

## Trekking with Mark McLelland to the Ends of Japanese Popular Culture

[Alisa Freedman](#)

When I think about Mark McLelland's approach to research and collaboration, the metaphor that comes to mind is trekking—to boldly go into academic areas where few scholars have gone before and to bring colleagues along for the journey. Mark led us through wild, underexplored territories of Japanese Studies. He expanded the purview of existing disciplines like Sociology and Cultural History and cultivated emerging fields like Japanese Popular Culture Studies and Sexuality Studies. He laid trails for researchers who wanted to write about texts deemed inappropriate for academic monographs because they included subversive or sexualised content or because they were produced by fans—materials as diverse as *fūzoku* magazines (focused on odd sexual practices and customs), *aniparo* (parodies of anime and manga) and *dōjinshi* (fan-created zines). He voiced the legal and ethical questions weighing on the minds of teachers who found themselves relying on non-traditional materials, like manga translated by fans, in their classrooms. He organised forums for discussion and debate, edited publications and mentored younger scholars. As explained below, Mark's explorations in Japanese popular culture were among his most adventurous treks and brought together scholars from diverse backgrounds and at different stages of their careers.

I always liked when Mark McLelland got personal and wrote about what inspired his treks.<sup>[1]</sup> In tribute, I will do the same and balance discussion of some of Mark's academic achievements with some of my favourite memories. I do so to show how Mark initiated collaborations that transformed how we research, teach and write, and to celebrate a treasured friendship. Recounting personal stories such as these helps us to reflect on where we are in our own work, where we have been, where we still need to go and the people who shape our trajectories.

I first met Mark at the 2008 Association for Asian Studies (AAS) Annual Meeting in Atlanta. I gave a presentation about how the collectively written, highly edited Internet novel *Densha otoko* (Train Man), and its various visual adaptations, promoted a new kind of masculinity—the compassionate 'otaku' (avid fan, in this case, of video games, computer technologies, manga and anime)—in 2004 and 2005, a time of Internet growth and falling birthrates in Japan. After the panel, Mark approached me and asked on the spot if I wanted to attend the Japanese Transnational Fandoms and Female Consumers conference he was organising at the University of Wollongong that July. I immediately said yes. Little did I know that this conference would change the course of my career. There, I met scholars who became collaborators and friends, including Carolyn Brewer, Romit Dasgupta, Vera Mackie, Kazumi Nagaike and Christine Yano. Romit later introduced me to James Welker. At the closing party, Romit and I brainstormed conference panels on gender and Japan, and Christine and I discussed plans for a project that became, with Laura Miller, a co-edited volume on

*Modern Girls on the Go: Gender, Mobility, and Labor in Japan*.<sup>[2]</sup> My 'Train Man' paper was published in a special issue of *Intersections* that Mark edited and became my first article on Japanese popular culture.<sup>[3]</sup> I later submitted a spinoff study on how nascent Internet and mobile media transformed notions of books, authors and readers to the *Routledge Companion to Global Internet Histories*, edited by Mark and Gerard Goggin.<sup>[4]</sup> Mark and my collaboration and friendship grew during subsequent conferences and urban hikes in cities spanning four continents. We hashed out ideas while t-shirt shopping in Tokyo. I was there when he bought that light-blue shirt with outlines of Mt. Fuji which he wore to conferences almost as much as he did his button-down with birds (Figures 1 and 2). I presented with Mark at eleven conferences and contributed to three of his edited books and journal issues. I hope Mark knew how grateful I was—and still am—that he lingered after that 2008 AAS panel.

With Mark, one project led to another; intertwined timely themes, current events and historical forces; and encouraged collaborations between interdisciplinary scholars. Especially between around 2012 and 2019, Mark led a multifaceted investigation of how the growth of the Internet gave rise to fans and fan communities who created new patterns for globalising Japanese popular culture, and, whether intentionally or not, challenged both Japan's commercial practices and national branding efforts and their own local copyright laws and regulations over media content. Concurrently, he analysed how fans drove the need for Japanese popular culture courses at global universities, thereby changing educational curricula and disciplinary training. Mark's 2017 edited volume, *The End of Cool Japan: Ethical, Legal, and Cultural Challenges to Japanese Popular Culture* (hereafter, *The End of Cool Japan*) merged these trajectories. The book stemmed from 'legal and ethical issues raised by ... research into Japanese popular culture due to some significant legislative and cultural differences between Australia and Japan.'<sup>[5]</sup>

*The End of Cool Japan*, like many of Mark's projects, was born out of his reflections on being a student, teacher and researcher. In the insightful book introduction, he maps his own trajectory in Japanese Studies, from graduate study in the 1980s on Japanese religion to his first book on *Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan* and beyond. He wrote,

I went on to show how this interest in sex and gender nonconformity was hardly a contemporary trend but had been evident across a range of Japanese media since content restrictions (excepting politically sensitive issues) were lifted in the occupation period in 1945. A close engagement with and study of the 'popular' has been central to my academic career from the very beginning.<sup>[6]</sup>

Mark's experiences personalise historical developments in Japanese Studies and function as rhetorical devices binding the book together.

*The End of Cool Japan* took shape as the Japanese Government and content industries jointly strove to boost tourism and the domestic economy through the globalisation of certain forms of Japanese culture. The overarching signifier 'Cool Japan' (*Kūru Japan*) has been used in Japan to denote a national image inspired by global popularity for select kinds of mainstream manga, anime and other cultural products. As Mark observed, official promotion of Cool Japan was accompanied with increased control over the content and circulation of Japanese culture both domestically and overseas. Governments, including those of Japan, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States, have regulated Japanese manga and anime.<sup>[7]</sup> Mark drew academic attention to case studies of fan arrests that disclosed legal discrepancies and contradictions in content rating. He raised question about whom regulators were trying to protect—their fictional characters or assumed audiences?

Teaching and researching Japanese popular culture have involved materials that violate licensing and copyrights and contain 'adult' content; indeed, whether teachers and students realise it or not, the study of some Japanese popular culture is illegal. This became increasingly problematic as teachers and students brought online materials to school. In *The End of Cool Japan*, Mark expounded on the challenges of 'teaching Japan in the convergent classroom' (where different media forms are analysed together) to students who 'occupy multiple roles as fans, students and producers,' an issue he had approached in other publications.<sup>[8]</sup> How do teachers explain to students that, in their efforts to build communities by circulating Japanese trends, they have been unintentional 'pirates,' and by remixing trends, they have been inadvertent plagiarists? There is also the question of the legality in any particular jurisdiction of content that depicts characters who may or may not be of legal age in sexual situations. Mark asks,

What role, if any, do educators have in alerting students to the problematic nature of studying, consuming, producing and disseminating contentious media content? How do we support students, balancing the need for academic freedom against requirements to live by the ethical and legal frameworks set by local authorities?<sup>[9]</sup>



**Figure 1.** Mark McLelland at *The End of Cool Japan* Conference, Michigan, 2014, photograph by Alisa Freedman.



**Figure 2.** Mark McLelland at the European Association for Japanese Studies Conference, 2017, photograph by Alisa Freedman.

*The End of Cool Japan* germinated in a panel at the 'Teaching Japanese Popular Culture' conference organised by Deborah Shamoon, Chris McMorrnan and Kam Thiam Huat and held at the National University of Singapore, in November 2012. It grew in a workshop on 'The End of "Cool Japan"? Ethical, Legal, Political and Cultural Challenges for Japanese Popular Culture,' held at the University of Michigan in April 2014, that, as Mark wrote, 'Looked at growing concern expressed, particularly in the Anglophone media, about certain aspects of Japanese popular culture that are considered inappropriate for youth audiences, or even for today's undergraduates.'<sup>[10]</sup> Contributors presented chapters at the 'Manga Futures: Institutional and Fan Approaches in Japan and Beyond' conference, held at the University of Wollongong at the end of November and beginning of December 2014. At each

stage, Mark included additional scholars in the conversation, making his study increasingly well-rounded. Contributors to *The End of Cool Japan* hail from Japan, Australia, Canada, the United States, China and elsewhere in Asia. Chapters explore such issues as the globalisation of Japanese media under anti-pornography laws in Australia, Canada and China; gender and cultural biases perpetuated by Cool Japan strategies; teaching fansubs, fandubs and fanfiction; researching culture that is 'unpopular in Japan' (like Lolicon, 'Lolita complex' media featuring fictional prepubescent girls); and transcultural manga in the Philippines and Indonesia. Following Mark's lead, contributors integrated their research data and personal experiences. As a result, more than an explication of the term 'Cool Japan' and what it encompasses and elides, *The End of Cool Japan* is a genealogy of the field of Japanese Popular Culture Studies, uncovering power relationships in the production of knowledge and how the field has been controlled and disciplined through institutions, laws and language.

Concurrently, the contributors of *The End of Cool Japan* argue that teachers need to make their students aware of how they have collaborated in the global spread of Japanese popular culture while circulating texts considered 'un-cool' by promoters of Cool Japan; how they have challenged laws and regulations governing the dissemination of media products; and how they have revealed fissures in international systems of control. *The End of Cool Japan* offers research methodologies and pedagogical strategies for professors who are using their training in anthropology, literature, art and other disciplines to tackle these thorny issues and to cultivate the field of Japanese Popular Culture Studies. *The End of Cool Japan* is also a call for action: for the establishment of clearer ethical guidelines and legal standards in how we consume, produce, research and teach media.

Mark's projects inspired spinoffs. For example, *The End of Cool Japan* led to conference panels and roundtable discussions on media misrepresentations of Japan and an essay on teaching manga in the convergent classroom published in *Introducing Japanese Popular Culture*.<sup>[11]</sup> Reflect, converse, research, collaborate, conference, write—and work extremely hard. This is how Mark approached academic issues important to him. Mark was an acute editor as well as a skilful collaborator and lucid writer. Mark's treks took Japanese Studies in new directions and expanded the number of scholars in the field. Trekking with Mark led me to discover a major strand of my work: the impact of Japanese popular culture on gender, education, globalisation and artistic production. Mark's treks into unexplored areas of academia have enlightened us all. He made the world a better place for having been in it. I will fondly remember my journeys with Mark and will miss them dearly.

## Notes

[1] Examples include Mark McLelland, 'Ethical and legal issues in teaching about Japanese popular culture to undergraduate students in Australia,' *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies* 13(2) (6 September 2013), URL: <https://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/ejcs/vol13/iss2/mclelland.html>, accessed 3 June 2021; Mark McLelland, 'Introduction: Negotiating "Cool Japan" in research and teaching,' in *The End of Cool Japan: Ethical, Legal, and Cultural Challenges to Japanese Popular Culture*, edited by Mark McLelland, 1–31, Oxford: Routledge, 2017, doi: [10.4324/9781315637884](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315637884); Mark McLelland, 'Managing manga studies in the convergent classroom,' in *Introducing Japanese Popular Culture*, edited by Alisa Freedman and Toby Slade, 93–103, Oxford: Routledge, 2018, doi: [10.4324/9781315723761-9](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315723761-9).

[2] Alisa Freedman, Laura Miller and Christine R. Yano (eds), *Modern Girls on the Go: Gender, Mobility, and Labor in Japan*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013, doi: [10.1515/9780804785549](https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804785549).

[3] Alisa Freedman, 'Train Man and the gender politics of Japanese "otaku" culture: The rise of new media, nerd heroes, and consumer communities,' in 'Japanese Transnational Fandoms and Female Consumers,' special issue of *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific*, edited by Mark McLelland, 20 (April 2009),

URL: <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue20/freedman.htm>, accessed 3 June 2021.

[4] Alisa Freedman, 'Cellphone and Internet novels: How digital literature changed print books,' in *The Routledge Companion to Global Internet Histories*, edited by Mark McLelland and Gerard Goggin, pp. 412–24, Oxford: Routledge, 2017, doi: [10.4324/9781315748962](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315748962).

[5] Mark McLelland, 'Acknowledgment,' in *The End of Cool Japan*, edited by McLelland, xiii–xiv, p. xiii. Earlier publications include Mark McLelland, 'Australia's "child-abuse materials" legislation, internet regulation, and the juridification of the imagination,' *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 15(5) (2012): 467–83, doi: [10.1177/1367877911421082](https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877911421082); Mark McLelland, 'Thought policing or protection of youth? Debate in Japan over the "Non-Existent Youth Bill",' *International Journal of Comic Art* 13(1) (2011): 348–67.

[6] McLelland, 'Introduction,' p. 5.

[7] McLelland, 'Ethical and legal issues.'

[8] See, for example, McLelland, 'Ethical and legal issues.' Mark uses media scholar Axel Bruns's term 'producers' for Internet users who produce and circulate content.

[9] McLelland, 'Ethical and legal issues.'

[10] McLelland, 'Acknowledgement,' p. xiii.

[11] McLelland, 'Managing manga studies in the convergent classroom.'

MAIN

---

Published with the support of Gender and Cultural Studies, School of Culture, History and Language, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.

URL: <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue46/freedman.html>

© Copyright

Page constructed by [Carolyn Brewer](#)

Last modified: 18 Dec. 2021 1037