I Love you as you are: Marriages between Different Kinds

Jason Davis and Mio Bryce
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Jason Davis, Macquarie University, NSW, Australia
Mio Bryce, Macquarie University, NSW, Australia

Abstract: A huge, powerful dragon falls in love with a chatty donkey, romantically pursues him, and the pair are finally married in Shrek 3. What does their happy marriage embody? Does it promote the notion of indiscriminative love? Focusing on Japanese folkloric representations of non-human animal brides, this paper discusses the significance of and changes within the irui-kon (lit. marriages between different kinds) and situates the folkloric legacy of these tales in relation to contemporary manga/anime, in terms of the search for genuine and equal relationships. Irui-kon has been a popular motif in many parts of the world since the ancient period. In Japan, such folkloric tales have evolved intertextually through different genres. Typically, such marriages are established between human grooms and non-human brides (e.g., heavenly woman, cranes, and foxes). The position of the non-human is ambiguous. They can marry only in human shape and will disappear when their identities are revealed. Despite the animistic closeness between humans and non-humans, the stories may be read as an individual’s longing for a genuine love suppressed and/or prohibited by social norms. Conversely, western tales of love between humans and non-humans are anthropocentric with many non-humans (both males and females) being in fact cursed humans. When their curses have been broken, (e.g., by a princess’ kiss to a frog prince), they regain their human form. As exemplified by Beauty and the Beast, these tales are often retold and analysed in terms of sexual awakening. The tales of love and friendships between humans and non-humans (e.g., vampires, robots, animals) have increased considerably in recent decades. What do these discourses represent in a society where numerous social and physical barriers have been shaken, blurred and shifted? This paper deals with the irui-kon to link a message, posed by numerous youth literature today – Love me as I am. (290)

Keywords: Irui-Kon, Marriages between Different Kinds, Equal Relationships, Manga and Anime, Intertextuality

A HUGE, POWERFUL dragon falls in love with a chatty donkey, romantically pursues him and the pair are finally married in Shrek and have babies in Shrek 3. What does their happy marriage embody? Does it promote the notion of indiscriminative love?

Irui-kon (lit. marriages between different kinds) has been a recurring motif in folkloric narratives (e.g., Seki Keigo 1978a, 1978b, 1981), while contemporary borrowings or reworkings of its mythemes resonate with thematic significance for understanding popular cultural expressions of identity and Otherness within diversified global communities. It is because of irui-kon’s figurative embodiment of ambiguous relationships involving Otherness and dichotomous structurings (e.g., humans and Nature; men and women), as well as treatment of issues relating to identity, intersubjectivity and maturation, that irui-kon’s intertextual resonances warrant attention. As Irmela Hijiya-Kirschner (2007) states, Others is a ‘relational’ notion that is inextricably tied to social normativity. Otherness is a widely and diversely depicted in Irui-kon discourses, signifying ambiguous relationships between an individual and society as well as within an individual as the experiences of a self.

Much of the scholarship focusing on i rui-k on, however, has been conducted within folkloric studies. This paper examines Japanese representations of this motif to depict an individual’s sorrowful surrender to social conformity by ejecting the Other of their desire as well as an encouragement for personal quests for both individual senses of self and genuine, equal relationships with others.

The Irui-Kon in Folktales

Irui-kon motif is found in many parts of the world, not as a reflection of a beast marriage (sodomie) but as a metonym of human’s (spiritual) association with Otherness (e.g., Nature and Otherness within an individual and a society). It has also been referred to as shin-kon (god marriages) (Seki Keiko 1980). Irui-kon scholarship has accumulated its observations mostly through the lens of folklore studies. For example, western studies of swan maiden tales began in 1919 and were developed further with access to Asian sources in the late-1930s. Such studies indicate that ‘folktales about marriage to a supernatural feminine being who disappears’ (Helge Holmström 1919) have been historically recurring symbolic expressions in China, Japan and Korea, with the oldest provenance of the tale being identified as Chinese from the third century (A.T. Hatto 1961; Ōbayashi...
Comparative studies of the swan maiden tales have also been carried out in Japan as tales of ‘ten’iyo (heavenly women), t en ‘nin ny ō b ō (heavenly wives) and/or hagoromo (lit. feathery robes) (e.g., Seki Keigo 1966; Kanda Hideo 1984; Kimishima Hisako 1984, 1987; Imoto Eiichi 1987; Furukawa Noriko 1989).

In Japan, folkloric tales often depict an animistic world where humans and animals (birds, reptiles etc) may interact with each other as partners or enemies (Ozawa Toshio 1976, 1994; Okuhara Reiko 2000; Gergana Petrova 2004). Such tales have evolved intertextually through narratival borrowings and allusions to different genres. Most of the non-human protagonists represent Otherness explicitly – something extraordinary and/or spiritual, therefore, domestic animals with normal behaviours (e.g., chicken, dog, cats, pigs, cows/ox, horses) are generally excluded (Sakurai Tokutarō 1984). Ozawa (1979) locates Japanese tales of human marriages with animals as inhabiting the border zone between ancient cultures in which no clear distinction exists between humans and animals (e.g., Inuit animals as inhabiting the border zone between ancient cultures in which no clear distinction exists between humans and animals (e.g., Inuit animals as inhabiting the border zone between animals and humans, with normal behaviours) by his human wife.

As for an example of a tale depicting a happily existing non-human wife, the tale of the cat bride is widely known through Matsutani’s version, although this cheerful tale is rather unusual and possibly less authentic as a folktale. It begins with a poor, lonely farmer rescuing a stray female kitten who decides to adopt it as a companion when it has been thrown out of a wealthy man’s residence. He takes care of the kitten as best he can and enjoys its company. Responding to his affection, the cat develops human capacities, such as talking to him, cooking and cleaning his house, transformations which culminate in the cat’s desire to visit the Ise Shrine to become a human girl and marry him. It should be noted that her shape as a cat does not hinder their relationship, which is reconfirmed by his loneliness while the cat is away at Ise. The tale suggests that affectionate devotion to the cat is what enables her to gain such human-like abilities.

**Typical Japanese Irui-Kon Narratives – The Victimised Female Other**

As mentioned above, the majority of irui-kon marriages in Japanese folktales have unhappy endings. The typical marriage between humans and non-humans is established between a human groom and a non-human bride (e.g., a heavenly woman, bird or animal) with the relationship generally ending with the bride’s immediate disappearance when their non-human identities are revealed. Such separations indicate a common recognition of the presence of an ontological border between humans and non-humans.
such that non-humans may be able to marry a human, but are never able to completely attain human identity. Non-human brides are depicted from a human perspective as someone who arrives and departs, so it is not surprising that migratory birds like cranes and snakes should figure as the most appropriate metaphoric image of non-human brides. The tales are often related to other motifs, such as the expression of gratitude and a prohibition against voyuer-ism.

In terms of the issue of identity, the real identity of non-humans in these narratives is concealed; hence the revelation of their non-human status is regarded as unacceptable. In other words, the Otherness of non-humans is objectified and abjected, and their social identity as human is demanded as essential for sustaining their marriages, rather than their personal, intrinsic natures. Such tales focus on a human man who becomes involved with a non-human female. In such stories, the human protagonists’ changes do not signify their personal maturation, self-discovery or empowerment, but rather the process of his social conformity, by virtue of the suppression of his own desire for love.

In Japanese tales, the original identities of non-human wives range widely from avian and reptile forms – cranes, foxes, snakes, frogs, tortoises – as well as fish, clams etc to mythical creatures attributed to visions (e.g., heavenly beings, dragons, spirits of trees). Their social position is ambiguous. They can marry only in human shape, therefore, in most cases they will disappear when their nonhuman identities are revealed. Kawai Hayao (1982a) notes that there are ambivalent attitudes towards their origins – they may be looked down on (e.g., animals except foxes) as lower beings or be admired as higher (spiritual) beings (e.g., heavenly women, dragon princesses and foxes). There is neither equal standing nor complementarity in their allotted roles, only potentialities for either the initiator or the victim of exploitation. Their marriage may be read as a metonymic condensation of humans’ relationship with Nature.

Popular tales of Tsuru no ongaeshi (The Grateful Crane) offer an exemplary case. Its recounting typically comprises the following episodic structure. A poor man rescues an injured crane, after which a beautiful woman visits him and marries him. One day she asks him for the use of a room for her weaving and makes him promise not to peek at her while using the room which he obeys. A few days later, she gives him a beautiful cloth to sell, which he does so and gains an astonishing amount of money, but is asked by the buyer to get another piece. The wife agrees to produce another sample of cloth with the same promise, only this time he peers into the room he is forbidden to enter and finds that a crane is weaving with her own soft feathers. She confesses that she is the rescued crane and has come to repay his kindness, after which she flies up into the sky. Because of their love and innocent good will, the resourceful non-human brides are either intentionally or unintentionally exploited by their human husbands and human society.

Human Dominance over Female Other - Broken Taboo of Viewing

The criticality of the revelation of non-human identity is signalled by the sudden ending of their happy marriage due to their husbands’ broken promise to not spy on them. The taboo associated with seeing the woman in her original form is a common motif in Japanese folklores and classified as miruna no taboo (taboo of Don’t look at) or miruna no yashiki (forbidden chamber). Unlike western folktales, there is no obvious punishment for such voyeuristic infractions; instead, the female victim simply disappears in sadness. This pattern is seen in both myths and folktales with the taboo against viewing originally associated with the exposure of genitals and consequently a strong sense of shame. Kitayama Osamu (1993) presses this observation further by maintaining that the sight of a person’s uncovered genitalia undermined people’s desire for spiritual unity, revealing the critical differences between the viewer and the targeted person, and so resulting in their permanent separation. The dominating power of viewing indicates that the taboo and its violation have evolved for sustaining their marriages, rather than their personal, intrinsic natures as well as fish, clams etc to mythical creatures attributed to visions (e.g., heavenly beings, dragons, spirits of trees). Their social position is ambiguous. They can marry only in human shape, therefore, in most cases they will disappear when their nonhuman identities are revealed. Kawai Hayao (1982a) notes that there are ambivalent attitudes towards their origins – they may be looked down on (e.g., animals except foxes) as lower beings or be admired as higher (spiritual) beings (e.g., heavenly women, dragon princesses and foxes). There is neither equal standing nor complementarity in their allotted roles, only potentialities for either the initiator or the victim of exploitation. Their marriage may be read as a metonymic condensation of humans’ relationship with Nature.

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Kawai (1982a) points out that the commonly sorrowful closure of the tales obscures the harsh relationship between the exploiter and the exploited. This is exemplified by the tale of a dragon bride, such as Toyotama-hime, which is often imbued with mythological overtones as it is traditionally recorded

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3 Kimishima Hisako (1984) points out that the original Chinese tellings of heavenly wives in tales of hugoromo (lit. feathery robes) are in fact about a bird-woman who transforms herself into a bird by wearing a bird robe, such as that resembling a crane, swan, peacock or a Chinese phoenix.

4 Ozawa suggests that the tales of bird and animal brides (including imaginary ones, e.g., dragons) are possibly limited to Japan and its geographical surroundings.

5 In some cases, the man is old and the crane becomes his foster daughter.

6 For example, Umehara Takeshi suggested it in a symposium on 11th March, 1978, titled “Honnō to bunka no hyōshō” (in Kawai 1982b, p.129)

7 Toyotama-hime (Princess Toyotama [lit. rich/beautiful gem], a daughter of a sea god) asks her husband not to see her in a house of childbirth, but when he observes her, he finds her in a shape of snake in Kojiki (The Records of Ancient Matters, 712) and a dragon in Nihon shoki (The Chronicles of Japan, 720). In both stories she feels ashamed and leaves him.
as an ancestral legend belonging to a specific clan. The tale is categorised as partaking of a group of tales identified with a Melusine motif. Melusine in French folklore involves a fairy princess who approaches her husband as a human girl and later asks him not to spy on her bathing, where she reveals her original shape with a snake-like lower body. The marriages of Toyotama-hime and Melusine are both broken by their husbands’ viewing of their brides’ non-human bodies. Both women leave their sons with a gift (e.g., power and wealth) so that their male descendents are free from humiliation and able to lead a successful life as a human (or a god).

The tale that best dramatises the non-human’s victimisation is the popular tale of a dragon wife; a tale in which motherly self-sacrifice is focused on in the storytelling, in contrast to her human husband’s passivity and dependency. The story begins with a beautiful woman visiting a poor man with the intention of marrying him and living happily for a while. At the time of childbirth, she asks him not to spy on her, but he does and finds a dragon (large snake) with a new born baby. She sadly confesses her true identity and farewells him, leaving a round gem for her child to lick. The gem is however taken by a landlord. The baby-boy cries until the husband obtains another gem from his wife in a lake, only to be deprived of the second gem as well. Responding to her husband’s request for another gem, she discloses that the gems are in fact her eyeballs and now she has been rendered blind. The story ends with her revenge against the avarice of the landlord by flooding his lands. The word tama (ball, gem) for eyeball is a homophone of tama (soul) and implies her whole-hearted dedication, hence the magnitude of her wasted sacrificial deeds. Her good will and love for her child are abused, resulting in devastation.

Such an ironic cause and effect is however common in non-human bride stories and it is usually masked by the (mutual) grief of the couple as depicted from the husbands’ viewpoint. From beginning to end, her husband remains passive, inactive and dependant on his wife’s initiatives, although he feels remorse when he realises the origin of the gems. Should he be free from any blame because of his innocence and/or his sorrow and sympathy towards the fate of his wife? Should his powerlessness and lack of intention to hurt her be a sufficient excuse despite his triggering of his wife’s hardship by breaking the promise not to see her? Is her melancholy sufficient to compensate their wives, who simply resign without accusing their husbands’ betrayal?

An aesthetic or religious significance attributed to the experience of sorrow predominates (Kawai 2003) and functions to obscure the real, harsher allegorical picture of the impoverishing relationship between non-human brides and their human grooms – human’s abusive exploitation of Nature (Komatsu Kazuhiko 1984). The sad breaking up of their marriages by the human husbands’ violation of the taboo set by the non-human bride stresses the extreme difficulty of achieving a harmonious and mutually respectful coexistence between different kinds, either Humanity and Nature or Man and Woman. Does this struggle for mutual recognition indicate the unsurpassed boarder between humans and Nature in the Japanese context, despite their outward closeness, as Ozawa insists?

The consistent feature of such plots is the disclosure of the ambivalent nature of the double-bound structure of Japanese patriarchy which relies on (or more boldly, exploits) women’s motherly care and strength. A non-human bride’s permanent marriage to a human is only possible through the total suppression of her non-human identity, in other words, the necessity for her total social conformity; the total domestication of her as a resource. This means that there is no place for her to authentically live as she truly is. Despite the animistic closeness between humans and non-humans, which is often seen as a characteristic of Japanese culture, the stories expose an inability to recognise and deal with Otherness (e.g., Nature/female) as a respectable partner.

**Human Greed, Adulthood and Social Conformity**

Human males’ greed, instigated by other humans, is frequently mentioned in the tales of failed marriages of non-human brides. What does their greed signify? Tales of the grateful crane commonly disclose the critical change in the initially innocent, naïve and genuinely sympathetic male protagonist. His greed is ironically triggered by his wife’s innocent gift, the treasured cloth, which provides him with unimaginable access to huge sums of money, material gain and wishful people who push him to obtain more valuable cloth. Money symbolises human society. This, therefore, can be considered as a form of social conformity, his domestication as a poor, naïve yet free willed man positioned on the border between human and natural worlds.

Here, Nature and childhood can be seen as synonymous. The husband’s ignorance is often stressed, positively signifying his innocence and spirituality, by virtue of his capability to associate with Nature.

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8 According to Ozawa (1989), Japanese folktales are characterised by brevity in their telling and exhibit a strong cyclical structure, which means at the tale’s conclusion, many protagonists’ lives have not fundamentally changed. This would suggest that stability has been preferred over development.
Being susceptible to money and/or others’ threats, he crosses the threshold to adulthood and becomes bound by both a materialistic world and the social norms underpinning it. He no longer belongs to the innocent, spiritual world of Nature and childhood. This critical shift is impressively dramatised as the sudden disintegration of meaningful reciprocity between himself and his crane wife as in Kinoshita Junji’s theatrical retelling of the crane wife tale, Yūzuru (lit. an evening crane) and Ichikawa Kon’s film, Tsuru (1988).

Dominant adults, who expose the husband to money and greed, embody the social pressure to relinquish innocent dreams and accept socially required roles as an adult along or the responsibility a child should carry into adulthood. He is urged to conform to social norms by accepting unequal relationships between humans and Nature and between men and women, rather than encouraging an individual’s love and self development through an integral sense of self. His longing for an experience of genuine love is regarded as unattainable and should be suppressed and/or prohibited by social norms. His wife, who has revealed her non-human identity, should be ejected and her memory buried in the melancholy of his nostalgic childhood memories.

In addition, Kawai claims that Japanese men’s susceptibility towards self-centred greed is highlighted in a number of tales about non-human brides (1982a). The human husbands’ dependency on their non-human wives may be compared to a form of infantilisation akin to that of the mythical Susano (the younger brother of the Sun goddess Amaterasu) (Yoshida Atsuhiko in Kawai 2003). Doi Takeo’s concept of amae (1971) is acutely relevant here; likewise, Kawai’s analysis of Japanese men’s dependency on their mothers (1982c).

What does adulthood bring to these male characters? Rather than independence and freedom to pursue their love objects, it leads to responsibilities and mutuality surveillance within a human society. Becoming an adult is almost synonymous for many Japanese youths with the loss of freedom, independence and a developed sense of ‘self’. Their persistent unwillingness to accept adulthood is ubiquitous feature of contemporary Japanese society.

**Crude Nature as Unacceptable Other**

Human’s ultimate rejection of Nature is represented by a harsher discourse depicting non-human grooms. Their non-human identities are narrowly limited to particular kinds such as monkeys, frogs, snakes, kappa (water goblin) and oni (ogre with short horn/s), and their true identities are often disclosed at the outset of the narrative. Most of the grooms are disrespected and frequently killed by their human wives. A typical example of this type of tale involves a monkey groom (saru muko), who is tactfully and mercilessly drawn to his death by his female human partner, despite being promised by her father as a reward. The complete lack of sympathy for the monkey is probably due to his marriage to her in a simian or animal form; a crude representation of Otherness, as the allegorical element of human harshness is less evident in the case of snake grooms who are spiritual beings approaching their brides disguised as handsome human men. Perceiving the wives’ murderous intent towards their non-human husbands as human antinomy towards Nature, Komatsu argues that such tales furtively teach the listeners/children that the (cunning) exploitation of Nature is necessary as well as stressing the inevitable hard work involved in being in a dutiful parent-child relationship.

Following Lévi-Strauss’ binary structuring of nature/females in relation to civilization/males, Amamiya Yūko (1985) argues that a non-human male’s marriage to a human woman is Nature’s forceful invasion into the ‘civilised’ human world.

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9 In the play, Nature/children’s innocence and adult human greed are sharply contrasted. Yohyō is originally agreeable, innocent and unimportant and belongs to Nature and children. Tsū (crane)’s happy marriage with him ends when he learns the value of money and becomes greedy, ironically from a too successful sale of her beautiful fabric. His change is figuratively displayed as a sudden form of Babelisation. They no longer understand each other’s speech. Her hopeless perplexity is what most non-human wives share, as represented by another retelling of the same story; the film, Tsura (1988), directed by Ichikawa Kon with the heroine being played by Yoshinaga Sayuri.

10 This is as evident from the scholarly examinations of subcultures of cuteness (e.g., Kinsella 1995; 1997, McVeigh 1996).

11 The story goes like this. A man becomes tired from the weeding of his mountain field and asks someone for help. A monkey comes and offers his assistance, but only in exchange for his daughter, which the farmer agrees. The monkey accomplishes the work unexpectedly and demands his reward. His daughter (often the youngest one) agrees to the exchange out of help for her father. When she leaves home with her monkey husband, she asks him to carry a heavy millstone. She further asks him to pick a flower (wisteria, cherry etc) above a river, while keeping the millstone on his back. As a result, he falls into the river and drowns. This story is obviously told as a clever girl’s victory over the monkey who forgets his place and ambitiously wants to have a human wife. The same fate awaits fox grooms in other tales. Although Chohoko (a human bride) is treated well by her fox husband and his family, and they present themselves in human shape in front of her, when she has become aware of their identity. Without hesitation, she (with her parents’ help) traps them in a large bag and they are beaten to death, while singing (retold by Matsutani Miyoko).

12 Compared to monkeys, snake husbands are more ambiguous; some are killed by their wives with a thousand needles, but some successfully take their brides away. The latter are often revered as gods, appearing in response to the call for rain.

13 According to John Stephens and Robyn McCallum (1998 p.3), the retelling of stories for children, especially folk and fairly tales, function ‘to initiate children into aspects of a social heritage, transmitting many of a culture’s central values and assumptions and a body of shared allusions and experiences’.
and the merciless killing of non-human grooms is human society’s inevitable and originating defence. Non-human grooms should be refused as they take away their human brides (e.g., a bride becomes a snake), whereas non-human brides are acceptable as they are beneficial by begetting something useful and/or leaving something good, e.g., their sons and wealth for their posterity. Their children are, and should be, male so that they can remain in the human world. Amamiya states that irui (the non-human) symbolises the chaotic outer world with the eventual ejection of non-human wives signifying humanity’s attempt at incorporating a safer, congenial side of nature as a mother, whilst expelling an untameable, polluting side of female/nature from the ‘civilised’ (male) sphere. In this context, the tales are read as the restoration of patriarchal respect for the lineage provided by male blood-lines and disrespect for maternity.

The social world posed in the aforementioned narratives is melancholic and pessimistic. Are there ways in which both a man and a woman can each develop their ability and still co-exist lovingly? Should a girl comply with social demands to harmoniously love males by suppressing her real ability? And what of the hetero-normative assumptions underpinning gender roles? By chasing a man, instead of being chased, has a girl/woman gained or lost? Many young males today seemingly comfortably wait to be chosen, rather than approach their girls and may face their rejection. Does this signify women’s gaining of their freedom or men’s escape from their responsibility?

The Irui-Kon in Manga and Anime

The irui-kon motif is threaded through contemporary narratives, but with shifts in the storytelling focus from affective investment in the significance of sorrowful tales of the exploiter and the exploited, to tales of half-blood characters’ ambiguous identities or longings for mutual love between different kinds. The shift is especially evident in manga and/or anime works, which are visually characterised by strong forms of storytelling, genre hybridity and affective (audio)visual representations of Otherness (Bolton 2002; Sato 2004; Lamarrre 2006 & 2007; Napier 2005 & 2006).

The fatalistic and/or melancholic resignation over the situation between humans and non-humans has been represented in stories which focus on half-blood characters and their psychical and/or corporeal struggles over their ambiguous identities, of being suspended between two ontologically different domains. For example, in Kakinouchi Narumi and Hirano Toshi’s Kyūketsuki Miyu (Vampire princess Miyu, 1988-2002), and the character D in Kikuchi Hideyuki and Kawajiri Yoshiaki’s Vampire Hunter D (2000) are typical examples. In addition, the pessimism of irui-kon is strongly indicated in Kyūketsuki Miyu with Miyu’s father trapped in the eternal twilight of a lethargic existence. This is ironic as he has lost interest in life and the animating forces compelling his love, as his transformation into an immortal by his vampire wife was to prolong their love and life together.

Ōshima Yumiko’s manga, Wata no kuni-boshi (The Star of Cottonland) stresses the unsurpassed border between humans and non-humans. In the story, the protagonist Chibi-neko (Little Cat) dreams of becoming a human girl and being romantically involved with her owner, Suwano Tokio, who rescued her as an abandoned kitten. By visualising cats in essentially human form in western clothes, the boundary between the human and the non-human is blurred, allowing readers to obtain multiple viewpoints as well as empathy with human and feline characters. At the same time, however, Chibi-neko is reminded by Raphael (her beautiful, intelligent suitor and mentor cat) that a cat should die as a cat – this re-establishes a clear boundary between what is essentially human from that defining a non-human animal; that the non-human animal is Other.

Nevertheless, the majority of treatments of irui-kon in manga/anime evidence discernibly positive and optimistic overtones as they are often love stories of sincerity and emotional challenges. The criticality of concealment of the non-human identity is no longer the main issue here. In such narratives, Nature is often displaced by technological manifestations. The non-human bride may assume a humanoid form as a robot girlfriend, as exemplified by the characters Chii (for Hideki), Yuzuki (for Minoru) and Ueda Yasuhiro’s wife in CLAMP’s Chobits (2000-2002). Similar examples can be found in Katsura Masakazu’s Den’ei shōjo Ai (Video Girl Ai, 1989-1992) and the character Saati (a humanised computer program) in Amakatsu Ken’s Ai ga tomaranai! (A.I. Love You, 1994-1997). In these love comedies, girl characters are portrayed as cute, innocent, sincere, devoted and intrinsically attached to their boyfriends who are often nice yet ingenuous.

Despite these techno-fantastic outlooks, such romantic narratives are used thematically not to predict visions of a golden technological future, but to reassert a pattern of heterosexual bonding grounded in

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14 According to the logic of Lévi-Strauss’ account, nature’s influence is overwhelmingly apparent in daughters who essentially belong to Nature, and so need to return to the natural world. See Amamiya.

15 In Japan, historical emphasis on the purity of blood (e.g., nobility) has had the corollary effect of making a mother’s blood not considered important and so it is probably impossible to establish an accurate family tree even in a royal family.
love, nature and monogamy’ (John Stephens and Mio Bryce 2004, p.44). These non-human girlfriends share essential elements with folkloric non-human wives, in terms of displaying self-sacrificing motherly care for ‘their’ male companion. Chobits is particularly rich in pretexts and employs them playfully, positioning Chi and Hideki within the folkloric coupledom of a heavenly wife and her human husband. At the opening, Hideki is depicted as taking care of cows, identifying him with the Cowhero who steals a heavenly woman’s mythical flying robe in order to make her his wife in the tales of Tanabata (star festival), one of the variant tellings of the tales of hagoromo. This also signifies the critical fissure between them and their possible separation. At the same time, Chii is awakened by Hideki and is affectionately attached to him, suggesting Sleeping Beauty and consequently the prospect of a tidy, happy ending. Being dictated by the folkloric metanarrative of social conformity, these contemporary discourses challenge the non-human wives’ double bound situation which permits their love and power to be exploited. In order to make sure that Chii can find someone who is destined only for her and who completely and unconditionally loves her as a unique individual, her reformating switch is set in her vagina. This means if the man loves her both body and soul, she will lose all her memories and developed personality. When he physically knows her, she will no longer be the same individual he has known. Hideki is confronted with an extremely difficult question – who he loves and why. Does he love her for his sexual need? His final answer is the present Chii. This decision is rewarded by saving the earth from disastrous destruction, which Chii is programmed to cause. Given an extraordinary power, she has been programmed to destroy all other personoms (robots) who are endowed with the ability to develop their own personality and loving attachment and devotion, in order to avoid their inevitable suffering from humans’ rejection of their love and individuality. The negative reflection of what Chii embodies can be found in the character of Tima in Tezuka Osamu’s Metropolis, who becomes a destructive monster when her humanity is denied and physically damaged.

I Love you as you are!

A similar challenge is seen in Watase Yū’s fantasy, Ayashi no Ceres - Tenkū Otojī-zōshi (Ceres, Celestial Legend, 1996-2000), which is another retelling of the Japanese celestial maidens (ten’nyo) tale. The protagonist Ceres, the ten’nyo, is a representative of an alien species which comprises only females, hence her contact with humans is to find a male human mate to father her children. Eloquently employing the folk tale, the story focuses on the sorrow, pain and resentment of the victimised ten’nyo. It casts Ceres as a reincarnated, powerful and revengeful soul, whose hagoromo (feathery robe) was deprived of by her human husband’s attempt to fully possess her. The tale houses two pairs of lovers who are human and non-human: the non-human Ceres and her human husband Mikagi; and the human Aya with the non-human Tōya who has been created by the Ceres’ lost hagoromo. The story develops through the interpersonal dynamic between Ceres and Aya and their respective relationships. Aya loves Tōya for what he is. Aya’s love is never shaken by Tōya’s Otherness: he has no memories yet has exceptional physical strength and is able to heal quickly and can produce a knife from his arm if he wishes. With Aya’s love, Tōya is able to accept himself and finds a place in the world. Ceres’ previously failed relationship with Mikagi is finally recovered, through her sharing Aya’s journey and love with Tōya.

An establishment of love for someone of a different kind can also represent an ideal love involving purity and strength. This is exemplified in Hikawa Kyōko’s fantasy, Kanata kara (From Far Away, 1993-2003), in which the character Noriko’s kiss transforms Izark from his monster-like form to his original human identity. This occurs when she realises that she is on the verge of losing him forever. Bearing pains from an injury, she sidles up to him, pleading, ‘No, no! Please don’t go. Please don’t leave me. I love you. I don’t mind who you are. I don’t mind even if you’re a monster!’ Izark is almost frozen in a blue-black, monstrous body covered with layers of scales, which he is profoundly terrified and ashamed of. After the kiss, Noriko faints. This is the first time Izark wholeheartedly accepts her, forgetting his fear of becoming the monster Tenjōki (Heavenly demon) who belongs in darkness and is fated as the destroyer of the world he enters.

This touching love story unfolds Noriko’s unexpected journey into a parallel world as the character Mezame (awakening) who is prophesied to awaken the monstrous power in Izark and transform him into Tenjōki. He is shy and gentle, yet his physical strength is overwhelmingly destructive. What the tale reveals is the role of Noriko as Mezame, the awakener of Izark’s ultimate power and intrinsic inner strength, which is manifested through his angel-like wings symbolizing his belonging to the white light.

The tale provides one more step for their ultimate unity whilst maintaining their respective selfhood. In the final moment of a devastating battle with the overpowering darkness, Noriko feels powerless and experiences herself as a burden on others. However, when she realises what she can do is to express her
gratitude for others, who are trying to protect her, and that everyone is able to connect and empower each other through such appreciation, powerful ripples of white light emit from her and spread, defeating the devil in the darkness. This is her transformation only achievable by accepting who she really is. By doing so, her spirit is now able to accompany Izark in his efforts to crush the mastermind behind the dark force, by displaying the warmth and the vision of the world of the white light.

Employing the motif of irui-kon, this story explores the mutual development of the pair, Noriko and Izark. It is through a series of transformative intersubjective experiences that Izark is able to overcome his sense of resignation and self-abjection, enabling him to use his power to assist others, as he genuinely wished to do. Being and loving together, helping each other, Noriko and Izark have to constantly push their individual capacities for each other, outgrowing their individual limits. Their love grows firm, deep and private, whilst their actions increasingly involve others as friends.

Conclusion

The folkloric motif of irui-kon is a rich, ingenious, metonymic representation not only of a unity between different kinds, but perhaps also an archetypal representation for human marriages.16 It has been utilised to represent the potentiality of human relationships by (re)staging the transformative scope of these forms of intersubjectivity as interactions between different beings. On the one hand, the (traditional) folkloric reworking indicates the impact of socially expected ways of attaining maturity by giving up affectionate associations with Otherness, although this alterity may also represent the conflictual nature of inner selves. On the other hand, the tales may signify the potential for the co-development of real selves and inner strengths, instead of the social prescription for their suppression.

In recent decades an enormous number of manga and anime works have employed the irui-kon motif to (re)stage coming-of-age tales, and so celebrate the mutual love between normal human characters and characters with strong manifestations of Otherness. In these narratives, the inner strengths of powerless human characters’ (e.g., Aya and Noriko’s) are often the key which impels not only individuals but also the people around them to carry out their respective passage towards self-development and maturation, from solipsism to altruism. What do these affective discourses represent in a society where numerous social and physical barriers have been shaken, blurred and shifted? The narratives of irui-kon are therefore retold as embodiments of a message posed by youth-oriented literature today – Love me as I am.

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About the Authors

Jason Davis
Liaison Librarian at Macquarie University and teaching/research assistant for JPN manga related units in Asian Languages, Humanities, at Macquarie University.

Dr. Mio Bryce
Senior lecturer and Head of Japanese Studies at Macquarie University, teaching Japanese language, literature and manga/anime. PhD in Japanese classical literature (The Tale of Genji) from the University of Sydney.