

## Book Review: *Queer Transfigurations: Boys Love Media in Asia*

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Welker, James, editor. *Queer Transfigurations: Boys Love Media in Asia*.

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In *Queer Transfigurations: Boys Love Media in Asia*, James Welker has brought together a variety of essays to provide a multifaceted view into the continuing (r)evolution of the BL genre and how its fans interact with it. In compiling this volume, Welker aimed to introduce four major themes of BL and its fandoms in Asia:

1. “BL is a transnational and transcultural media phenomenon.”
2. “BL is a useful tool for unsettling gender and sexual norms.”
3. “BL cannot be separated from LGBT(Q) issues, including politics.”
4. “BL is political.” (Welker 2022, 4)

He argues that BL in its transcultural, transnational, and transformed manifestations in Asia has ultimately led to increased support and visibility for LGBTQ+ people and causes, challenges to gender norms, and ultimately, that BL plays “a positive role in the lives of fans and others.” (Welker 2022, 272)

*Queer Transfigurations* reads as a much-needed expansion upon the ideas set forth in the critical BL text, *Boys’ Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan*, co-edited by Welker along with Mark McLelland, Kazumi Nagaïke, and Katsuhiko Suganuma. Not only does *Queer Transfigurations* extend the borders of BL beyond Japan, but it also significantly updates our understanding of BL from a fan studies perspective and the social, cultural, and political effects of BL in Asia. Many of the authors in this volume build upon fundamental ideas from fan studies scholars such as Henry Jenkins and Camille Bacon-Smith while also contextualizing them within their unique areas of focus, specifically China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, India, and Malaysia, which brings

important new perspectives to the fields of manga studies and fan studies, among many others.

Though Welker's book is organized by region and country, he acknowledges in the introduction the drawbacks of this structure. The primary shortcoming of dividing by region is the unbalanced number of chapters in each region, with India receiving one chapter, China four, and Vietnam none. However, Welker fully addresses this issue in the introduction, suggesting that this imbalance reflects the relative youth of the field and the limited number of scholars in the region able and willing to write on the topic in English. Although Welker suggests that such a structure may also "give a false impression of clear-cut borders between countries and regions that are not so clear in the lives of fans and the texts they share and celebrate," (Welker 2022, 13) the excellent selection of topics and the way the scholars in each chapter refer back to and tie into each other's chapters thoroughly re-establishes the porous nature of the borders of BL and its fandoms.

Chapter 3, Xi Lin's "Breaking the Structural Silence: The Sociological Function of *Danmei* Novels in Contemporary China," is particularly groundbreaking in that it presents an adaptation of anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard's existing concept of structural amnesia as a base for a new term, structural silence, which is silencing that is structured through social pressure and by which certain voices are crowded out by dominant social views and concerns and subsequently forgotten. This new framework provides an important lens for understanding the importance of BL to its fans, the LGBTQ+ community, and society at large. In chapter 6, "'Send Them to Mars!' Boys Love Erotica and Civil Rights in Hong Kong," Katrien Jacobs and Hau Hau Lai challenge

Azuma Hiroki's theory in *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* (2001) that anime fans have become "animalistic" and unconcerned with relating to a given work beyond surface attachment to the characters with evidence that the BL fans of today are seeking "deeper ethical and activist approaches" (Jacobs and Lai 2022, 69) to consumption on the internet as well as on the cultural and political stage.

While there are some chapters that seem less integrated with the others and there is the occasional questionable application of outdated theories, overall, *Queer Transfigurations* is a well-edited, novel, and interesting collection of chapters well-suited for academic readers. The extensive use of jargon in many of the chapters may make it less approachable to readers outside the field, but it is a crucial volume for manga and fan studies scholars, as well as for anyone interested in Boys Love and LGBTQ+ media. Though many of the conclusions may seem upbeat or even idealistic, the positive, forward-looking tone of this volume mirrors Welker's final argument that the BL genre has been "positively reshaping the imaginary and real worlds of its fans and others in Asia and beyond" (Welker 2022, 275) and leaves readers feeling refreshed and optimistic for the future.

## Bibliography

Jacobs, Katrien and Hau Hau Lai. "Send Them to Mars!' Boys Love Erotica and Civil Rights in Hong Kong." In *Queer Transfigurations: Boys Love Media in Asia*, edited by James Welker, 68-79. University of Hawai'i Press, 2022.