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https://doi.org/10.15017/13978

出版情報：言語文化論究. 24, pp.67-78, 2009-02-28. 九州大学大学院言語文化研究院
バージョン：
権利関係：

Yamambas, an Alternative to Gender-Stereotyped Heroines, in Contemporary Children's Books in Japan: A Step Forward from Tough Heroines in Comics

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1. Introduction

Today, in Japan, many strongly-gender-biased children's books cannot be found. There is even a trend toward tough or fighting female characters in comics and animation. However, when it comes to books for younger children, it still seems that some authors choose the sex of the protagonist according to the theme of their story. For example, for an exciting, thrilling adventure story, a boy is chosen as the protagonist. For a story where the independent protagonist tackles a problem, a boy is chosen. On the other hand, a girl is chosen for a book describing the protagonist's fear or anxiety. Such somewhat gender-stereotyped characterization of protagonists can have an influence on young children when they form their self-images and gender identities.

Yamamba heroines tear down such gender stereotypes. In some contemporary books for young children, Yamambas, mountain witches, are employed as tough heroines. A typical example of such Yamamba heroines is Mayu, a little girl Yamamba in *Yamamba no Musume Mayu no Ohanashi* [*A Story of Witch's Daughter*] series. Mayu, a modernized version of Yamambas in old Japanese folklore, is a super-powered, independent, tough heroine, and, therefore, can have the power to provide young girl readers a positive option to their self-images and gender identities.[1]

2. Mayu and Yamambas in Old Japanese Folklore

Mayu, the heroine in *A Story of Witch's Daughter* series, is a little Yamamba. Her toughness and independence, seen in the four-volume fantasy stories, are closely related to the fact that she is a girl Yamamba. The four stories of *A Story of Witch's Daughter* series are as follows:

Mayu to Oni: Yamamba no Musume Mayu no Ohanashi
[*Mayu & Ogre: A Story of Witch's Daughter*]. 1999.
Mayu to Bukabukaboo: Yamamba no Musume Mayu no Ohanashi
[*Mayu & Monster Bukabukaboo: A Story of Witch's Daughter*]. 2001.
Mayu to Ryu: Yamamba no Musume Mayu no Ohanashi

[*Mayu & Dragons: Story of Witch's Daughter*]. 2004.
Mayu to Urinko: Yamamba no Musume Mayu no Ohanashi
[*Mayu & a Little Boar: A Story of Witch's Daughter*]. 2007.

They are all original stories written by Yoko Tomiyasu and illustrated by Nana Furuya, and the stage for the stories is set in modern times. However, the description and the characterization of the heroine, Mayu, are, to some extent, based on the prototypal image of Yamambas in old Japanese folklore.

Yamambas in old folklore are horrible-looking, witch-like hobgoblins with supernatural powers and superhuman strengths and abilities. In many cases, they are described as elderly women with a mop of red or grey hair and a mouth extending from ear to ear with sharp teeth in it. [Fig. 1] They are supposed to be outsiders who live deep in the mountains far away from towns and villages. Their supernatural powers and superhuman strengths and abilities are extraordinary: they can transform into anything; they are strong enough to hold a big cow; and they can run with superhuman speed.

Fig. 1 Yamamba in *Kuwazu Nyobo* (Illustrated by Suekichi Akabane)

Horrible ogresses are a widely accepted image of Yamambas. They are supposed to be able to eat any man who has wandered into the mountains. The Yamamba in *San Mai no Ofuda* [*Three Talismans*], for example, invites a boy monk into her hut in the mountains and tries to eat him. Though evil and horrible, they are sometimes naïve enough to be tricked and killed by a villager.

Actually, however, there are also some benign Yamambas in folklore. Though still feared and scared by people, they are benign enough to give a magical present to a villager who has been kind to them. The Yamamba in *Chofuku Yama no Yamamba* [*Yamamba in Mt.Chofuku*], for instance, gives a roll of magical brocade as a token of her

gratitude to an old woman who has been kind to her and her new-born boy baby. In some cases, Yamambas are even regarded to be mountain goddesses who bring a prolific growth of a grain crop to the village.[2]

Mayu is a modernized version of benign Yamambas in old folklore. (*Yamamba Yama no Mokkotachi* [*Mokkos in Mount Yamamba*], the precedent of *A Story of Witch's Daughter* series, begins with the report that the Yamamba in the mountain has just given a birth to a baby, Mayu. This opening scene has an echo of *Yamamba in Mt. Chofuku.*) She has superhuman physical powers and abilities which are derived from Yamambas in folklore. Her appearance has some characteristics peculiar to Yamambas: a mop of red hair, bare feet, and plain clothes. However, the horrifying characteristics of the appearance of Yamambas such as sharp teeth and a wide mouth extending from ear to ear are carefully excluded from her appearance. Then, she looks like a human girl rather than a Yamamba. In addition, as the stage for the stories is set in modern times, the appearance of her and her mother are fairy modernized. Because of these modifications, she is free from the horrible image of Yamambas in old folklore. Young child readers, then, can feel affinity with her. [Fig. 2]

Fig.2 Mayu in *Mayu & a Little Boar*

In regards to her nature and personality, Mayu is quite different from evil and horrible Yamambas in folklore. In Mayu and most of other contemporary Yamamba heroines and characters in young children's books, only the good and welcoming attributes of Yamambas, such as toughness, fearlessness, independence, pure and simple good-heartedness, and benignity, are emphasized, and the negative attributes like evilness, cruelty, and excessive appetite for humans are ignored.

3. Mayu as Tough Heroine

Just like in many Western countries, Cinderella has high popularity among young girl readers in Japan because of the romantic settings and plot of the story. Like her, many heroines in Western fairy tales well-read in the country are sweet and beautiful but inactive and male-dependent. In such fairy tales and some other stories or comics for children, active, independent, and tough women or girls cannot be the heroines. They are almost always either unimportant supporting characters or female villains to be defeated by the male hero.

Mayu's vigorous image confirms that she is different from traditional gender-stereotyped heroines. In the first few pages of *Mayu & Monster Bukabukaboo*, she jumps out of her house, with joy, into the rain and steps and splashes in the puddles, only to become wet and muddy. The vigorous and energetic description of Mayu reappears in *Mayu & a Little Boar*, and in *Mayu & Dragons* she enjoys the speed and thrill of flying around in the sky on the head of a dragon.

In *Mayu & Ogre*, Mayu's aspect of a powerful, tough, independent, but naïve, heroine is outstanding. In her encounter with an ogre in the forest, it is the combination of her naivety and her own superhuman physical power which saves her from him. The hungry ogre, planning to boil and eat her, asks her to help him to make a fire and boil the water in a large pot. When he asks her to collect firewood, she uproots a thick tree and breaks it into pieces. When he asks her to gather some stones, she kicks a rock wall and smashes it into pieces. The ogre, surprised to see her superpowers, tries to induce her to take a bath in the boiling pot. The naïve Mayu, trying to be polite, thinks that he should take a bath first, and holds him and throws him into the boiling water.

Mayu & Monster Bukabukaboo highlights her aspect as a fighting girl. She fights against a big weird monster all the creatures in the forest are scared of:

> 'You are so impolite that you won't even raise your cap or return my greeting. I will make you take off your cap!'
>
> Mayu cried at the monster Bukabukaboo, and got ready to jump at him.
>
> One, two, three!
>
> She kicked at the ground and jumped with all her strength!
>
> She jumped over the bush onto the red cap of Bukabukaboo.
>
> 'I made it!' Mayu said to herself, and. . . .
>
> All of a sudden, Bukabukaboo collapsed onto the ground.
>
> (*Mayu & Monster Bukabukaboo*, pp. 21-23)

Fighting women or girls are often found in contemporary popular culture like comics and animation. In gender-stereotyped conventional ideas, femininity is often regarded to be associated with weakness and vulnerability. Therefore, many of tough female characters like Wonder Woman are created to fight to reveal their power and independence and to

show that they are not confined in conventional gender-stereotypes. Mayu is not an exception.

It is often said that girls have a tendency to learn that toughness and independence have almost nothing to do with them through gender-stereotyped fairy tales, children's books, and animation movies. Without knowing, children are repeatedly persuaded that tough, brave, independent heroes are male, not female. As is pointed out by many women, it is frustrating for girl readers to see that they are excluded from the lively, exciting, and thrilling episodes.[3] They often see a heroine described, in the scenes of difficulties and crises, not as the one who rescues somebody but as the one who is rescued.

This stereotype is torn down by Mayu's courageous rescue episode in *Mayu & a Little Boar*. Finding a baby boy boar shivering with fright on the top of a steep cliff jutting over a deep ravine, she climbs the cliff to rescue him heroically, without regard to the risk. She is a tough and brave heroine, strong enough physically and mentally to do the rescuing of someone in crisis. The heroic descriptions of her assure the girl readers that they deserve to be included in this type of scenes, as the one who can do the rescuing.

4. Tough Heroines in Comics: Cross-dressed Heroines and Transformed Heroines

Besides Yamambas, there are other types of tough heroines who cross the conventional gender-line. Cross-dressed heroines and heroines who transform into warrior girls are quite common in Japanese comics, especially in comics for young girls. The comparison of Yamamba heroines with those other tough heroines helps to highlight their significance as role models for young girls.

Cross-dressed heroines in comics for girls are one of the earliest attempts to liberate the heroines from the restrictions of conventional gender-roles. An example of cross-dressed heroines is Sapphire, the heroine in *Ribon no Kishi* [*Princess Knight*] by Osamu Tezuka. *Princess Knight*, first published in 1953, is actually a Tezuka's version of Western fairy tales. It successfully provides young girl readers an alternative to the gender-stereotyped heroines in fairy tales by introducing a cross-dressed heroine. The heroine has been brought up as a prince because a princess is not allowed to succeed to the throne in her kingdom, and the truth that she is a female, not a male, is a closely-guarded secret. [Fig. 3]

Her public persona as a male allows Sapphire to stay away from female gender and to act freely with no restrictions. She is given such conventional 'masculine'[4] attributes as toughness, power, bravery, and independence. She is a female hero who is capable of overcoming any obstacle, and of fighting fiercely in thrilling confrontations with villains. In convention, femininity is associated with weakness and vulnerability, and the heroine, Sapphire, with a male persona fights to show her toughness so that her femininity is not unveiled.

Sapphire's cross-dressing allows her to express a male facet of her persona. Just as she wears male clothes, she wears a 'masculine' persona. And when she is secretly dressed in female dress, she takes off her male persona. In women's clothes, she often turns into

Fig. 3 Sapphire in Male Clothes

a conventional female character, and her 'femininity' is overly emphasized. Her secret love for Prince Charming is also a trigger to strip her of her male persona. It makes her frustrated with her life as a woman in disguise, and she suffers from a conflict between her male and female identities.

It is true that Sapphire has been welcomed and supported by girl readers for more than a half century, and she can still have the power to rewrite the conventional gender norms. To me, however, her 'masculine' attributes, which allow her to cross the traditional gender-line, do not seem to be reconciled with her 'feminine' attributes. One time she wears a male persona, the other time she wears a female persona. She keeps going back and forth between male gender roles and female gender roles. Therefore, such characterization of Sapphire could give a message to girl readers that, in order to be tough and independent, they should wear a male persona. This reinforces the stereotyped association of masculinity with toughness and independence, and also reinforces that of femininity with weakness and vulnerability.

Heroines who transform into tough and powerful fighting girls or warrior girls are also found in Japanese comics for young girls. A good example of these heroines is Usagi, the heroine in *Sailor Moon* published in the 1990s. When she and her friends fight against the villains, they transform into warriors with superhuman power and strength, but they still keep their extremely feminine appearances. Even after their transformation into fighting girls, they still emphasize their femininity, wearing very short skirts and beautiful accessories. [Fig. 4] They are in stark contrast to such cross-dressed heroines as Sapphire, who covers her femininity with her male persona in order to be tough and independent.

Fig.4 Usagi in *Sailor Moon*

The heroine in *Sailor Moon* is free from the stereotyped, conventional association of masculinity with toughness and independence. She shows that girls can be tough and independent without wearing a male persona. When she is transformed into a warrior girl, she can be 'masculine' and 'feminine' at the same time. In this sense, she is a step forward from cross-dressed heroines. However, there is a big discrepancy between the two facets of her identity. It is her transformation into a girl warrior that gives her power and strength. She can be tough and independent only when she is acting as a girl warrior. Therefore, it cannot be said that in her, the 'masculinity' and the 'femininity' are well combined.

5. Mayu as Benign Heroine

So far, I have discussed tough-girl and female-hero aspects of Mayu and other tough heroines. Now let us consider 'feminine' aspects of Mayu. Just as Yamambas in folklore have twofold attributes: evil and benign, she also has twofold attributes: toughness and benignity, in other words, power and compassion. Just after the above mentioned fighting scene in *Mayu & Monster Bukabukaboo*, she is on the verge of tears, to see the monster fallen down onto the ground from her attack:

> 'I made it!' Mayu said to herself, and. . . .
> All of a sudden, Bukabukaboo collapsed onto the ground.
> 'Eek!' Mayu cried, and jumped off from the monster.
> Out of the collapsed Bukabukaboo, came white smoke.
> 'Bukabukaboo has fallen down! Bukabukaboo has fallen down with smoke coming out!'
> Staring at Bukabukaboo, who kept giving off a lot of smoke, Mayu was on the verge of tears.

Like a shrinking balloon, Bukabukaboo became smaller and smaller, giving off a lot of smoke.

'Bukabukaboo, are you all right?'

Mayu approached worriedly to the shrunk and collapsed Bukabukaboo.

(*Mayu & Monster Bukabukaboo*, pp. 23-26)

This reflects Mayu's compassion toward the weak and her guilty conscience for attacking the creature that has turned out to be weak and helpless.

Also in the story, *Mayu & a Little Boar*, Mayu shows her benignity. She takes care of a little baby-boy boar who has strayed from his mother. She affectionately tells the baby boar trembling and crying with anxiety, 'Don't worry. Don't worry. I'll take the place of your mother until you meet her again.' (*Mayu & a Little Boar*, p. 3) Preparing food for him and singing a lullaby to put him to sleep, she enjoys childcare very much, and even calls herself 'Mommy'. This episode also reveals her 'feminine' aspects.

The above episode is followed by the episode of her heroic rescue of him. This effectively shows that she can be both tough and benign. The preceding description of her affectionate care of the little boar marks her as 'feminine', while her brave, heroic act of rescuing marks her as 'masculine.' The Yamamba heroine can be 'masculine' and 'feminine' at the same time. Unlike cross-dressed heroines, she does not need a male persona in order to be 'masculine'. She does not have to be an honorary man to be tough and independent or to be free from stereotyped gender roles. Unlike transformed warrior heroines, she does not have to transform to be a warrior to acquire power and independence. In this sense, she can be called an androgynous heroine, and can be a good role model for young girl readers when they shape their self-images and gender identities. In addition, the frequent appearance of the tough, independent, and benign mother implies that Mayu will also keep her toughness, independence, and benignity even after she has grown up.

6. Another Example of Yamamba Heroines

In order to confirm the significance of Yamamba heroines in contemporary children's books, I will examine another example of Yamamba heroines. Just like Mayu in *A Story of Witch's Daughter* Series, Sachi in *Nanairo-yama no Himitsu* [*Sachi's Adventure in Nanairo-yama*] by Kaoru Soya (the author) and Akiko Hayashi (the illustrator) is a vigorous, tough, independent heroine. However, she does not have any characteristics of Yamambas in her appearance [Fig. 5]. (Until the ending part of the story, it is hidden not only to the readers but also to the heroine herself that she and her grandmother are Yamambas.) In addition, she does not have superpowers or superhuman abilities, and her symbiotic relationship with the mountain is carefully introduced to the story.

Fig.5 Sachi in *Sachi's Adventure in Nanairo-yama*

Like Mayu, Sachi is the heroine who does the rescuing. In the place of her sick grandmother, she goes up onto the mountaintop to save the mountain stone, actually the mountain spirit, in crisis. Although she meets difficulties on the way to the mountaintop, she manages to overcome many obstacles and save the mountain spirit not only with her toughness and independence but also with her wisdom and compassion. It is after she holds the mountain stone to her bosom and gently sings it a mysterious lullaby she has learned from her grandmother that the stone regains its power. This clearly shows that her mother-like benignity and compassion, 'feminine' attributes, as well as her courage and toughness, 'masculine' attributes, enable her to save the mountain from the crisis.

Sachi is a variant of androgynous Yamamba heroines. Even without superhuman physical strengths and abilities, she is also a tough and benign heroine. She faces the crises and does the rescuing not with superhuman physical powers or strengths but with her courage, wisdom, benignity, and compassion. She breaks the association of femininity and weakness not by fighting but by showing her strength of mind and mother-like benignity and compassion.

7. Conclusion

'Yamambas are supposed to be horrible old women, but I believe that they are actually much more friendly and benign than people of today.'[5] Tomiko Inui has written in the Preface to her *Yamamba to Umi no Kani* [*Yamamba and Crabs*] published in 1969. She is one of the earliest writers of children's books who have introduced good-natured, vigorous, and naïve Yamambas with superhuman powers: Yamambas different from the widely-accepted image of evil and horrible ogresses. In her *Yamamba and Crabs*, she presents a good and friendly Yamamba, who enjoys taking care of a charcoal burner's 5-year-old son. In *Yamamba Minarai no Musume* [*Girl Yamamba in Training*], she

introduces a Yamamba who has a symbiotic relationship with nature.

Now in contemporary books for young children, Yamambas are employed as tough, independent heroines who cross the conventional gender-line. This is closely related to the fact that Yamambas in folklore, excluded from human societies, are free from patriarchic conventions and gender in society. It is their outsiderness and otherness as well as their supernatural powers and superhuman physical abilities which allow Yamambas to stay far away from stereotyped gender and convention.[6] This can be the reason the authors of children's books employ them as their heroines, who are free from gender roles and, therefore, can tear down conventional gender-stereotypes.

Yamamba heroines have the power to offer androgynous role models to young girl readers. The unconventional descriptions of heroines convey a message that girls can be tough and independent as well as compassionate and benign. Yamamba heroines show young girl readers that there are options to their self-images other than Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, or Snow White.

Notes

All the English translations of the Japanese texts in this paper are my own.

1. As for the power of children's books to offer child readers options to their self-images and gender identities, see Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children's Novels*.
2. See Kazuhiko Komatsu, *Yokai Bunka Nyumon* [*Introduction to Hobgoblins in Japan*], p. 249.
3. For example, Akimi Yoshida, a famous comic artist, shares this feeling. See Yukari Fujimoto, *Shojo Manga Damashii* [*Shojo Manga Spirits*], p. 131.
4. In this paper, attributes considered to be masculine/feminine in gender-stereotyped conventions are represented as 'masculine'/'feminine' attributes.
5. Tomiko Inui, *Yamamba to Umi no Kani* [*Yamamba and Crabs*], p. 1.
6. Cf. Noriko Mizuta, 'Yamamba no Yume: Joron to shite' ['Yamamba's Dream: An Introduction'], *Yamamba Tachi no Monogatari* [*Stories of Yamambas*], p. 13.

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