

**Steger, Brigitte and Angelika Koch, ed. *Manga Girl Seeks Herbivore Boy. Studying Japanese Gender at Cambridge.***

Münster: LIT Verlag, 2013. Print  
ISBN 978-0-7391-6625-3  
English; 240 pages; 29,90 Euro

When Itō Kimio writes in the introduction to *Danseigaku nyumon [Introduction to Men's Studies]* that the 1990's is the "period of men's problems" (1), the concept that men are in crisis finally had reached Japan. The ground shaking changes of the economic system deprived today's average young Japanese students of the certainty of a job and life-time employment and thus of the more or less stable living conditions of the preceding generations. After the war the *salarīman* – a white collar employee whom Dasgupta calls "the 'everyman' of Japan" (118) – became the role model for the average young Japanese man. With this role model hardly being appropriate anymore, ideas of what a man should be like diversified.

In this book, editors Brigitte Steger and Angelika Koch compiled essays of four young scholars of Cambridge University, who address issues of gender constructions in contemporary Japan that until now have hardly met with scholarly interest. Their analyses widely range in topic from the popular culture of *manga* to the discourse on the new masculinity of the so-called "herbivorous men". By doing so, they provide a collection of groundbreaking work that is not only meant to be an introduction to gender questions but also provides a basis for further research. The editors show the relevance of gender analysis with regards to the dynamics of contemporary Japanese society and thus make a valuable contribution to the discussion of problems, which are relevant for developments of contemporary Japan.

Hattie Jones analyzes the depiction of female characters in boys' *anime* and *manga*. Boys' *manga*, she argues, used to be analyzed within discourses on pornography, *salarīmen* and science fiction. She seeks to determine whether the depictions of women in recent boys' *manga* are more varied than previously assumed. Jones presents the analyses of the four popular works *To Love-ru*, *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya*, *Demon Detective Neuro Nōgami* and *Gintama*. Her analysis is centered on the always implicit axis of masculinity in contrast to femininity. This approach is useful and necessary, as gender is a concept which is "[...] inherently relational. 'Masculinity' does not exist except in contrast with 'femininity'. A culture which does not treat women and men as bearers of polarized character types, at least in principle, does not have a concept of masculinity [...]" (Connell 68) or femininity. Hattie Jones shows in her fascinating analysis that discourses on constructing femininity and thus gender in general are not as simplistic as they once were. She suggests that this is the sign of changing overall perceptions of gender and thus a further step towards gender equality. However, this can only be an assumption. Further elaboration, especially on other aspects of producing cultural artifacts, is needed in order to evaluate if changing depictions of femininity in *manga* and *anime* really are an indication of a development towards a more gender equal society.

Zoya Street approaches gender discourses in Japanese society from the perspective of moral education in Japanese textbooks, paying special attention to constructions of father figures. Her endeavor to carve out the position and role of the father figure in morality textbooks is a very intriguing one, given the increasing absence of the father in postwar Japanese family life. Street's analysis shows to what extent gender is incorporated into aspects of everyday life, education and social discourses. When she points out that the fundamental characteristics of father figures in textbooks are silence and absence from home, she proves that moral education is drawing on hegemonic gender discourses and by doing so it reproduces them. Unmasking the relationship between gender, social development and school curriculums could be – even though not directly stated by the author – a great contribution to

the understanding of contemporary dynamics in Japanese society and politics. Unfortunately, Street does not further elaborate on these issues. However, her work may serve as a starting point for questioning the gender roles conveyed by moral education.

One of the buzzwords appearing in Japan since 2006 has been *sōshoku(kei)-danshi*, the “herbivorous man”. The expression became one of the key terms of public discourse when referring to changes of masculinity primarily with regards to the younger generation. Chris Deacon analyzes the discourses on *sōshoku(kei)-danshi* and interprets them by taking into consideration theories of masculinity and gender performance, trying to understand the position of these young men within Japanese society. Deacon conducted an interview study with 35 university students and also draws on the results of Morioka Masahiro, focusing on three main areas: “[...] working habits, shopping/fashion, and relationships.” (136). He shows that in Japan gender is not so important a category during childhood. However, it becomes very important when entering adult life. Referring to Butler’s theory of gender performance, Deacon seeks to find out how the shift from the non-gendered boy to the gendered adult male occurs. He argues that Japanese society has institutions whose function is to prepare young males to become full members of society. Negotiating Japanese masculinity has long been and still often is characterized by an androcentric world view and thus by the perspective of an “ought to be” working male. When Deacon interprets the meaning of *sōshoku(kei)-danshi* in the context of Japanese society, however, he convincingly evokes two other aspects that contribute to the formation of masculinity – fashion and relationships. He argues that by stepping out of the conventions of the “normal Japanese male” in terms of employment, beautification and relationships, *sōshoku(kei)-danshi* subvert Japanese society and by doing so partially loosen its chains.

Deacon’s endeavor is a daring one. He analyzes a phenomenon that is probably the newest and least explored of those addressed in this book. Thus, his article cannot be more than a first encounter with this subject matter. That, of course, has its downsides as it does not leave any

space to investigate several topics in depth. Yet, Deacon's results are very intriguing and provide a good overview of the existing discourses on *sōshoku(kei)-danshi*. He furthermore presents some first ideas on how to approach and discuss this phenomenon.

Nicola McDermott analyzes how transgender identities in Japan are negotiated. Drawing heavily on the work of Mark McLelland she calls into attention indigenous Japanese transgender discourses that differ from the discourse of transsexualism in the West, introduced to Japan in the 1990's. However, McDermott sees this discourse as very problematic. Japan adopted the guidelines for diagnosing GID (gender identity disorder) entirely from the USA, which means that "[...] Japanese media and society have appropriated the hegemonic model of transsexualism, and some in the transgender community have internalized this model, marginalizing Japan's indigenous transgender identities." (193). The guidelines for GID, she argues, further reinforce conservative views of gender identity. She elaborates on the problems caused by the discourses used to negotiate the topic of transgender in Japan, giving examples such as the Japanese family register *koseki*.

McDermott provides in her article a very insightful analysis on how gender is constructed discursively. She investigates how certain discourses were introduced to Japan from the West and how these discourses changed the means by which gender identities are constructed and the ways in which they are perceived. She pointedly shows how these foreign hegemonic discourses cause problems for indigenous Japanese transgender identities which do not fit the Western mold. McDermott convincingly argues in her conclusion that her findings do not necessarily only hold true for Japanese transgender identities but also for those in various other countries. By doing so, she provides us both an intriguing evaluation on how hegemonic gender discourses create and recreate social reality, and an insight into the extent to which the "glasses of binary gender-relations" still dominate the way the majority of people understand the world.

All contributors to this book provided insightful and fascinating analyses regarding problems of gender constructions in contemporary Japan. They did so by investigating topics that as of yet have been largely ignored by most researchers. Of course, sometimes the reader feels that the in-depth analysis should start just when a chapter ends, or that some theories and works of other scholars could have been discussed more critically. However, given the fact that the contributors just graduated, their efforts and results deserve praise and respect. Maybe it is its “flaws” that at the same time are the “strengths” of this book. It is easy to read and very comprehensible and thus serves well as an introduction to topics whose academic exploration is just beginning.

**Ronald Saladin (M.A.)**

Department of Japanese Studies,  
University of Trier, Germany.

**Works Cited:**

- Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. Print.
- Itō, Kimio. *Danseigaku nyūmon [Introduction to Men's Studies]*. Tōkyō: Sakuhinsha, 1996. Print.
- Dasgupta, Romit. “Creating corporate warriors.” *Asian Masculinities: The meaning and practise of manhood in China and Japan*. Ed. Kam Louie and Morris Low. London: Routledge, 2003. 118-134. Print.