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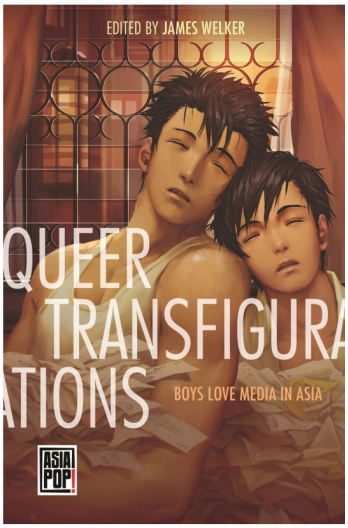

James Welker (editor)

Queer Transfigurations: Boys Love Media in Asia

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Queer Transfigurations: Boys Love Media in Asia edited by James Welker is a text that goes beyond the traditional scope of Boys Love (BL) Studies. While BL texts have historically been viewed through a Japanese lens, Welker's work takes a global perspective, examining these texts' historical and cultural impacts across various cultures. This inclusive approach, which considers the influence of BL on sexual identification among primarily cisgender heterosexual women and members of the queer community, offers a much-needed perspective on BL studies that is thoroughly and respectfully articulated. Welker notes in the introduction, and reiterates at the end of the book, BL is transnational, disruptive, political and cannot be distinguished from broader queer movements. Each chapter in this volume blatantly makes the case that these elements work in tandem, and consequently, as BL acts as a transformative agent, it also blurs the boundaries of reality and text.

The book's transnational and cultural component is evident in its construction. It contains 19 chapters and is divided into four sections: East Asia (Chapters 2–9), Southeast Asia (Chapters 10–15), South Asia (Chapter 16), and Border Crossing (Chapters 17–19). Collectively, these chapters revolve around Welker's concept of transfiguration, which, in the context of BL, is described as the 'ripples of change' (p. 3) that emerge because of BL forming its own distinct identity within a culture while maintaining the elements associated with its Japanese origin. Throughout these chapters, BL from a total of 12 countries is explored, further demonstrating how BL is transcultural and transnational.

The first chapter, authored by Welker, provides an overview of the existing literature on Anglophone and Japanese BL scholarship. It also introduces the concept of 'transfigurations,' a core component of Welker's analysis. He describes transfigurations as 'transnational flows of culture' (p. 3), a cultural exchange between diverse societies while simultaneously critiquing the postcolonial power dynamics that occur within these interactions. This nuanced examination of

language establishes the tone for the book, effectively challenging prevailing postcolonial interpretations within BL studies. While it is more enriching to read the whole book through the lens of transfigurations, as editor, Welker has structured each chapter so that the text can be understood without this conceptual framing. Beyond this chapter, the remainder of the book has been written by several authors and compiled to fit within this transfigurative concept.

Chapters 2 to 5 examine the development of Boys' Love (BL) culture within Mainland China. Chapter 2, written by Yanrui Xu and Ling Yang, explores the history of Danmei (A label for BL in China), noting how it differs from both 'Slash' (an Anglophone term that predates BL usage in English) and Japanese BL stories in the portrayals of gay men. Xi Lin expands upon this in Chapter 3 and considers the political potential of Danmei in disrupting China's patriarchal and heteronormative society whilst also considering how it reinforces other harmful stereotypes. Chapter 4, authored by Thomas Baudinette, explores how Queer Chinese men take an aspirational and sometimes escapist reading of BL only to be excluded and met with xenophobia in Japan. Although this chapter frames the interactions as xenophobic, it could also be argued that it demonstrates an objectification of Japanese gay men. As such, it illustrates why this area warrants further research. Chapter 5, written by Wei Wei, further discusses the political power of *Danmei* and notes how real-life coupling has been used to disrupt a hegemonic masculine society.

Katrien Jacobs and Han Hau Lai authored Chapter 6 which explores Danmei in relation to Hong Kong, noting the similarities and differences between Hong Kong, Mainland China, and Taiwan. It also considers the role Danmei plays in political movements, including queer rights, sexual liberation efforts and the 'Umbrella Movement' and its subsequent aftermath. Chapter 7, written by Jungmin Kwon, discusses the history and commercialisation of BL within South Korea. Notably it features an interview with a BL author, which provides valuable insight into the production side of BL media, which has largely been overlooked. Chapter 8, penned by Hyojin Kim, critiques the 'Leaving BL' movement within Korea, noting the flaws behind three key reasons given for stopping engaging with the genre: realistic vs unrealistic portrayals of gay men, unrealistic power portrayals, and the exclusion of women depicted in the narratives. Peiti Wang authors chapter 9 and explores divisions within the BL Community in Taiwan, noting that while most fans supported same-sex marriage, some were hesitant to embrace their BL fan identity, stemming from concerns that this might negatively impact on the broader queer community, resulting in the suppression and self-policing of their identities.

Chapter 10, researched and written by Kania Arini Sukotjo, considers the role conventions play in Indonesia in creating safe spaces in which to share BL content, which enables queer and women's sexuality to be expressed and consumed where otherwise it would not be possible. However, the BL community has to act discreetly as even these spaces are at risk of political and cultural regulation. Gita Pramudita Prameswari's Chapter 11 continues to explore BL in Indonesia and notes that BL fans are more aware of queer issues. However, due to socially ingrained cultural and religious views, this awareness does not translate to an acceptance of queer rights. As a result, BL fans are often forced to contend with conflicting ideals. Given the scarcity of research from Indonesia, these chapters provide some significant insight into BL culture within an extremely conservative state.

Tricia Abigail Santos Fermin explores BL in the Philippines within chapter 12 and examines how Filipino women view the *uke* and *seme* (loosely akin to Top and Bottom) power dynamics,

highlighting how these interpretations disrupt traditional norms of gender and sexuality, namely the male gaze and hegemonic masculinity traits. Chapter 13, written by Aerin Lai, discusses the panoptic-like behaviour and the fear of the state in Singapore, which results in the self-regulation of BL content. Poowin Bunyavejchewin reviews the history of Thai BL in chapter 14, with a particular emphasis on licensing aspects, and the demographics of *sao-wai* (female BL fans) and *hnum-wai* (male BL fans). It highlights a significant discovery of the subversive potential of BL, featuring a predominantly non-heterosexual audience among both male and female consumers in Thailand. Chapter 15, penned by Kang-Nguyễn Byung'chu Dredge, further studies Thai BL culture; however, it shifts to examining the blurred lines between fiction and reality, particularly through coupling, shipping, and the 'cute boy' culture that is prevalent in Idol culture and the queer community.

Chapter 16, authored by Lakshmi Menon, explores female consumers of BL content in India, noting that it serves as a means of identity and sexual exploration for women in India, like Mills and Boon novels. It highlights that as this medium disrupts patriarchal views on sexuality, it is also stigmatised as a 'dirty little secret' (p. 215). As in other chapters, it finds that consumers of BL, in this instance Indian, are more inclined to hold positive and supportive views of homosexuality. Despite South Asia's significant population, there is limited research in the field, which makes chapters such as this one important for exploring the cultural impact of BL media within the region. Kristine Michelle Santos penned chapter 17 which critiques contemporary understandings of transnational flows of culture regarding BL culture, notably linking back to Welker's concept of transfiguration. It considers the importance of BL literacy, such as page layout and iconology, in understanding, creating, and consuming the medium.

Kazumi Nagaike's Chapter 18 sought to unpack *fudanshi* (Male fans of BL) in East Asia, which has been a significantly overlooked demographic of BL consumers. However, it spends a considerable amount of time exploring Freudian psychosexual subconscious and self-feminisation within the *shotacon* medium. Due to the sensitivity of the content, additional care was required for this chapter, which was arguably absent. Namely, while discussing homosexuality, the linkage to child exploitation material could be misappropriated by ill-intended actors. Research on *Fudanshi* culture is significantly warranted, but it needs to be more considered in its delivery.

Chapter 19, authored by Asako P. Saito, explores the Dynasty Warrior games and related *doujinshi* fan works as a case study demonstrating the transfigurative flow of culture. It examines how these games adapt and alter the Chinese classic *The Tale of the Three Kingdoms* in a manner that creates a distinct, globally transfigured identity that is not constrained by its Japanese, Taiwanese, or Mainland Chinese influence. The chapter also wraps up the book and presents a somewhat reflective look at the concept of transfiguration.

Overall, *Queer Transfigurations* presents incredible insights into the field of BL and introduces the concept of transfiguration for transnational flows of culture. It should be viewed as an essential book for anyone interested in studying BL, and a significant and pivotal contribution to the wider academic field involving transnational flows of culture. In many ways, it is the continuation of the 'beyond' introduced in *Boys Love Manga and Beyond* edited by Mark McLelland, Kazumi Nagaike, Katsuhiko Suganuma and James Welker.

References

McLelland, Mark, Kazumi Nagaike, Katsuhiko Suganuma, and James Welker (eds). *Boys Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan*. University Press of Mississippi, 2015.

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