The Boys of the Académie des Naïfs: (Re)Constructing traditional masculinity on Japanese reality TV

Cindi SturtzSreetharan
CSU Sacramento, USA

Junjyou Gakuen Otokogumi, a reality TV program broadcast by Asahi Housou from 1998 – 1999, features two up-and-coming Kansai (Western Japan) comedians – Imada Kouji and Higashino Kouji. The show features a group of Japanese "boys" ranging in age from 15 years old to 60 years old who are students in the "naïve academy" engaging in various activities during each 60-minute episode. Each episode begins and ends in a classic Japanese secondary classroom with each of the boys wearing school uniform and the two teachers at the head of the class. The episodes typically involve competitive games of eating, drinking, and/or sports-related activities.

In this paper, I argue that the styles of linguistic interactions and kinds of physical activities engaged in combine to present a vision of masculinity that harkens back to former styles of masculinity rather than looking forward to a softer, more rapport-focused masculinity. Particular focus is given to the use of address and reference terms, the demeanor and physical activities the students are required to undertake, and the position and (scant) roles of women in the episodes.

The timing of the program cannot be ignored. The memory of Japan’s bubble economy was fading, unemployment was increasing, and, in the Kansai area, the 1995 Kobe Earthquake was still seen and felt by all. Voices, including governmental, calling for men to take a more overt role in child rearing and domestic tasks, were being studiously ignored. The Junjyou Gakuen Otokogumi offer comedic respite from other messages which question and challenge the masculine status quo; indeed, the program offers its viewers lessons on how to be manly men regardless of age, the kind of men their (great) grandfathers would appreciate.

Keywords: Japan, representation, hegemonic masculinity.