

## **Rationalized Passions: *Sherlock* and Nation-branded Boy Booms in Japan**

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Prior to his December 2012 *Star Trek Into Darkness* junket, Benedict Cumberbatch was all but unknown in Japan. The TV series *Sherlock* had been featured in a handful of magazines in late 2012 to mark the Japanese release of series two on DVD; however, as the editors of *Hayakawa Mystery Magazine* observed in April 2013, "To be honest, when we released our special issue [on *Sherlock*] back in September [last year], we had no idea that Benedict Cumberbatch would become so popular." In fact, this popularity was a direct result of the appearance of roughly 500 fans at Narita Airport to greet him on his arrival to Japan. A phenomenon typically reserved for such luminaries as Johnny Depp and Leonardo DiCaprio, the sight of so many women gathered to greet a wholly unfamiliar, and seemingly unlikely British star attracted the attention of magazine editors hungry for the next big thing. From there, it was but the work of a few months to catapult Cumberbatch to fame, parlaying his popularity into a full-blown 'British boy boom' that is ongoing to this day.

At first glance, this 'boom' appears unworthy of serious consideration; at best, it seems like little more than a local iteration of the *Sherlock*/Cumberbatch marketing blitz that inundated Anglo-American media throughout 2014. But if we consider it against the backdrop of a twenty-seven year history of Japanese nation-centered boy booms, it takes on fresh significance. Scholars are wont to see

transnational fan phenomena as discrete, their influence extending no further than their own discursive borders. In this way, the most widely discussed Japanese female fandom in English-language scholarship, the Korean Wave, has been mistakenly understood as an isolated and "virtually unprecedented"<sup>1</sup> occurrence, all but unrelated to the unrecognized 'first' British and Hong Kong male star booms that preceded it.

Yet, as Meaghan Morris famously observed in 1988, in following the 'boom' – what she describes as "a massive wave of collective... passion – for a musician, a film star, an intellectual topic or figure" – we run the risk of letting it "define... and direct... what can be done at a given moment."<sup>2</sup> In this sense, near-exclusive attention in English-language scholarship to the Korean Wave and its Japanese-Korean socio-political contexts equally allows us to overlook the ways that the broader media and even political discourses of nation-branded boy booms mask their own interests and imperatives. Through consideration of Benedict Cumberbatch's *Sherlock*-centered Japanese popularity and the British boy boom it inspired, this paper will demonstrate that such foreign star booms are, in fact, neither discrete nor centered on only one nation. Rather, they are part of a nearly thirty-year, cyclical phenomenon in Japan of mobilizing naturally emerging female fandoms to more efficient economic and political ends.

Japanese foreign star 'booms' – each a response *to*, rather than impetus *for*, previously demonstrated fan interest – historically have been targeted at an otherwise grossly underserved audience of adult women. By the 1980s, *yakuza* movies, anime films for children, and idol-driven vehicles aimed at girls dominated

the Japanese box-office. Hollywood films were no different: action blockbusters, James Bond films, disaster movies, and big-budget adult films such as the *Emmanuelle* series and *Caligula* comprised the bulk of foreign box-office successes in Japan. While melodramas such as *Kramer Vs. Kramer*, *The Champ*, and *Endless Love* were lucrative in the Japanese market, their success only foregrounded the extent to which female filmgoers were being overlooked.

Yet, by the end of the 1980s, film distribution in Japan was undergoing a transformation. Emerging home video technology and urban 'mini-theaters' – small theaters of under 200 seats that thrived on low overheads and comparatively inexpensive, often independent films from Europe, the United States, and East Asia – actually invited women's film spectatorship. This was due in large part to the ways that each was ensconced within the milieu of women's everyday lives: video rental shops stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the dry cleaners, coffee shops, and grocery stores that women frequented, while mini-theaters were an increasingly common and fashionable feature of urban department stores.

It was in this way that Japanese women were introduced to one of the seminal works of British heritage film, and the impetus for what is now called the 'first' beautiful British boy boom, James Ivory's 1987 film, *Maurice*. *Maurice*, based on the E.M. Forster novel of the same name, is the story of a young Edwardian man coming to terms with his homosexuality – a narrative that, as some have argued, held no small appeal for women who had grown up on the homoeroticism of girl's manga of the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> The film ran for fifteen weeks in 1988 at mini-theater Cine

Switch Ginza, grossing a not-insignificant 122 million yen (approx. US\$940,000 in 1988) in total.<sup>4</sup>

Claire Monk has made the case for considering British heritage film as 'women's cinema' based on these films' *mise en scene*, romance and melodrama narratives, and the pleasures of consumption and *looking* they evince.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it was this appeal, combined with *Maurice*'s encouraging box-office returns, that ultimately caught the attention of publisher Haga shoten, the producer of a long-standing series of photo books of Hollywood and European stars. Yet, these books focused overwhelmingly on individual stars and their unique contributions to global cinema. In contrast, their 1988 publication, *Young Noblemen of England*, mirrored nation-centric British heritage film itself in organizing its male stars by nation for an explicitly female readership. As such, it's here that we can locate the origins of the nation-branded 'beautiful boy boom' in Japan.

In fact, most of the baseline prerequisites for subsequent 'boy booms' were effectively established in this book and its sequel, *Young Noblemen of England Part II*. For example, in an essay by journalist Midori Nakano entitled, "The 'Golden Seven' of the British World of Beautiful Men: The True Nature of their Beauty," she writes:

'National characteristics' are, after all, an impressive thing. Even though the development of communications and media information technologies has resulted in the ongoing dissolution of national borders, it would seem that a sense of 'national characteristics' persists somewhere deep inside us. I'm

especially convinced of this when I consider the stars that are active these days in the British film world. Whatever else you can say about them, the actors Rupert Everett, Daniel Day Lewis, Hugh Grant, James Wilby, Rupert Graves, Cary Elwes, and Colin Firth are the “golden seven” of the world of beautiful British men, and they certainly have a different air than young American stars.

Specifically, Nakano observes that, "Fashion such as the so-called 'second skin' of t-shirts and jeans that put the body on display suit no one so much as Americans, but the tight control of a stiff-collared shirt and flannel trousers – more than anyone in the world, such restrictive fashion suits the British," equating restrictive Edwardian costuming to a typically 'English' emotional repression. As she writes, "Emotions and desires are extremely suppressed, so that 'masculinity' is found in intelligence and strength of will. This is the essence of 'British tradition', requiring men to be naturally 'upright' and 'stoic'."

Writ large, what this and similar articles in *Young Noblemen of England I* and *II* reveal is the broad contours of what ultimately would be a rationalized framework for the nation-based marketing of male foreign stars to Japanese female fans. By 'rationalized', I'm speaking in the economic sense of codifying and streamlining heretofore idiosyncratic, affective female fan engagement with male stars for the purposes of capitalizing on them as efficiently as possible. And we see this process beginning to take shape with this first boom, in which a clear equation emerges: **women + accessible media + pretty boys + national characteristics + (+ a certain homoerotic something) = nation-branded boy boom**

In the case of the first British boy boom, new patterns of mini-theater and home video distribution coincided with the pastorally pretty male stars of female-friendly British heritage film to create the ideal conditions for its formation. Subsequently, the then-emerging – and ultimately longer lived – Hong Kong star boom emerged out of a similar confluence of "cool," "masculine," and "vital" Hong Kong stars and mini-theater/home video/and Hong Kong-specific Video CD technology. That this boom also coincided with broader economic, political, and cultural discourses of Japanese East Asian regionalization lent a real world inflection to mass media discourses of foreign male star fandom. This, in turn, was picked up in (and became a flash-point of) the subsequent boy boom centered on the "soft masculinity"<sup>6</sup> of South Korean stars, which ultimately began to wane in the backlash against what opponents considered to be a nationalistically 'manipulative' Korean Wave.<sup>7</sup>

With this historical context in mind, I'd like to return to the Benedict Cumberbatch/*Sherlock*-inspired 'second' beautiful British boy boom, which – I contend – conforms closely to the discursive contours of the previous three cycles in ways both explicit and implicit. In order to demonstrate how mass media rationalization of Cumberbatch and *Sherlock* fandom essentialized it in the creation of a specifically nation-branded discourse intended to capitalize on fan interest, I'd first like to contrast this discourse with the results of an informal fan survey I conducted in March 2013.

This survey coincided with the first magazine articles to talk about Cumberbatch's December 2012 junket, and it came several months before

Cumberbatch's more publicized second junket in July 2013. As such, fans' responses here to questions about their initial encounters with *Sherlock*, as well as the reasons for their love of both the show and Cumberbatch himself, were essentially uninfluenced by a British boy boom discourse that was as yet only just beginning to emerge in Japanese magazines. Unsurprisingly, they talk about their interest in idiosyncratic terms: while the majority of fans first saw *Sherlock* by way of public broadcaster NHK, some caught it on more obscure rebroadcasts on satellite channel AXN Mystery or happened to see the show while in the UK, while a few had heard about it on Twitter or through *doujinshi* (fanzines), and then subsequently rented the DVDs. One had been encouraged to see it by a friend, but put it off until she was traveling overseas and pulled it up to watch on her flight, while another watched it on NicoNico streaming video.

Similarly, fans' explanations of the show's appeal to them were wide-ranging and varied: for many, the relationship between Sherlock and John was a big draw, with one fan discussing eloquently how she loves their characters on the BBC show in large part because of their imperfections and the way the show foregrounds their personal growth. For other fans, it was *Sherlock's* overall aesthetic that appealed to them: cinematography and music, in particular, were singled out for praise; while still others, mainly those already fans of the original Conan Doyle stories, talked about their pleasure in the show's reworking of familiar characters and plots.

Not all the fans surveyed were also fans of Benedict Cumberbatch, although the majority did self-report as such. Here, too, his unique appeal was identified in a diversity of ways: his acting skill, his strange looks, the way he seems to become a

different person in each role he performs; his eyes, his kindness with fans, and various ways in which he is simply unusual or different from most other actors. While a handful of fans singled out certain things that lent themselves to a nation-centered discourse – his "embodiment of Britishness," "elegance," and "English gentlemanliness" – such qualities were in no way generalizable from the wide variety of responses given by the 70 fans who responded to the survey.

In contrast, the first three months of reporting on Cumberbatch and *Sherlock* following his first trip to Japan were distinguished by two things: exclamations over the number of women who showed up at the airport to greet him, and delightfully haphazard attempts to figure out just how to position him discursively so the press might continue to capitalize on his apparent popularity. The first magazine to take him up in any meaningful way was the March 21, 2013 issue of *DVD and Blu-ray* magazine. In it, Cumberbatch sat at the top of a list of "16 Rising Stars of Hollywood," in which his Britishness was a mere afterthought (accompanying stills from his quintessentially English roles in *War Horse* and *Parade's End* notwithstanding). Indeed, despite the inclusion of other soon-to-be-iconic British actors as Eddie Redmayne, Ben Whishaw, Martin Freeman, and Tom Hiddleston, here what they had in common was simply being cast in big budget Hollywood films, despite coming from "outside the United States."

Although an interview with Cumberbatch in *Pia* magazine prefaced it with a throwaway mention of his "English Charisma," it fell to the April issue of *DVD and Blu-ray Vision* magazine to bring out the big discursive guns. Their five-page spread included a full filmography – with particular attention to *Sherlock* – as well as an



"Introduction to Cumberbatch" that proclaimed his level of airport fan-service "greater than Johnny Depp's" and – critically – labeled him "the first social phenomenon star since Yon-sama!!" *Here* is the first real hint of nation-branding-to-come: 'Yon-sama' was the Japanese name given to South Korean superstar Bae Yong-joon, credited with spurring the Korean Wave in Japan in the early 2000s. In linking Cumberbatch's 500 fans to the thousands who regularly turned up at Japanese airports to greet 'Yon-sama', the magazine posited – however unwittingly – a nascent, nation-based 'boom' implicit in Cumberbatch's enthusiastic welcome to Japan.

In the end, it fell to film fandom stalwart *Screen* magazine to definitively articulate Cumberbatch with existing discourses of nation-branded foreign star booms, but not without a few false starts. Like *DVD and Blu-ray* magazine, *Screen's* first look at Cumberbatch, in the March 2013 issue published in January, was centered exclusively on his work in *Sherlock* as part of a somewhat eclectic group of "New Type Exciting Actors" including Martin Freeman, Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Eddie Redmayne, Ben Whishaw, Tom Hiddleston, and Ezra Miller. The April 2013 issue built on this *Sherlock*-centric reporting in a feature devoted to exposition of "Sherlock and Watson's Combi-Love" in the first two series of the show (for which they were reportedly inundated with requests from fans), lending Cumberbatch's most popular and well-known work that loosely homoerotic appeal so compatible with Japanese nation-branded boy booms.

It wasn't until the May 2013 issue of *Screen* that we see the first full invocation of nation-centered characteristics to explain the appeal of not just Cumberbatch, but a host of other British actors. In a feature in which stills of each actor were accompanied by a small Union Jack, Cumberbatch himself was introduced in unequivocally nation-branded terms as the fastest rising star within the "treasure trove" of "uniquely sexy, skilled actors" that is Great Britain. Here, Englishmen were described as "sexy, talented gentlemen," with Cumberbatch's "elegant English gentleman" in *Parade's End* a particularly "entrancing" example of such. Indeed, it took little time for the author of this piece to hone in on that role of Cumberbatch's most congruent with British heritage film of the 1980s – no surprise, given that it was written by Sawako Omori, the editor of the original *Young Noblemen of England I and II*.

In this way we come full circle: the once and future British star 'boom', subsequently picked up in women's fashion magazines proclaiming the "brainy sexiness" and "gentleman[liness]" of "hot" British actors, and spawning best British actor polls, fan tourism features, *Sherlock*-centered British creative industry events and 'British Fairs' at major department stores, and a host of other ancillary phenomena that collectively are known today as the 'second' British boy boom. *This* is how soft power works – not through the ham-fisted, tone-deaf strategizing of government committees, but through the rationalization of fan affect by marketers; and, *as* affect, always subject to the whims and vagaries of ever-changing fannish tastes.

Yet, it would be a mistake to understand this latest boom as simply an echo of its 1980s predecessor. This new generation of stars is more mature, and their film, television, and theater roles more varied (and globally accessible) than their earlier heritage film counterparts. This reflects an audience of adult women that was effectively locked out of the latter-day Korean Wave by its clear youth orientation, invoked by both magazines and NHK in their marketing of both *Sherlock* and *Downton Abbey* as "adult drama" in contrast to the "children's drama" so popular to that point. Moreover, the "combination of both traditional values and modern sensibilities"<sup>8</sup> of these actors' work and personae is a key node of Asian regional media consumption they embody seamlessly. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, in their explicit non-Asianness – in their cultural and political distance from the fraught, contemporary East Asian regional contexts that have contributed to the continuing decline of the Korean Wave, these actors of the second British boy boom constitute a safer site of popular cultural consumption – one that is political in its apoliticality.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Korean Wave: A New Pop Culture Phenomenon* (2011). Korean Culture and Information Service. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Morris, Meaghan (1988). "Banality in Cultural Studies," *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* 10.2: 4-5.

<sup>3</sup> Otaka, Hiro (1998). *Mini-shiata teki!* Tokyo: Wave shuppan. 43.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>5</sup> Monk, Claire (1997). "The Heritage Film and Gendered Spectatorship," *Close Up: The Electronic Journal of British Cinema*. Online.

<sup>6</sup> Jung, Sun (2011). *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-pop Idols*. Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press.

<sup>7</sup> Hayashi, Kaori and Eun-jeung Lee (2007). "The Potential of Fandom and the Limits of Soft Power: Media Representations on the Popularity of a Korean Melodrama in Japan," *Social Science Japan Journal* 10.2: 208.

<sup>8</sup> Lin, Angel and Avin Tong (2008). "Re-Imagining a Cosmopolitan Asian 'Us': Korean Media Flows and Imaginaries of Asian Modern Femininities," in Huat, CB and

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Iwabuchi K. (eds.), *East Asian Pop Culture: Analyzing the Korean Wave*. Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press. 110.