

***Sherlock* and Global Transfandom**
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When I proposed this paper, the idea was to examine a number of global iterations of *Sherlock* fandom from a transfandom perspective. However, as doing this in fact involves going ‘deep’ in at least two popular cultural contexts in order to effectively pull out examples of how I believe transfandom works more generally in a transnational setting, my talk today will center mostly on Japanese *Sherlock* transfandom

Until fairly recently, the transnational circulation of media texts was characterized primarily in terms of flows from one country to another, and transnational fans as implicated in them in a similarly unidirectional flow. More recently, there’s been acknowledgement of how this framework is no longer adequate for discussing transnational media distribution and consumption. As Sun Jung observed in 2014 [slide], “The current online K-pop flows signify the deconstruction of a conventional schema of mono-directional cultural flows once predominantly led by media conglomerates... and reinforces the construction of a new paradigm of multidirectional creative distribution, which accelerates cultural divergence” (114). Similarly, Hye-Kyung Lee, also writing in 2014, notes that [slide], “Compared with the notion of ‘global,’ ‘transnational’ is less encompassing or generalizing, signifying the complexity of cultural globalization, where culture and media are trafficked in plural directions by multiple agencies, including not only commercial and governmental actors but also cultural consumers who are virtually connected” (195). One might think this complexity would lend itself to the disarticulation of media and nation; yet Lee argues that [slide], “as fans’ appreciation of

cultural and media products from abroad cannot be neatly separable from their broader perception of the products' country of origin, such fandom may be associated with fans' discovery and recognition of cultural appeal of the producing countries... and may become a key concern of the countries' nation branding projects" (195).

I see something of a disconnect here between the decentralized nature of present-day transnational media circulation and the potential centripetal effects Lee describes; one that emerges, I think, from the difficulty of accounting for increasingly rhizomatic, transnational online fan cultures in critical frameworks centered on the sociopolitical concerns about nation-centered media distribution and consumption. Once characterized by the critique of cultural imperialism, today these concerns arise in response to governmental soft power/nation-branding projects that propose to advance national economic (and sometimes political) interests through, among other things, the transnational distribution of 'national' popular cultures. Given the enormous financial resources poured into such nation-branding projects alone, these concerns are legitimate enough; yet, they're predicated on an assumption of success ("if we make it, they will come") – something that, as Lee's uses of the word "may" suggests, is always *possible*, but in no way guaranteed. Indeed, given the "messy and confusing social world of actual audiences" (Ang, quoted in Hayashi and Lee, 199) there equally exists the possibility that media fans in a transnational setting will *not* act consistently or rationally, in the economic sense. It's here that a transfandom orientation might help us to envision something more akin to a web of non-necessary, nodal, and often idiosyncratic

articulations — of fan objects, fan practices, national cultural and popular cultural repertoires, and so on – that reflect today’s transnational online media fan cultures.

In illustrating how we might apply a transfandom perspective to the study of transnational media fandoms and their implications, I’m using the shorthand “*Sherlock* fandom” to refer primarily to globally dispersed, primarily female fans who produce fan art for online distribution and consumption, in full recognition that this is but one segment of *Sherlock*’s transnational fan base. I’ve chosen this group primarily for the relatively easy translatability of images, and I’d like to begin with a look at a commercially distributed Japanese manga adaptation of *Sherlock* by Japanese manga artist “Jay.” [slide] An ongoing serialization in the weekly comic anthology *Young Ace*, the *Sherlock* manga was made possible by arrangement between Hartswood Films and publisher Kadokawa Shoten, which both produces *Young Ace* and is the official distributor of *Sherlock* DVDs in Japan. With its close fidelity to *Sherlock*’s televised episodes, the *Sherlock* manga is an uncomplicated adaptation of the series. [slide]

Put in the terms of transnational media flows, this manga is emblematic of the localization (or, more awkwardly, ‘glocalization’) of *Sherlock*; and, indeed, this kind of localization is not uncommon, but can be seen – in the Japanese context alone – in anime versions of [slide] the CW’s *Supernatural* as well as in the so-called [slide] “Marvel Anime Universe,” which features direct-to-digital animated episodes of *Iron Man*, *Blade*, *X-Men*, and *Wolverine*. Jay.’s *Sherlock* manga are slightly different from these, insofar as the project originated not with Hartswood, but with Kadokawa and the artist – who was

introduced to the show by a friend – in Japan (and indeed, there’s much to be said about Japan’s counter-intuitive nation-branding of Great Britain). Nonetheless, this manga series has to this point exemplified bi-directional transnational media flow between one country, becoming a more bifurcated counterflow with an English version of the manga set for distribution in the UK and US by Titan Comics. At the same time, the *Sherlock* manga has also been available online in pirated scanlation form almost since it first appeared in print in Japan, circulated between fans outside official channels of distribution in a way that better typifies Jung and Lee’s conceptualization of transnational media fandom as increasingly decentralized and multi-directional.

Then there’s this. [slide] Although there's no definitive confirmation that this is the same artist, similarities in character design [slide] suggest that this *doujinshi* (roughly translatable as ‘fanzine’) is also by Jay., drawing under the separate pen name AZEL/kagari. In contrast with the canonical fidelity of the official *Sherlock* manga adaptation, this amateur manga isolates an imagined, extra-canonical moment from *Sherlock*; one with a comical touch that plays on that homoerotic tension that's spawned multi-language fanfiction and East Asian *doujinshi* alike. Which is to say, the very same characters, drawn in the same way, here are at a remove from canon and, indeed, from their British moorings, instead using a sex farce trope familiar to Japanese manga readers to play out a transformed – even translated – imagined moment between John and Sherlock. The artist here links two nodes within her own popular cultural repertoire: BBC *Sherlock* and Japanese manga reading/writing; and it’s in this articulation of *Sherlock* with a nearly hackneyed Japanese manga trope where we see the beginnings of a

transfandom orientation, one that is not contained in (or by) *Sherlock* as a discrete – and unequivocally British – media text.

A more overt example of this same articulation can be seen in another *doujinshi* treatment of *Sherlock*, this time crossed with the popular (and nostalgic) Rumiko Takahashi manga, *Ranma 1/2*. [slide] The Takahashi manga is a gender comedy set in China, about a young male student of martial arts who is cursed to transform into a woman when doused with cold water, only able to transform back by being doused with hot water. In the *Sherlock doujinshi*, "Sharo 1/2" [slide] the central conceit is the same, playing on the alternating softness [gif] and hardness [gif] of Benedict Cumberbatch's Sherlock in a scenario in which he alternates between Sherlock and "Shirley." [slide] The main story of "Sharo 1/2" is a short, comedic episode, like those of many *Ranma 1/2* stories: Lestrade and Donovan –aware of Sherlock's condition - douse him with cold water so he can go undercover in a bunny club as Shirley. In the midst of his investigation, Shirley bumps up against John, there at the club with members of his old American football team. John is vaguely enamored with the pretty cocktail waitress. Later, when Shirley has been accidentally returned to Sherlock, a now-drunk John helps him dry off, all the while commenting on how 'she's' even cuter than before.

As in the previous *doujinshi*, this artist articulates two familiar-to-her popular cultural texts – *Sherlock* and *Ranma 1/2* – in such a way that together they are uniquely legible to her and other fans who are conversant with both. And, indeed, it's this legibility that's central to the pleasures of the *doujinshi*, realized in small moments of intertextual

congruity. [slide] The author has cleverly converted the SS logo of the weekly *Sunday Shonen*, in which *Ranma 1/2* was serialized, into an SJ, with “SherlockJohn Comics” written above it in small print. In the lower right-hand corner, Ranma’s gruff, self-serving, but ultimately loving father, Genma Saotome (who’s been cursed to transform to a panda) has been translated to Mycroft Holmes, with [slide] one of the four-panel short comics inside parodying Mycroft’s series 3 post-exercise belly pat in another moment of cross-cultural intertextuality.

We see a similar sort of transfannish articulation of *Sherlock* and local cultural context in a work by Chinese fan artist Sevnilock, in which her own translation of *Sherlock* to a Chinese context is so culturally specific as to be almost illegible outside it. Sevnilock reimagines an intellectual Sherlock and soldier John in a Chinese past; specifically, the Republican Era that spanned from 1914 through 1949. This is an era that, particularly for being synonymous with fashionably retro, Shanghai-centered modernity, continues to make frequent appearances in films and television, which in turn makes its iconography particularly recognizable - *in a Chinese context*. So that, [slide] in imagining Sherlock as a Chinese-styled Republican-era intellectual, Sevnilock draws him in *chángshān* – long formal robe – languidly relaxing in a rosewood chair. So far so good – it’s pretty, and a fan from anywhere can appreciate it on an aesthetic level alone. That the pose reflects both a (mass mediated) [slide] sense of the bourgeois trappings of such intellectuals AND Sherlock’s own rather bourgeois nonchalance is part of its unique charm to a viewer conversant in both. When she gets to John she does the same, drawing him in the soldierly uniform of the same period as per his canonical persona. [slide] But where

Sevnilock almost certainly sees this [slide] in imagining her Republican-era soldier John, to Western eyes, this kind of military uniform has much stronger connotations of this [slide]. Which is to say, this is legible to people familiar with both Sherlock and Sevnilock's Chinese historical (or popular cultural) repertoire. For people outside this context, it's a jarring interpretation that is unrecognizable as any honorable John we know. Removed – as many fanworks are – from strict canonicity, this piece is equally removed from its British origins; not divorced but unmoored, and no longer wholly recognizable as the discrete, transnationally distributed television show *Sherlock* of BBC Worldwide/Cool Britannia intent.

To my mind, this is where it gets really interesting because, once unmoored, the possibility of transfannish associations that cannot easily be mapped onto the nation intensifies. By way of an example, when Cumberbatch made his July 2013 junket to Japan to promote the Hollywood film *Star Trek Into Darkness*, he was at one point outfitted in a summer kimono – *yukata* – [slide] for a small publicity event and TV interview, with pictures of him in the *yukata* circulated online within hours of the event. Over the course of the next two days, fans produced art of what was termed by fans 'yukata!Batch', some of which reflected a high degree of familiarity with not only Sherlock/Cumberbatch (here, with his Sherlock hair, very much a hybrid of character and star persona), but also Japanese manga/anime character design *and* the visual tropes of summer-themed manga and anime. Moreover, not originating from Japan, these fanworks in fact came from a diversity of places, including China [slide], Thailand [slide], and Taiwan [slide].

Critically, this anime/manga style was *not* intended as homage to – or any kind of acknowledgement of – the photograph's Japanese origins beyond the *yukata* itself; rather, these works were consistent with their artists' own drawing styles [slide] as deployed across multiple – and frequently non-Japanese – fandoms. That is, these artists' manga/anime-inflected styles of drawing were fully part of their own popular cultural (and now artistic) repertoires. As such, the explicit 'Japaneseness' of yukata!Batch artworks arose out of little more than a uniquely Japanese moment in the trajectory of Cumberbatch's stardom, their Japanese manga/anime stylings little more than happenstance. Where an explicitly anime style wasn't employed, as in the case of one French artist, [slide] the summer festival detailing – as in some of the other art – remains entirely consistent with the artist's preexisting awareness of the (popular) cultural uses of the summer festival setting as romantic backdrop in Japanese anime and manga.

Writ large, what motivates these articulations of Cumberbatch/Sherlock, manga/anime style, and Japanese summer festival tropes isn't (necessarily) the successful deployment of anime-centered nation-branding, although it's certainly linked to some moment of consumption and possible fandom of anime. Rather, what we see here are transcultural recognitions and the linking of liked things – transfandom articulations of elements within fans' own popular cultural repertoires in the creation of something outside the aegis of both official and unofficial media distribution. As in what I've been calling the "Totoro meme" [slide], here featuring [slide] Mycroft as Totoro to Sherlock's Satsuki and John's Mei, transfandom art works – when it does – because a fan recognizes the

non-necessary articulation of unrelated things as having unique, unexpected, and highly subjective resonance. If Totoro is taciturn, and the motivations for his actions opaque at best, so too is Mycroft (and Genma Saotome, [slide] in another trans fandom articulation), and this works for *me* – as a fan of both *Totoro* and *Sherlock* – because it merges both in an almost unutterable moment of intensely affective affinity.

It's critical to note that nothing here guarantees that past familiarity with, or fandom of, anime reflects sustained investment in either Japan or its popular culture. As American fan artist Reapersun [slide] wrote when I asked if her style was influenced by anime:

yeah, it definitely has Japanese influence.... I had been drawing before... but getting into anime kind of ignited my passion for it and it was what I drew until I was well into college, when I started looking at more western art and trying to create my own style. The feeling I was having at the time, due to a combination of art teachers talking down anime... and stories I was having more and more difficulty connecting to, was that while I loved it as a kid, it was becoming more and more obvious to me as I got older that so much anime, down to the themes in the stories, was geared towards a culture that was so unlike mine that, as an adult, I just couldn't connect to it anymore." (January 16, 2016 email interview)

So that, while Reapersun's artwork reflects an ongoing anime influence implicit in her style, she is in the thrall of neither Cool Japan nor Cool Britannia nation-branding initiatives. As happens in fandoms all the time, she's fallen out of love with an object that once held meaning for her, whose traces continue to be felt, but cannot be meaningfully conscripted in (or credited to) any government's nation-branding practices.

If it sounds like I'm suggesting we can all stand down and give our critical faculties a rest, I want to be clear that it's not only possible to capitalize on transfandom articulations, but we're beginning to see particularly effective examples of it that reinforce the need to be looking outside a strict national aegis in understanding the relationship between media producers and fans in their transnational contexts. In the case of *Sherlock*, one particularly appealing (to me) example – and singularly effective for it – came in the form of South Korean satellite broadcaster OCN's television promos for the show. I don't know if these were the only promos aired or not; similar promos for *Hannibal* [slide] by AXN Korea suggest that they ran concurrently with less playful ads. But in the case of these promos, the male-love subtext of *Sherlock* is articulated with a South Korean popular culture industry that's been trained for over a decade on female consumers and, in particular, their love of homoerotic narratives (both in scripted television and between real-life pop idols). [video] These promos were, in fact, wildly popular among globally dispersed *Sherlock* fans on Tumblr, and – quite tellingly – many non-Korean fans exclaimed over how great the South Korean media were [slide] for affirming those gendered readings of *Sherlock* that have been consistently rejected or stereotyped by the show's producers.

At the very least, and often with fans' full awareness of how they're being hailed as a certain kind of media consumer, this sort of play can engender considerable, if *non-quantifiable*, goodwill towards media producers. Even when, as in the case of AXN Korea, it's acknowledged that such marketing is a “gift to fans” – which is to say, fan service – insofar as it rests on an awareness of what at least some fans actually value – as

opposed to what men gathered around a boardroom table think fans want – these fans seem receptive to it. At the level of a comparatively small-scale broadcaster in South Korea, this may not mean much in terms of how companies might capitalize on a transfannish orientation; in the context of a media behemoth like Disney it may mean something more. Marvel’s *Doctor Strange*, currently in post-production for a November 2016 release, features *Sherlock*’s Benedict Cumberbatch in the title role. Given Cumberbatch’s *Sherlock*-spawned popularity among, in particular, women in East Asia (China, South Korea, and Japan), as well as his demonstrated suitability [slide] (with [slide] Robert Downey Jr. and [slide] Tom Hiddleston) to in-person, star-centric promotional activity in these same markets, the corporate articulation of Sherlock/Cumberbatch and promotional practices that are meaningful to celebrity fans in East Asia suggests we should be paying at least as much attention how media producers are learning to harness [slide] transfandom pleasures and literacies as we do governmental soft power projects.

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