

***Sherlock* and the British Actor Boom: 'Regifting' Female Fandom in Japan
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This paper is something of a riff on Suzanne Scott's 2009 essay, "Repackaging Fan Culture: The Regifting Economy of Ancillary Content Models," in which she argues that American media industries are engaged in the creation of "parallel fan spaces" that exist alongside grassroots fandom, appropriating fans' own value systems (here, the gift economy) in order to rationalize them for wider consumption.¹ The case studies she discusses – notably, SyFy's *Battlestar Galactica* Videomaker Toolkit, which offers fans footage from the series for use in fan vids in exchange for allowing the vids to be owned and used promotionally by SyFy – operate within a fairly well-defined producer-fan relationship. In contrast, the phenomenon I will be discussing today, centered on the ancillary content marketing of *Sherlock* and its star, Benedict Cumberbatch, in Japan, is predicated on the careful blurring of the line separating fans and ancillary content producers, to ends that both reflect and complicate Scott's original thesis.

When Benedict Cumberbatch first arrived in Japan for the one of two *Star Trek Into Darkness* junkets in December 2012, *Sherlock* – the little BBC sleeper that put him on the global map – was little more than niche programming there. First broadcast in Japan during the 10:00-11:30 pm slot on NHK's then-newly launched BS Premium satellite channel in August 2011, the show and its star had been mentioned in only a small handful of publications to that point. Most notable was *Hayakawa Mystery Magazine*, which noted in an April 2013 editorial follow-up to a previous *Sherlock*-centered issue, "To be honest, when we released our special issue

back in September 2012, we had no idea that Benedict Cumberbatch would become so popular.”

Indeed, as the popular movie magazine *Screen* helpfully illustrated in their annual poll of fans’ favorite foreign stars [slide], Cumberbatch had been a complete unknown in Japan prior to 2013. His leap from obscurity to fame had been precipitated by the presence [slide] of an estimated 500 fans on hand to greet him at Narita Airport; a turnout that, in fact, had been encouraged by Paramount Japan, which had forwarded details about Cumberbatch’s junket to the fan website benedictcumberbatch.jp for dissemination within the fandom. Intended to attract the attention of a mass media fuelled by, among other things, foreign star ‘booms’, Paramount’s strategizing worked, as evidenced by the subsequent deluge of magazines featuring Cumberbatch, *Sherlock*, and *Star Trek Into Darkness* that led up to his second Japan junket in July 2013 [slide], when time he was crowned the “King of Magazines” by the editor of *Screen* magazine.

Thus, when I speak of ‘producers’ in this paper, it is these ancillary content producers - magazine editors [slide] and their television counterparts - to whom I’m referring. By the time Cumberbatch landed on Japanese soil, Paramount (and, in particular, marketing director Yuka Hoshino – one of a small number of top-level female executives in Japan)² had already done their job of revealing to the mass media Cumberbatch’s *Sherlock*-fueled popularity amongst a niche fandom of mostly women, in the hopes of sparking a new star-centered ‘boom’ on which they, too, could capitalize. But the work of generating and sustaining the hoped-for boom fell to the mass media itself, which was at the time hungry for the next big thing,

particularly in the wake of a waning – and increasingly controversial – Korean Wave.

Thus, following this first junket, the Japanese mass media first turned to the business of situating Cumberbatch within pre-existing modes of foreign celebrity marketing. The result was a haphazard series of characterizations tried on for size, which alternately pegged him as [slide] one of a group of rising “Hollywood” stars, as a “social phenomenon” star on par with South Korean star Bae Yong-joon, and as a Johnny Depp/Leonardo DiCaprio-style ‘fan service’-oriented star, before finally settling on Cumberbatch’s [slide] quintessential “Britishness” as the hook on which they would ultimately hang an entire British Boy boom that is ongoing to the present.

But what’s particularly interesting in these various attempts to package Cumberbatch is the media’s consistent use of a rhetoric of inclusiveness common in Japanese marketing. Here, it was used to dissolve the dividing line between ‘us’ and ‘them’ – that is, between fans and producers – and, in so doing, weaken any sense of the emerging *Sherlock*/Cumberbatch-centered boom as having been in any way manufactured by the media. This rhetoric was deployed in several ways: visually [slide], as in this layout in the November 2013 issue of *Frau* magazine, which uses a hand-drawn aesthetic to signify a kind of organic fan squee; materially [slide], as in both the July 2, 2014 issue of *an-an* magazine, featuring a roundtable discussion with three self-described “Cumberbitches” who also happen to be professional writers and editors in the Japanese television and publishing industries, as well as [slide] in the August 6, 2013 issue of *Josei jishin* magazine, proudly laying claim to

complete coverage of Cumberbatch's second Japan junket by a "big fan reporter"; and, finally, linguistically – for which we need a quick Japanese lesson to discuss.

Amongst the most common verb conjugations in Japanese is the volitional form, indicated by the verb suffix "mashō." [slide] The simple effect of appending "mashō" to a verb is to render it suggestive and inclusive: "taberu" – to eat – becomes "tabemashō" – let's eat. Similarly, "asobu" – to play – becomes "asobimashō" – let's play. In a public information context, it is often used to foster a sense of collective responsibility (as in, "let's keep the river clean" [slide]). In media marketing, this verb form interpellates readers and viewers as fans 'like us,' presenting the media *itself* as a fan, and exhorting readers to *join them* in the fun. So that, for example, the April 2014 issue [slide] of *DVD & Blu-ray Vision* invites 'us' to reflect back on Benedict Cumberbatch's appeal; a special April 6, 2014 issue [slide] of the women's magazine from *Hanako* devoted to London similarly suggests that 'we' watch *Sherlock* and explore the city 'together with' Cumberbatch; while the October 2013 issue [slide] of the women's monthly *Spur* suggests 'we' watch eight of Cumberbatch's filmic transformations in order to help us appreciate him better. Here, we might say that producers' use of this verb form 'regifts' fandom itself, and in such a way that their appropriation of it is largely obscured.

In thus weakening the divide between fans and media producers, this rhetoric of inclusion fosters a sense of the emerging *Sherlock*/Cumberbatch-centered boom as being, first and foremost, fan-driven; which is to say, unmediated. And this is the fine line ancillary content producers walk in Japan. Media and celebrity booms frequently are reactive, with producers picking up on pre-existing

fan interest – however niche – and repackaging it for the widest possible consumption. But since this repackaging involves a rhetoric of inclusion intended to interpellate fans both old and new, it must be – and, critically, remain – attuned to the subtle vagaries of fandom in order to succeed. In other words, producers must be nimble in order for this strategy to work; adhere too closely to a fixed notion of what ‘female fans’ like and want, and they run the risk of making themselves visible.

This was, in fact, what happened in the case of Jackie Chan’s 1980s female fandom in Japan. In the early 1980s, when Chan was not only seen as the logical successor to Bruce Lee, but also appeared to have a particularly enthusiastic, grassroots female following in Japan, his Japanese promoters quickly and aggressively targeted this demographic with magazines and, in particular, books [slide] that featured Jackie’s softer side. Yet, in their ham-fisted marketing of Chan to Japanese girls and women as little more than a potential romantic partner (rumors of his actual marriage notwithstanding), Chan became associated in Japan with a particularly ‘tacky’ kind of Hong Kong star fandom. Further, as women’s fandom of Hong Kong stars evolved, he effectively became the Hong Kong star against which ‘serious’ fans of Hong Kong celebrities defined their fandom – the structuring absence of Hong Kong star fandom throughout the 1990s.

In the case of the *Sherlock/Cumberbatch*-centered boom, it was producers’ attempts to position themselves as fellow fans – to dissolve the divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and, again, give women what they were *supposed* to want – that brought them perilously close to disaster, all hinging on their misguided use of one proper name suffix. As is well known outside Japan, the suffix ‘-san’ is often appended to

proper names as a general sign of respect. What is less familiar abroad (except outside anime and manga fan circles) is another, more formal, suffix, ‘-sama’. Historically, -sama was used to refer to nobles; today, it’s used to refer both to members of the Imperial family, as well as to ordinary people in written correspondence. In popular culture fandom, it has been adopted by some, overwhelmingly female, fans to single out male celebrities of a certain, rather pretty type: Leonardo DiCaprio [slide] is ‘Leo-sama’, Hong Kong star Leslie Cheung [slide] was ‘Les-sama’, and - famously – South Korean star Bae Yong-joon [slide] was known both among fans, and subsequently in the Japanese mass media, as ‘Yon-sama’.

It is this last usage that was to prove contentious on the occasion of Cumberbatch’s second Japan junket in July 2013. ‘Yon-sama’ was a grassroots fan appellation that emerged in 2004 following the Japanese broadcast of Bae’s television drama, *Winter Sonata*, and it fit seamlessly within the existing constellation of other celebrity-sama. But it was quickly picked up by the mass media both as a way of invoking the aforementioned rhetoric of inclusion, and as a means of pathologizing what the men’s newsweekly *Shukan jitsuwa* [slide] called the “stupid, gullible housewives”³ who comprised Bae’s Japanese female fandom. Over the course of the next decade, the -sama suffix became emblematic of the ensuing Korean Wave marketing blitz, reaction to which pegged female fans in terms familiar to female fans everywhere [slide]: crazed, hysterical, suffering from ‘Yonfluenza’, and so on. The name ‘Yon-sama’ – and in particular, the -sama suffix – thus came to signify the kind of fandom from which ‘real’ fans wanted to distinguish

themselves – Korean Wave fans became the *Titanic*, One Direction, or *Twilight* fans of Japan.

Enter Benedict Cumberbatch, who – particularly in his Sherlock incarnation – [slide] might be considered the very definition of the original regal-yet-pretty, popular culture *-sama*. As one fan observed of a magazine feature about Cumberbatch following his first trip to Japan [slide], “In the article there’s a reference to him as “Cumberbatch-sama” at the beginning, and I feel like I’ve seen him called this in other media articles as well. I wonder if he really comes off as Cumberbatch-‘sama’ to people who have actually met him? Certainly, with his attitude and appearance, he has a noble quality.”⁴ Another fan noted on her blog in July 2013 [slide], “[The] last time [he came to Japan], he arrived in such style with his cool suit that, for just a bit, I [called him] ‘Bene-sama’ even here on my blog. That was because he seemed so regal that neither ‘chan’ nor ‘san’, but ‘sama’ seemed right.”⁵ By the time he returned to Japan in July 2013, the mass media was ready for him. His arrival at Narita Airport – this time to an estimated crowd of 1000 fans – was live streamed on Ustream, and it was a featured story on several nationally broadcast morning news shows, as well as on the late night NHK social media-centric news roundup, *News Web*. And on several of these shows, announcers referred to him as “Bene-sama,” to the outspoken anger of many. As the previous fan put it in her post-arrival blog post [slide], “As others have pointed out, [-sama] seems so Korean Wave.”⁶

The morning news show *Mezamashi terebi* was singled out for criticism in blogs and on Twitter following its July 16 broadcast, during which announcer

Shinichi Karube (K-be) exhorted viewers to “remember the name ‘Bene-sama’,” emphasizing the *-sama* suffix repeatedly. Some of this criticism was targeted specifically at his use of the suffix in reference to Cumberbatch, as in a tweet that read [slide], “And one important thing. The nickname that all the Cumberbitches have demonstrated their rejection of: Bene-sama. At the very least, I hope this will disappear from the press. We've been very clear that we usually call him Benedict-shi [Mr. Benedict]. (^)”⁷ This was echoed in criticism directed at *News Web*, which also invoked the *-sama* suffix to fan outcry, with fans tweeting [slide] “It's not ‘Bene-sama’, it's ‘Ben-san!’”⁸ and [slide] “Fans don't call him ‘Bene-sama’, it's ‘Bene-san’.”⁹

Yet, much of this critique was explicitly aimed at what the *-sama* suffix had come to represent in the broader context of mass mediated fandom. The second fan mentioned previously goes on in her blog post to address the mass media directly, writing [slide]: “At first glance, you might think that because you see some similarities between [Benedict] fans and the Korean Wave, you should call him '*-sama*' and aim to start a second Yon-sama boom, but/Dear mass media, you can't just turn Bene-san into a pachinko machine... /And moreover, because he's someone who shoulders [responsibility for] not only Britain, but Hollywood as well with his talent and honesty, do you think his Cumbernannies are going to be so easily led by the press?/I absolutely reject that./Karube-san said it as if he were drawing attention to it, and I reacted by muttering/Karube-san, just who is this '*Bene-sama*'?”¹⁰

Another fan similarly tweets [slide], "I can see [the mass media] betting on making a great boom with "150 spent the night" and "Bene-sama," and it makes me sick. No one stayed overnight! The only ones who were there were those who stayed at a hotel and went early at 3 am. There's not one person who calls him Bene-sama! We call him Bene-san, Bene, Benene, Bene-shan, Batch-san..."¹¹ and later [slide], "Just as I thought. Even though we told the ZIP [news program] reporter yesterday "We don't call him Bene-sama, it's Bene-san," he made an unsatisfied face that clearly said, "Then I can't get the footage I want." When I saw that, I knew they wanted to make 'Bene-sama' popular..."¹² This tweeter followed up these thoughts on her blog, where she continued [slide], "People who make TV think they have to make booms. I don't understand why they keep pushing 'Bene-sama' even though we've rejected it."¹³ Yet another adds on her blog [slide], "I think it's okay [to call him *-sama*] since we're free. I don't want to criticize what fans want to call him. But I really hate, from the bottom of my heart, lies in the mass media that 'all the fans call him that!'"¹⁴

Thus, what these fans discerned in producers' seemingly inclusive use of the suffix *-sama* was a calculated attempt at fostering a new celebrity boom along the same lines as that of Yon-sama and the Korean Wave a decade earlier; one distinguished by mass media characterizations of crazed fans spending the night at the airport in order to see their idol, blindly in thrall of his otherwise elusive charms.

In fact, as a result of this outcry, Shinichi Karube stated on a subsequent broadcast of *Mezamashi terebi*, "Since fans seem to dislike him being referred to as

'Bene-sama', we'll be using Benedict,"¹⁵ for which several fans thanked him, with the author of one *Sherlock*-centric blog reflecting [slide], "It's important that they stopped because of negative feedback from fans. The Cumbercollective came together on sites like Twitter and insisted, "It's NOT Bene-sama!!!!" and that got through to them. I realized anew just how big an effect Twitter has."¹⁶ Writ large, fan reaction to mass media attempts to 'mediate' Cumberbatch in Japan resulted in their disruption; moreover, in all but completely jettisoning the *-sama* suffix in reporting on not just Cumberbatch and *Sherlock*, but all the British stars of the present-day boom, the Japanese mass media deftly avoided the fate of both Jackie Chan's marketers and the Korean Wave juggernaut.

So the fans win, right? Yes and no. On the one hand, this is the kind of responsiveness to female fans' desire for respect from media producers that women in English language fandoms (and especially the *Sherlock* fandom) can only dream of; yet, it isn't the end of the story. If fans were well aware of the media's use of the *-sama* suffix as a means of pigeonholing them as a certain – and, to them, undesirable – kind of fandom, the mass media quickly became equally aware that what fans were reacting to wasn't the suffix, per se, but its Korean Wave connotations. Thus it was that in marketing leading up to the June 2014 broadcast of series 3 of *Sherlock*, the show was positioned as an 'adult' alternative to more 'childish' television dramas – in which 'childish' seems to have connoted the youth-oriented latter-day Korean Wave in Japan. The July 2014 issue of the women's monthly *an-an* (which was released two months earlier, as is common in Japan) featured a piece on *Sherlock* [slide] in an article entitled, "Get Your Fill of Cool, Adult

British Men Through *Sherlock*” – part of an issue [slide] devoted entirely to the topic of ‘Adult Men’ in which South Korean stars were conspicuously absent. Similarly, NHK advertising [slide] for their broadcast of series 3 featured promotional stills from *Sherlock* and *Downton Abbey* with the tagline, “For people who are tired of children’s drama, NHK is adult drama.”

In the Japanese context, then, I would argue that the regifting of fan culture embodied in the rhetoric of inclusion has evolved – however tactically and provisionally – to incorporate the regifting of fan identity itself, in which producer validation of fans’ own self-perception as different from ‘those’ kinds of fans acts as a powerful incentive to consume the ancillary content they produce.

¹ Scott, Suzanne. 2009. Repackaging fan culture: The regifting economy of ancillary content models. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 3.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2009.0150>.

² Mark Schilling, “Yuka Hoshino, marketing director, Paramount Pictures Japan,” *Variety*, October 4, 2012 (online).

³ Motosaru Nashi, “Itsu made tsuzuku Hanryu suta no zeni geba shoho,” *Shukan jitsuwa*, December 9, 2004 (54-55).

⁴ *7th Heaven* blog, February 3, 2013.

⁵ *cry&smile* blog, August 16, 2013.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ @mai_turbo, July 17, 2013.

⁸ @Sherlock_hmk, July 16, 2013.

⁹ @ikano_J12MS, July 16, 2013.

¹⁰ *cry&smile* blog, August 16, 2013.

¹¹ @ikano_J12MS, July 16, 2013.

¹² @ikano_J12MS, July 16, 2013.

¹³ *Go Go Oretachi!!* blog, July 16, 2013.

¹⁴ @Mako_Itou, July 16, 2013.

¹⁵ *Eikoku eiga to dorama de eigo no benkyo – hajimari wa Sherlock* blog, August 23, 2013.

¹⁶ *Sherlock Holic* blog, August 29, 2013.