which is a phenomenon in which *jingai-mono* play only a small part. Many of Japanese fantasy subgenres exhibit the characteristics of fundamentally subversive titles, in line with various scholars' descriptions of fantasy's function. For Miéville, 'We need fantasy to think the world, and to change it' (Miéville, 2002, p. 42), and fantasy 'embed[s] potential transformation and emancipation in human thinking' (p. 46). Other scholars who share in approaching fantasy as an exploration of reality and/or society include Lance Olsen (1988, p. 108), and Temenuga Trifonova (2006, pp. 183–184), among others. These scholars do not see fantasy as unproductive escapism; rather, they view it as a way to question the real, the society, the Other, and the self. As we will see later, such lines of questioning are the raison d'être of many Japanese fantasy titles.

Susan Joliffe Napier covered some of this genre's aspects through one of its earlier incarnations: the alien in Japanese fantasy (1996, pp. 93–141). Such aliens are actual extraterrestrials, but as Napier demonstrated, they are also, in wider terms, proxies for representations of the Other. Since then, the use of aliens as motifs for such purposes has declined, but many others have appeared. Our paper focuses on

how *jingai* have recovered a wide array of nonhuman characters that were borrowed from several mythologies or earlier fictional works, both local and foreign. The present paper uses *jingai* in three ways: as the study's genre object, which is written as *jingai-mono*; to describe any nonhuman, sentient, humanoid character, which is written as *jingai character*; and as a meta-motif for encompassing the sum of former characters at the genre's core.

This paper will focus on the current state of *jingai* representations in the Japanese social context in which they function as proxies for very humane representations. That function is itself linked to the workings of fantasy as a genre, regarding which our stance differs from Napier's on only one point. She states that 'Despite the popular culture celebrations, most Japanese fantasy exists as a counter-discourse to the modern, even when it is most blatantly escapist. For we would like to emphasize that even escapist fantasy can be subversive' (1996, p. 8). While Napier made use of the expression 'despite*'*, we argue that, on the contrary, it is precisely *because* of their nature as popular culture that Japanese fantasy works are able to exist as counter-discourse, and precisely because they are escapist that they can exist in a society where self-censorship is common. At the genre's core, there is an inquest regarding interpersonal relationships in contemporary Japanese society. Rather than directly underscoring and representing problems through realistic depictions like some non-fantasy works do, they make use of proxies to treat subjects that are often taboo in Japanese society.

The Nature and Function of *Jingai-Mono*: What, from Where, When, How, and Why?

Just because titles represent nonhuman characters does not mean that they qualify as modern *jingai-mono*. If that were true, most current Japanese fantasy could be classified as such. As a genre, modern *jingai-mono* revolves around the representation of intelligent nonhuman characters and their interactions with human protagonists (barring a few exceptions representing *jingai* characters exclusively, but functioning identically). Emphasis is placed on interpersonal interactions, and this differs in focus and scope from other Japanese fantasy subgenres where similar motifs are used with different intentions. With *jingai-mono*, Japanese protagonists learn to deal with nonhuman alter ego in the context of Japanese contemporary society. We will argue that *jingai-mono* therefore serves as a means of negotiating the Other's increasingly imposing presence and/or conscience, whether it be foreigners or the opposite sex among others, thereby crystallizing current preoccupations in Japanese society.

While the current trend is a recent phenomenon, as a word, *jingai* is not new. It originally covered, quite literally, all that is not human, both in the natural and the supernatural orders. However, this paper will confirm a sharply narrowed definition for contemporary use. Recent uses, mostly in popular culture titles and their paratext, describes nonhuman characters in the context of fantasy titles. The word's resurfacing as an umbrella appellation is recent, and it coexists with other terms, such as *ajin* (lit. 'demi-human',), *monsutā musume* (lit. 'monster girls' for often eroticized female characters), and *jūjin* (lit. 'beast men' that exhibit more

prominently animalistic features), whose meanings overlap to some extent. *Jingai* roughly subsume them.

Since the term is older than its use in the present paper, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact timing of its popularization. However, we can situate both the modern *jingai* trend's origin and the term's spread at the start of the 2010s. In 2011 alone, there were three manga revolving around centaurs in human society: *Hatarake Kentaurosu* (lit. 'Work, centaur!'*)* by Esuto Emu, which revolves around a centaur *salaryman* who is struggling to fit into human society, attracted scholarly attention for its representations of male homosexuality and otherness as well as its gender criticism and treatment of themes such as social inequality in a light-hearted fashion that is aimed at a female audience (Lee, 2016). Others are *A Centaur's Life* (Murayama 2013–), which revolves around a high school-aged centaur girl and her otherness-related problems that are typical of a human adolescent; and several stories from the anthology *Ryū no Gakkō wa Yama no Ue* (lit. 'Dragon school is at the top of the mountain') by Kui Ryōko, which share similar settings involving *jingai* high schools. In 2012, Okayado's manga *Monster Musume* (lit. 'Monster girls', 2013–2019) became a hit in Japan. It features not only a centaur character but also a lamia, harpy, mermaid, slime-girl, dullahan or spider-woman. The title is based on the author's internet submissions to the adult bulletin board system PINK Channel from 2007 onward. A Google Trends keyword analysis for 2004-2021 has confirmed a steady increase in the usage of the term starting around the mid-2010s (Figure 1).

Another point of interest that underscores the establishment of *jingai-mono* as a popular, recognized genre is the publication of the anthology *Kemomo* as two special issues of Tokuma Shoten Publishing Co., Ltd.'s *Monthly Comic Ryū* (*Gekkan Komikku Ryū*) *(Kemomo 1*, *Comic Ryū Anthology*, 2011; *Kemomo 2*, *Comic Ryū Anthology,* 2011). *Kemomo* was dedicated to the genre, and the works it welcomed were mostly representative of its most eroticized aspects, but also included tamer titles such as *A Centaur's Life*. It was subtitled 'Fawning on jingai ♡ Anthology' (*jingai moe ♡ansorojii*). Titles that have made use of such a wide array of highly idiosyncratic motifs regrouped under a blanket identity as *jingai* and grew thereafter, constituting the basis for the term's current popular use.

Jingai as Proxies: Bypassing Taboos

Sociologist Munesuke Mita stated that an 'age of fiction' started in the 1970s, revolving around a shift away from realist narratives anchored in consensus reality towards escapist alternative worlds (2011, p. 523). Expanding on Mita's theories, Miyadai Shinji divided the age of fiction into two periods, marking a shift at around 1996, after which 'reality and fiction are registered side by side in the database of material available for the homeostasis of the self' (2011, p. 235). In psychology, homeostasis is defined as equilibrium and the processes that prevent its disturbance, and maintain and restore it (1955, pp. 85, 89–90). When we consider Mita's and Miyadai's comments, we can see how such considerations are important to fantasy and its subgenres, including jingai-mono. With fictional works having been assigned a value that is on par with everyday experience, jingai-mono is able to

function as an efficient inquest that intimately involves the audience, providing experience and input that are equivalent to those in real everyday life. As such, it constitutes a valid point of comparison for (re)thinking and (re)evaluating society, the self, the Other, and the relationships between them, and this is a process that operates in line with Miyadai's homeostasis of the self.

The modern jingai question still lacks extensive scholarly treatment, but we can mention research on representations of aliens in Japanese popular culture as a related inquiry. For that, we will borrow Napier's words:

> Whether internal or ideological, the ultimate impact of the alien in modern Japanese fantasy is a profound one. Appearing within a society that prides itself on its homogeneity and stability, the disturbing and destabilizing function of the alien cuts across both textual and extratextual boundaries to trouble, provoke, and emancipate some hidden part of the reader's sense of self and world. (1996, p. 97)

Based on what Napier has described, *jingai* are probably an even clearer incarnation. Mark Siegel also analyzed the alien motif in Japanese popular culture as a way of representing foreigners and their influences as dangerous to the Japanese societal order and its ethnic and cultural homogeneity; Japanese protagonists are supposed to vanquish this danger (Siegel, 1985, pp. 258–262), Indeed, the use of nonhuman characters to represent the Other is not new in Japan. We would argue that while both *jingai* and aliens share a common core, a paradigm shift separates them, given that there has been a change from aliens as a danger to the social order to *jingai* as a tool for learning and interacting. Such a shift can be seen as reflecting changes in Japanese society in light of increased immigration and a quickly ageing population. What was once seen as a scary possibility, as Siegel described (1985, pp. 254–255), seems now understood as an unavoidable reality with which people must cope and about which there are many current active discussions. Besides Napier's and Siegel's aliens, we can also mention the example of the *oni* (Reider, 2003, pp. 147–149, 152–153).

Again, *jingai-mono*'s idiosyncrasy among those representations of the Other is its emphasis on interactions between those who embody otherness and human protagonists. One major theme is that of cohabitation, either at an individual or household level, or at the level of Japanese society. As an example of the latter, Yōko Tamotsu's *Midnight Occult Civil Servants* (2015–) revolves around the public servants who work at a secret bureau that is dedicated to ensuring that humans and nonhumans coexist in Tokyo. Another previously mentioned example, which is now more narrowly focused on protagonist experiences, is Okayado's *Monster Musume* (2013–2019). The protagonist is a student named Kimihito Kurusu who gets involved in the 'Interspecies Cultural Program'. Mimicking the host families system that welcomes foreign students, the government-backed programme does not target ordinary foreigners, but rather, those from other worlds. While this title is highly eroticized, through the use of *jingai*'s proxies, it represents alterity, more specifically that of both the foreigner and the other sex, albeit via admittedly lighter representations.

Another title that uses *jingai* characters as proxies for foreigners is Shoji Gatō and Range Murata's light novel *Cop Craft: Dragnet Mirage Reloaded* (2009-11-18~ongoing) in which a trans-dimensional gate that appears over the Pacific Ocean changes society drastically by creating a world that is no longer ethnically homogenous because, inspired by heroic-fantasy titles, foreigners from other dimensions and species, such as an elf-like race or fairies, now live among humans. The title's setting is our world, but its events mostly take place on a fictional island in the Pacific Ocean; however, given its Japanese protagonist, it still maintains strong ties to Japan. Interestingly, these themes overlap with current concerns over immigration in the archipelago. While the number of foreigners living in Japan increased in recent years, the country is still ethnically homogenous with only 2.29% foreigners as of 2022 (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Statistics Bureau, 2022). However, these ongoing demographic changes have provoked unease with respect to foreigners among a number of Japanese (Morita, 2015).

Another title that gives us clear examples of representations of difficulties that arise as a result of nonhuman others in society is Petos' *Interviews with Monster Girls* in which the setting is a school where the *jingai* students occupy a social space that is reminiscent of foreign students'. The main characters include a snow woman from Japanese folklore (an exception in this title), a vampire and a dullahan students, as well as a succubus teacher. The major themes revolve around physical difficulties that are related to being different. These differences are not anchored in individual idiosyncrasies, but rather in race-specific peculiarities, though they obviously mirror human concerns. When these obstacles are eventually vanquished, the title revolves around underlying themes of mutual and self-acceptance as well as cohesion in spite of differences. As is often the case with the genre's most archetypal titles, all the *jingai* characters are female.

While it is true that most *jingai-mono* revolves around a male protagonist and nonhuman women, exceptions exist. In Kore Yamazaki's *The Ancient Magus' Bride* (2015–), the protagonist, Chise Hatori, is purchased as a male fey's slave and taken as both bride and disciple. The title explores interpersonal relationships in which reaching mutual understanding is arduous because of fundamentally different natures. Both cross-cultural and male–female relationships are mirrored in this title's *jingai* considerations. Meanwhile, Coolkyoushinja's *Miss Kobayashi's Dragon Maid* (2016–) offers a representation of female homosexuality, which is often a taboo subject in Japanese society. As the title makes clear, the protagonist, Kobayashi, a career woman, ends up having a female dragon in her service as a maid, who is trying to court her. When lesbianism is spoken of in Japan, it is often characterized as antisocial since both womanhood and wifehood, as women's primary roles, are conflated with giving birth and the sphere of the (traditional) family (Chalmers, 2002, pp. 43–44). Positive depictions of female homosexuality are rare, and fantasy provides a more forgiving ground for them through the proxy of *jingai* women.

Sexual orientation is not the only sexuality-related topic that can find more palatable representation through *jingai-mono*. Recent studies and surveys on sexual

education have pointed to several problems wherein high school students feel that they have insufficient and incorrect sexual knowledge due, in part, to the pointlessness of sexual education in schools ("About 40% of Japanese Teens Say Sex Education at School Is Useless," 2018; Brasor, 2018; Watanabe et al., 2018, pp. 7–8) While several non-fantasy titles have approached sexuality directly, these are usually intended for older audiences and therefore have more serious undertones. Whether to reach a younger audience or simply as a light-hearted alternative, nonhuman characters can and are used to respond to this social need. It is noteworthy that, in such cases, *jingai-mono*'s tendency to revolve around a human and often male protagonist falls into the minority with the main characters being made *jingai*, perhaps to allow for the subject to be treated with some degree of comfortable distance while maintaining a reasonable level of familiarity. In *A Centaur's Life* (Murayama 2013–), Japanese high school students are portrayed through various mythological creatures. The manga's first chapter starts with the protagonist—a centaur girl—sharing concerns with other *jingai* girls about dating an angel and her first sexual experience. All within a few pages, it then entertainingly moves on to the potentially looming problem of the male's penis size followed by the protagonist's lack of confidence about the appearance of her vulva. Although *jingai* proxies facilitate the light-hearted coverage of such subjects, they are by no means limited to gag value; rather, they embody aspects of sexual education. That aspect is especially important when considering sexual education problems in contemporary Japan, as previously mentioned. If these topics had been realistically depicted, even via the same media, they might have been much harder to sell.

Conclusion

Although we have established an outline of the phenomenon, we must admit that it is difficult to establish a clear-cut line in *jingai-mono* between social inquiry, pure entertainment value, and sexual fetishism. The origin of modern *jingai-mono*'s popularity as a genre being partly rooted in pornographic content muddle the water further despite the already noticed societal value of some works. Having underscored that *jingai* representations allow writers and audiences to deal with interpersonal relationships, otherness, and related taboos in contemporary Japanese society, it would be hard to pretend that it exclusively concerns itself with such matters. In the context of mass-market Japanese popular culture, entertainment value is primordial, and some titles go lighter on subtext in favor of humorous or eroticized depictions. This does not detract from the genre's function; on the contrary, it allows it to reach audiences that may not have taken an interest in more serious treatments of usually taboo subjects. However, the fetishization of *jingai* characters also needs to be underscored. Indeed, *jingai* characters are not only proxies for human representations, but they are also targets of strong sexual fetishism. Can—and should—we separate these two aspects of *jingai?* Are they two faces of the same coin?

Our overview suggests that, despite such sexualized representations, *jingai-mono* titles function as a way to question and think about otherness and the self, otherness

and society, the self and society, and each dyad's respective relationships and problems. Furthermore, it suggests that lighter treatments combined with *jingai* representations can allow for usually taboo subjects to be covered, such as sexual education questions or offering representations of subjects, like female homosexuality, that are usually shunned. This was, however, only a rough overview of the genre. Further exploration of many of its aspects, such as the genre's ambivalent straddling of sexualization and social inquest, the context of the early 2010 significance for its establishment, but also proper textual analysis of works pertaining to the genre is needed. This short paper constitutes but a step in the clearing of a still largely unexplored field, especially in its contemporary incarnation.

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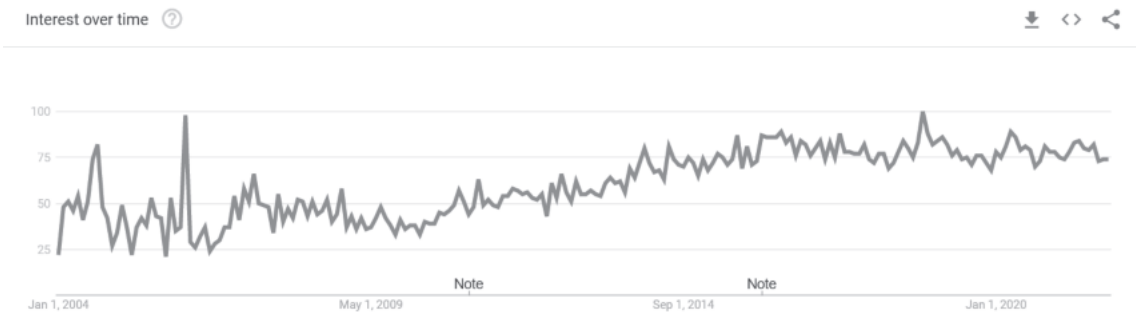
Appendice

Figure 1 Search interest over time for the term jingai in Japanese, for Japan



(*Google Trends for Jingai, 1/1/04 - 12/31/2021*)