

KERORO GUNSÔ:
CARNIVALIZATION IN JAPANESE ANIME

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the playful world of *Keroro Gunsô*, a *manga-turned-anime* comedy that is immensely popular in millennium Japan and starting to gain popularity on a global scale. Drawing from a parody of Japan's military aggression during World War Two, the *anime* plays with the public memory about Japan's imperial past and the binary opposition between war and peace, invader and the invaded, and ultimately, patriarchy and matriarchy. This paper will examine the text of *Keroro Gunsô* as a symbolic site of what Mikhail Bakhtin called "carnival," a discursive space for renewal, festivity and laughter freed from ordinary social restrictions and conformity.

I would argue that *Keroro Gunsô* offers a playful fantasy for Japan's "post-postwar memory" (as Carol Gluck calls it) to deal with social anxieties associated with Japan's imperial past and its tragic defeat in the war. I will start my argument by looking at the increasingly significant role of carnival/festival *anime* in today's global culture. Then, after a brief reading of the story of *Keroro Gunsô*, I will locate its text in the framework of "carnival" to examine its carnivalesque features: the attack against historical facts through parody as well as the reversal of Japan's patriarchal hierarchy through the mobilization of its symbolic characters. Finally, I will examine how *Keroro Gunsô* embraces/celebrates Japan's playfully weak, irresponsible, and ultimately, emasculated identity as a response to the social anxieties surrounding Japan's defeat in World War Two. Through the alternate reading of this incredibly popular comedy, this paper attempts to explore a different side of Japanese society encapsulated in this carnivalesque *anime* behind its humor and festival laughter.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Huiyong Qiu.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Preface.....	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Japanese <i>Anime</i> Culture and the Festival/Carnival <i>Anime</i>	5
Chapter 2: The Carnavalesque World in <i>Keroro Gunsô</i>.....	11
2.1 Parody and the Reconstruction of an Alternative History	16
2.2 The Subversive <i>Shôjo</i> and Japan’s Patriarchal Hegemony.....	30
Conclusion	41
Works Cited.....	44

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Introduction

Along with the development of communication technology and the Internet in the era of globalization, Japanese *anime* has flourished beyond its domestic market and has a significant impact on today's global culture. The ever-growing Japanese *anime* industry has offered a rich variety of cultural products that are greatly adored by global consumers beyond its domestic target market. As a cutting-edge contemporary art form, Japanese *anime* has not only demonstrated its prevalent popularity in the cultural industry, but also invited critical reading of the issues of identity, power struggle, and social anxieties interwoven in its various discursive texts.

The *anime* of concern in this study is called *Keroro Gunsô* (*anime* director: Satô Jun'ichi, 2004), a sci-fi comedy that is immensely popular in Japan and starting to gain popularity on a global scale. *Keroro Gunsô* (ケロロ軍曹, "Sergeant Frog" in its official English translation) is a *manga*-turned-*anime* series produced by *manga* artist Yoshizaki Mine (吉崎観音). Ever since its debut on TV Tokyo Network in April 2004, its ongoing popularity has led the show to expand into a seven-year-broadcasting TV series (from 2004 to 2011) along with five major full-length film versions. The *anime* series has also been picked up by many TV channels in European and other Asian countries. In the meantime, the success of the *anime* series has also stimulated the sales of its original *manga* books, as well as the proliferation of various relevant types of merchandise related to its characters. Well received and adored by cultural consumers across demographic boundaries, *Keroro Gunsô* has become another mega-hit *anime* product. According to a nation-wide survey of "マイベストムービーTV アニメランキング" (My Best Movie TV *Anime* Ranking) conducted by CDV-Japan in 2008, *Keroro Gunsô* ranked number nine ("マイベ

スト”). It is a competitive position between the globally famous *Pokemon* (Pocket Monster, anime director: Yuyama Kunihiro, 1997), which ranked number eight, and the acclaimed “otaku-anime classic” *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (anime director: Anno Hideaki, 1995), which ranked number ten.

Lighthearted and playful, *Keroro Gunsô* tells the story of a group of imperialist alien soldiers and their (repeatedly failed) attempts to invade the Earth/modern Japan (set in 2004 in the anime). The Keroro platoon (ケロロ小隊), the main protagonists, is sent to Earth with a military mission to investigate and take over the planet. However, due to Keroro’s accidental exposure of their stealthy task, the entire invasion attack is aborted and the platoon is abandoned on Earth. Captured by two Japanese siblings (Hinata Natsumi and Hinata Fuyuki) from a local family and having his powerful weapon (the Keron Ball) taken away, Keroro becomes vulnerable and helpless. He is now at the mercy of the Hinatas for shelter, where he is kept busy with manual labour (house chores) and under constant abuse (mainly from the sister Natsumi). During their stay with humankind, the “invaders” become friends with the invaded and start to re-plan their invasion in a peaceful, cultural, anti-violent way (in order not to harm their human friends). Unfortunately for the alien soldiers who are sandwiched between the alien empire and their human friends, their invasion plan seems to be stuck indefinitely with no hope of success. Following the aliens’ various (hilarious and ridiculous) invasion campaign attempts, the story is thus unfolded surrounding their lives on Earth and the friend/enemy struggle with the Hinatas.

What makes the text of *Keroro Gunsô* intriguing and therefore worth further reading is the very problematic identity of its alien characters. Even though they are depicted as an exotic species from outer space (created out of the producer’s imagination), these alien soldiers are not entirely “alien” to their (Japanese) viewers. They are invested with a great number of cultural

symbols associated with Japan's imperial past. From the military gear the alien soldiers are equipped with, the jargons they use in their speech, to the hierarchy in their ranking system within the team, the close resemblances between the alien soldiers and the Imperial Japanese Army during World War Two are fairly obvious. In fact, enthusiastic fans on various *anime*-forums (for example, Anime News Network and FUNimation) have commented that *Keroro Gunsô* could be considered as a parody of Japan's invasion of Asian countries (especially China). While I agree with such interpretations considering the symbolism invested in its alien characters, much is left to be further explored about the cultural meaning of such parody and its mobilization of those symbolic characters in light of the current social and cultural atmosphere in Japan.

How can a parodic depiction of Japan's invasion/defeat during World War Two, a highly politically explosive period of history, be considered inoffensive or even funny? Why is the corruption of moral values and patriarchal hierarchy, embodied by the aliens' (playful) irresponsibility and weaknesses, amusing in the eyes of the current (Japanese) audience? Finally, what kind of "fun" does this playful *anime* offer in relation to the social stress and anxiety in the current Japanese society? To answer these questions, this paper will examine the text of *Keroro Gunsô* as a symbolic site of what Mikhail Bakhtin called "carnival," a discursive space for renewal, festivity and laughter freed from ordinary social restrictions and conformity.¹ By revealing the carnivalesque features in the *anime*, I would argue that *Keroro Gunsô* offers a playful fantasy for Japan's "post-postwar memory" (as Gluck calls it) to deal with social anxieties associated with Japan's imperial past and its tragic defeat in the war.² I will start my

¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984).

² Carol Gluck, "The Past in the Present." *Postwar Japan as History*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1993) 64-95.

argument by looking at the increasingly significant role of carnival/festival *anime* in today's global culture. Then, after a brief reading of the story of *Keroro Gunsô*, I will locate its text in the framework of "carnival" to examine its carnivalesque features: the attack against historical facts through parody as well as the reversal of Japan's patriarchal hierarchy through the mobilization of its symbolic characters. Finally, I will examine how *Keroro Gunsô* embraces/celebrates Japan's playfully weak, irresponsible, and ultimately, emasculated identity as a response to the social anxieties surrounding Japan's defeat in World War Two. Through the alternate reading of this incredibly popular comedy, this paper attempts to explore a different side of Japanese society encapsulated in this carnivalesque *anime* behind its humor and festival laughter.

Chapter 1: Japanese *Anime* Culture and the Festival/Carnival *Anime*

The popularity of *Keroro Gunsô* arose alongside the worldwide blossoming of *anime* culture. Before further reading into the world of *Keroro Gunsô*, it is important to first consider why we should take Japanese *anime* culture seriously. There is a general stereotype of cartoons or animation as a type of cultural product produced mainly or solely for children's consumption. However, *anime*, a major form of Japan's media's informational power, possesses more sophisticated social and cultural significance as a globally famous cultural commodity and as a cutting-edge contemporary art form.

As a cultural commodity, Japanese *anime* has engendered an enormous amount of profit for the economy of Japan's cultural industry. Fulfilling the needs of cultural consumers of various social and cultural backgrounds, it has offered a huge variety of cultural products including plastic models and stuffed animals for children; original soundtrack albums and collection of CDs and DVDs for music and video fans; graphic design books for art school students, not to mention various miscellaneous products with imprints of *anime* character images for general consumers. As Anne Allison concisely remarks, "in these play goods that both feed consumerism and nurture virtual attachments, Japan has found a millennial product that sells well and sells Japan itself on the global market" (332). Indeed, as Japanese *anime* products travel across geopolitical boundaries, *anime*'s impact on the global cultural industry continues to grow while gathering worldwide popularity. In her exploration of Japan's *anime* culture, Susan Napier comments: "through *anime* Japan has become an increasingly significant player in the global cultural economy" (5).

As a contemporary art form, on the other hand, Japanese *anime* offers invaluable insights into Japan's constantly changing society. It is an extremely flexible space open for

artists/producers' arbitrary imagination to express their wildest, most innovative ideas on any social issues in today's society. At the same time, it strongly influences how (both domestic and global) audiences view and imagine current Japanese society. As noted by Mark Macwilliams, "they [Japanese *animés*] play an increasingly important role in the global mediascape of electronic and print media that is shaping the collective imaginations, experiences, and feelings of people throughout the world" (5). With its prevalent popularity and significance to Japan's cultural economy, *anime* can no longer be taken for granted as children's entertainment. As Napier puts it,

Anime, with its enormous breadth of subject material, is also a useful mirror on contemporary Japanese society, offering an array of insights into the significant issues, dreams, and nightmares of the day. (8)

Therefore, *anime* opens a discursive space that calls for critical thinking about its cultural significance, its unique perception and representation of today's society, as well as the reconstruction of Japanese identities.

In her studies of Japanese *manga/anime* culture, Napier proposes that *anime* could be categorized into three main modes of expression: the apocalyptic, the elegiac and the festival, depending on the storyline and themes involved. Portraying a specific side of Japanese society, each of these three modes carries a distinct tone in its presentation. While the apocalyptic mode laments and "centers on the destruction of society and the planet itself," the elegiac mode expresses a sense of "loss, grief and absence" (Napier 13). These two modes of expression have been studied and analyzed in depth because they are the main themes adopted in most of Miyazaki Hayao's films, and other *anime* films that are popular in the Western market, including *Akira* (film director: Ôtomo Katsuhiro, 1988) and *Ghost in the Shell* (film director: Oshii

Mamoru, 1995). In contrast to these well-known and well-explored *anime* products, *anime* in the festival mode seem to have received much less academic interest. In contrast to the other two, the festival is a playful and light-hearted mode usually presented in the form of comedy. According to Napier, the festival “celebrates the (temporary) dissolution of social boundaries and hierarchies” (237). It represents a special time and space where audiences are invited to enter a utopia-like fantasy away from official culture, social restraints and everyday anxieties.

There are a great number of brilliant works of festival *anime* including *Sailor Moon* (*anime* director: Satô Juni'chi, 1992) and *Ranma 1/2* (*anime* directors: Mochizuki Tomomi and Shibayama Tsutomu, 1989) etc., which have been studied and scrutinized by Western scholars and cultural critics. Nonetheless, festival *anime* in general still attracts less academic interest than *anime* of the other two modes mentioned earlier. There are probably several reasons for this situation. One of the reasons may be due to the cultural specificity, or “cultural odor” to use Koichi Iwabuchi’s term, involved in festival *anime*.³ The term “cultural odor,” proposed by Iwabuchi, is used to “focus on the way in which cultural features of a country of origin and images or ideas of its national, in most cases stereotyped, way of life are associated positively with a particular product in the consumption process” (27). In terms of cultural specificity, festival *anime* no doubt has a strong cultural odor because festival *anime* focuses closely on Japanese society. It is the foundations of the Japanese lifestyle and its traditional and contemporary culture upon which festival *anime* is created and constructed. It is then not surprising that cultural specificity becomes a barrier for foreign audiences’ consumption of such *anime* products, considering that a certain level of knowledge of Japanese language and culture is required for the reading of such texts.

³ Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization* (Durham, DC: Duke UP, 2002).

However, a significant change has occurred in the age of the Internet. Web search engines like Google have made it highly convenient for Internet users to look up explanations for specific cultural references in *anime*. More importantly, the Internet has also opened multiple channels of communication within the community of global consumers across geographic boundaries. Websites, forums and bulletin boards are established for internal discussion and communication about fans' favorite *anime* products. As a result, the cultural odor in festival *anime* has ceased to become a cultural barrier for consumers. Rather, discussing about a specific plot or cultural difference/reference involved in festival *anime* becomes fun and enjoyable, replacing what used to be a painful and frustrating experience. Although festival *anime* products might still be less well known to global consumers (than the apocalyptic and elegiac *anime* mentioned earlier) due to linguistic and/or cultural barriers, the influence/popularity of festival *anime* continues to grow alongside Japan's expanding *manga/anime* industry in its increasing global context.

In this regard, *Keroro Gunsô* provides excellent evidence for the increasing cultural significance of festival *anime*, which has a strong Japanese "cultural odor." As a comedy show, its story incorporates a great deal of (Japanese) word-play, situational and physical humor, cultural references and military jargon, all of which are inextricably linked with Japanese culture. What is more phenomenal is the size of its fandom established in cyber space across geographic boundaries. A simple Google search for the word *keroro*, a Romanized Japanese word from the title *Keroro Gunsô* which is otherwise meaningless in the world of English, brings millions of hits listing various websites and forums dedicated to this *anime*.

While Napier's classification of *anime* (three major expressive modes of the apocalyptic, the festival, and the elegiac) provides a solid structure for the exploration of Japanese *anime*

culture, Russian literature critic Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque analysis is highly profitable for our further investigation into the power relationships and social anxieties in the world of festival/carnavalesque *anime*.

Drawing from his research on Medieval European festivals, Bakhtin developed his theory of carnival with a focus on the creative and liberating energy in carnivalesque literature. The Medieval carnival is filled with ambiguity and festival laughter. It is a special space where bizarre and grotesque images are celebrated; the official political and social system is mocked; clowns are empowered to mock the king and destroy his authoritarian power by decrowning him. For Bakhtin, carnival means more than just a cultural and social event; it represents a liminal period of time open for any creative change and limitless possibility. In this peculiar moment, any "dogma, authoritarianism and narrow-minded seriousness" is temporarily suspended for the purpose of social revival and renewal (Bakhtin 9). As a result, all the people involved in a carnival are granted with a "second life outside of officialdom," an opportunity to enter a utopia-like fantasy that confronts hierarchy, religious, political and moral values, as well as prohibitions in the official society (Bakhtin 8).

Even though Bakhtin's concept derives from medieval folk culture, his carnivalesque analysis in literature remains essentially applicable to the study of today's mass media culture. As John Fiske remarks, the world of carnival theorized by Bakhtin can "provide some useful points of comparison with the popular pleasures that television offers" (241). It is possible to extend Fiske's application of Bakhtinian carnival beyond television and apply it to our reading of carnivalized *anime*, that is, *anime* that uses the carnival spirit to confront morality, discipline, and social control in Japanese society. Based on the insights provided by Napier's festival and Bakhtin's carnivalesque analysis, the following reading will demonstrate how *Keroro Gunsô*, the

Japanese carnivalesque/festival *anime*, takes on the carnival spirit within its own structure to produce characteristic parody, inversions and hierarchical reversals in opposition to contemporary Japanese official culture.

Chapter 2: The Carnavalesque World in *Keroro Gunsô*

Keroro Gunsô was initially serialized in a Japanese monthly *manga* magazine *Shônen Ace* (月刊少年エース, which caters to teenage boys and young-adult *anime* fans) and was later published as a *manga* series (dedicated book-sized volumes) since April 1999 by Kadokawa Shoten (角川書店). The *manga* series became an enormous commercial success; it has more than twenty-three volumes with cumulative sales of over ten million copies in Japan (Yoshizaki 6). In 2005, *Keroro Gunsô* was awarded the fiftieth *Shôgakukan Manga Award*, a major award in Japan's *manga* industry, which established *Keroro Gunsô* as the signature *manga* of its publisher as well as a principle promotional *anime* to the overseas market (“小学館漫画賞”).

Following the success of its *manga* version, *Keroro Gunsô* was made into an *anime* series directed by Satô Jun'ichi (佐藤順一) with its TV debut in 2004. The TV series of *Keroro Gunsô* had a seven-year consecutive broadcasting run in Japan until April 2011 with a total of seven seasons consisting of 358 episodes. Meanwhile, five full-length movie versions, directed by the same *anime* director, were released between 2006 and 2010.⁴ The *anime* of *Keroro Gunsô* has had a phenomenal economic and cultural influence on Japan's domestic and global cultural market. Domestically, the cumulative DVD sales of its TV *anime* series and filmic versions have surpassed one million copies as of 2009, according to its production company Bandai Visual (“大人気”). A great variety of its themed merchandise is also available for sale, including soundtrack albums, TV games, novels, and uncountable toys and figures imprinted with its

⁴ *Keroro Gunsô* movies include: *Keroro Gunsô, the Super Movie* in 2006; *Keroro Gunsô 2, The Deep Sea Princess* in 2007; *Keroro Gunsô 3, Keroro VS Keroro* in 2008; *Keroro Gunsô the Super Movie, Crushing Invasion, Dragon Warriors* in 2009; and *Keroro Gunsô the Super Movie, Creation! Ultimate Keroro, Wonder Space-Time Island* in 2010.

character images. Internationally, after being dubbed into various languages, *Keroro Gunsô* was broadcast via official TV channels in countries starting from Taiwan, Hong Kong, mainland China, South Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines in Asia, followed by France, Italy and Spain in Europe. Although it has not been broadcast on TV in North America yet, a number of DVD collections of the *anime* have been released for the American market by FUNimation, an American television and film production company that acquired the distribution rights of *Keroro Gunsô* in 2009.

With teenage boys as its main target readers, the *manga* version contains a lot of black humor as well as sexual content. The *anime* version, however, is greatly toned down in order to cater to a broader audience including children. Therefore, many scenes including vulgar language, the exposure of the girl character's underwear as well as the naked female body are either edited or removed from the TV broadcasts. For my further reading of this text, this study will mainly focus on the first two seasons of the *anime* version because they are relatively closer to the producer's original idea in the *manga* series, and also they are the most popular episodes from the whole series. Since *Keroro Gunsô* (ヶ口口軍曹, literally Sergeant Keroro) is both the name of the series and the titular character, I will refer to the series as *Keroro Gunsô*, and the main character as Keroro to avoid confusion.

Keroro Gunsô is a “*matsuri*” (祭り), Japanese equivalent for festival/carnival) in the form of *anime*. Showcasing both the modern and traditional sides of Japan's culture, the series is packed with integral elements of Japanese cultural and social life, presented as “a celebration of ‘the realm of play and ritual’” (Napier 30). In both forms, *anime* and *manga*, *Keroro Gunsô* is famous for its skillful and playful use of parody and cultural references based on an enormous range of Japanese popular cultural products including various *anime*, *manga* and video games.

Among them, *Mobile Suit Gundam* (*anime* director: Tomino Yoshiyuki, 1979) and *Space Battleship Yamato* (*anime* director: Matsumoto Leiji, 1974) are the most obvious texts being parodied in *Keroro Gunsô*, as Bandai actually holds the copyrights of these products. Other less well-known cultural products can also be found overtly or covertly parodied or referred to in many ways throughout the show.

Aside from the contemporary culture adopted in the show, Japanese traditional culture is also a significant resource for the storyline in terms of the exploration of Japanese cultural heritage. Depending on the topics covered in certain episodes, the *anime* is arranged to broadcast in accordance with Japan's cultural events, such as *hanami* (cherry-blossom viewing) and *takoage* (flying kites) in spring, *omatsuri* (festivals) in summer, *obon* (Japanese Buddhist festival honoring the departed spirits of the ancestors) in fall, *oshôgatsu* (New Year) and *yukigassen* (snow-fight) in winter.

The story of *Keroro Gunsô* takes place in contemporary Japan in a fictional city called “Inner-Tokyo (奥東京).” A group of five frog-like alien soldiers named the Keroro platoon (ケロロ小隊) is sent from their empire planet (ケロン星, the Keron Planet) to take over the Earth known to them as Pekopon (ペコポン, adapted from “ポコペン Pokopen” used in its original *manga* version). The leader of this group is Keroro, who is in charge of their secret investigation but is unexpectedly discovered by two human siblings, the 13-year-old Hinata Natsumi (日向夏美) and her 12-year-old brother Hinata Fuyuki (日向冬樹). Overpowered by Natsumi, Keroro is captured and later becomes a “war slave” himself. Due to the exposure of their stealthy invasion plan, the alien empire army decides to retreat from the Earth and leaves the troop behind. Consequently, Keroro begins his journey on “Pekopon” with the Hinata siblings as something between a servant and a pet, an enemy and a friend.

When he is not busy with chores for the Hinata family, Keroro is usually distracted by Earth/Japanese culture such as collecting and assembling *Gundam* model kits, reading *manga*, or surfing the Internet with little or no concern for his task of invasion. However, he does manage to reunite with his squad-mates, each of whom has a very distinct personality, with strengths as well as weaknesses. Besides the lazy, irresponsible and easily-distracted team leader Keroro, his platoon is composed of Private Second Class Tamama, who has a split-personality between adorable angel and a scary monster; Corporal Giroro, a combat specialist and war-maniac but helplessly vulnerable because of his crush on Natsumi; Sergeant Major Kururu, a smart and manipulative intelligence officer with a distorted personality; and Lance Corporal Dororo, a ninja-like peace-advocator who sadly gets forgotten by his teammates all the time. Lovely and funny as they are, Keroro and his teammates are still invaders contemplating the conquest of “Pekopon.” As they gather at the Hinatas, the Keroro platoon re-launches its invasion campaign, which not only complicates the tension and relationship between “alien” and “humankind” but also turns the seemingly “ordinary” life of the Hinatas into a state of chaos.

Keroro Gunsô draws comedy from the aliens’ playful invasion and the chaos/conflict they impose on the Japanese family. Because it is a comedy show, the way its characters talk and behave is typically exaggerated and dramatized for comical effect. From the wordplay in its characters’ speech, situational and physical humor, to the funny yet intense action in fight scenes, the *anime* is packed with hilarious and humorous elements in its narrative. For instance, when the Keroro platoon explore and learn about the Earth/Japanese culture for their invasion, their approach to the conventional and familiar contemporary lifestyle from an “alien” point of view is often very funny. Or when they execute an invasion plan that brings them in direct confrontation with their opponents, mostly Natsumi, their fight can get extremely intense and

amusing for the audiences as well because the alien soldiers are equipped with “futuristic” weapons cross-referenced to the *anime* of *Gundam* series (mentioned earlier).

In addition to the funny elements in its narrative, *Keroro Gunsô*'s humor operates on a deeper and cultural level where the *anime* plays with the public memory about Japan's imperial past (its invasions of other Asian countries during World War Two) and the binary opposition between war and peace, invader and the invaded, and ultimately, patriarchy and matriarchy. As we will see in the following reading, the “invasion” in *Keroro Gunsô* is constructed upon a series of reversed expectations: what is expected to be a brutal invasion becomes a series of hilarious and funny failures; the supposedly serious and disciplined warriors turn out to be careless and irresponsible (while being lovable) toy soldiers; male invaders are controlled/enslaved/defeated by a *shôjo*/a high-school girl. Through these subversions, the *anime* brings surprises to its audiences in a way so absurd that it triggers humor, while constantly challenging and destabilizing Japan's official culture.

Keroro Gunsô's mode of representation, its employment of humor against Japan's official culture, conforms to Bakhtin's characteristics of carnival. For Bakhtin, carnivals “offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extra political aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom” (Bakhtin 6). Therefore, we are led to wonder what kind of “second world” and “second life” are established in the playful world of *Keroro Gunsô* outside of Japan's officialdom, as well as what kind of social anxieties the *anime* aims to deal with through the celebration of its temporary chaos.

2.1 Parody and the Reconstruction of an Alternative History

A recurring theme throughout the *anime* series is the alien soldiers' multiple attempts to invade the Earth. Typically, each episode opens with a new invasion campaign proposed and executed by the alien soldiers, which subsequently ends with their laughable failure/defeat. It is during these episodic events where carnivalesque chaos and reversals take place between the non-human/alien Others and the human/Japanese Selves. However, in order to understand the symbolic chaos presented in the *anime*, it is necessary to first decipher what these alien Others represent.

Similar to many science fiction stories, *Keroro Gunsô* starts with the arrival of aliens. In the story, this group of frog-like aliens comes from an exotic planet called the Keron Planet (ケロン星). As revealed by the protagonist Keroro, they represent “Gamma Planetary System, the 58th Planet, Space Invasion Army Special Tactics Platoon (ガマ星雲 第58番惑星 宇宙侵略軍特殊先攻工作部隊).” Exotic species as they are, it is not difficult to notice that these alien soldiers actually represent the Imperial Japanese Army through various cultural connections established between them. The most obvious clue in the aliens' representation of Imperial Army derives from the same target of their invasions, namely “Pekopon (ペコポン).” In the *anime*, the aliens consider the Earth, known to them as “Pekopon,” a place of inferiority (especially in terms of scientific technology and military power) that is subject to their invasion and manipulation. The word “Pekopon” is derived from “Pokopen” (ポコペン) used in the original manga series. In reality, according to Takashi Sakurai, the word “ポコペン (Pokopen)” is a “兵隊支那語” (literally, “military Chinese”) used to refer to China during World War Two (Sakurai). Due to its political sensitive nature, the word “Pokopen” is changed to “Pekopon” in the Japanese *anime* version, and is subsequently modified as “蓝星 (blue planet)” in the Chinese version for the

broadcasting in Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China, presumably to avoid political controversy. All in all, by deliberately using “Pekopon” as the target of invasion, *Keroro Gunsô* forms an alignment between the alien soldiers and Imperial Japanese Army.

The Keroro platoon’s representation of the Imperial Japanese Army becomes clearer when we examine the cultural symbols invested in its characters in terms of appearance, titles, and personal memories. To start with, the signature design of its alien protagonist, Keroro, is the headgear he wears as an integral part of his body image. Keroro’s headgear is reminiscent of the military caps worn by the Imperial soldiers during wartime. Clearly identifiable by the color (yellow), the star-sign in the middle, and the ear-covers on both sides of the headgear, the military headgear serves as an identical feature for both alien and Imperial soldiers.

Accompanying the symbolic headgear are the military titles assigned to each member of the Keroro platoon. The military titles and ranking system employed by the Keroro platoon is the same as the ones used by the Imperial Japanese Army: 曹長 (*Sôchô*, Sergeant Major), 軍曹 (*Gunsô*, Sergeant), 伍長 (*Gochô*, Corporal), 兵長 (*Heichô*, Lance Corporal), to 二等兵 (*Nitôhei*, Private Second Class). While such a ranking system elucidates each member’s position within the platoon, it simultaneously establishes a hierarchy similar to that of the Imperial Army. Furthermore, it is important to note that such a ranking system has been abolished by the Japanese Constitution along with the dissolution of Japanese army at the end of World War Two. As noted by Frühstück in her research about Japan’s postwar Self Defense Forces, a new set of military ranks and language was created “in order to break tradition and disrupt connection to both the old imperial structures and language adopted from the German military” (66). In other words, *Keroro Gunsô*’s reference to the Imperial army’s titles/ranking system rather than the

current one can be viewed as a gesture to deliberately establish a connection between the aliens and Japan's imperial soldiers.

Furthermore, Keroro's personal memory is equally significant to our reading of the representation of Japan's imperial past. If the military symbols and hierarchy function to re-establish the imperial structure within the alien army, Keroro's personal experience illustrates the nature of such hierarchical structure. His memory about his home planet/the alien empire is first unveiled in the twenty-seventh episode, “ケロロー父キタル、父カエルであります (Keroro's Daddy Issue),”⁵ upon his father's impromptu visit to his “investigation headquarters (the Hinata household)” in Pekopon. Keroro's father is his biggest fear (according to episode 123 in the *anime*). As Keroro recalls, his father is a prestigious sergeant known for his strictness and cruelty during wartime with a reputation as a “鬼軍曹” (*onigunsô*, literally “demonic sergeant”). Here, his father's frightening image as a “demonic sergeant” resonates with the fearful image of superior officers in the Imperial Army, who “commonly commanded fear rather than respect,” as noted by John Dower (58). As he explains, “the group cohesion and discipline of military hierarchy [was not] built, as its propagandists intoned, on some idealized notion of ‘loyalty’ or ‘harmony,’ but on a structure of authoritarian coercion that transferred oppression downward” (Dower 58). Thus, Keroro's memory of his father as a “demon sergeant” not only establishes his father as a powerful and authoritative patriarchal symbol, but also highlights the dominant patriarchal hierarchy in the alien/imperial empire (the opposition between patriarchal and matriarchal power will be discussed in detail later).

⁵ “Keroro's Daddy Issue” is FUNimation's official translation for this episode's title. However, while the title literally means “Keroro–father is coming, father is leaving,” the latter part “父カエルであります” from the original Japanese title is a double entendre and can be understood either literally “father is leaving” or humorously “it is a frog father.”

As discussed above, *Keroro Gunsô* resurrects the Imperial Japanese Army in the form of alien Others through the appropriation of war symbols, militarist culture and a patriarchal hierarchy associated with Japan's imperial/wartime past (during World War Two). As Christine Cornea noted in her study of alien Otherness in science fiction cinema,

Images of Otherness in science fiction can be understood as a metaphor for forms of Otherness within society or between societies and in this way the genre can engage with the fears and anxiety surrounding a given society's Others. (176)

Thus, in re-presenting Japan's Imperial Army as alien invaders in contemporary Japanese society, *Keroro Gunsô* engages the fears and anxiety surrounding Japan's wartime past in this carnival world. Its carnivalesque strategy to confront and deal with such anxiety, however, begins with parody.

Parody, according to Linda Hutcheon's definition, is "a form of repetition with ironic critical distance" (*A Theory* xii). It is an adaptation of a certain text and discourse into another, where "there is a reorganization, a reconstruction, not necessarily a destruction, of the parodied material" (Hutcheon, "Parody" 209). In the case of *Keroro Gunsô*, Yoshizaki, the producer, fabricates an extraterrestrial invasion by alien soldiers who represent Japan's Imperial army. Through parody, Yoshizaki reconstructs Japan's serious historical past and transforms it into a funny and playful story that liberates its audiences from the social anxiety surrounding Japan's defeat in World War Two.

The opening episode of *Keroro Gunsô* is worth examining in some detail because it demonstrates a series of counter-expectations and reversals of the alien/imperial invaders in its parody (Satô). In the beginning of the episode, a series of images about a fearful alien attack is shown along with a voice-over narration highlighting the threatening tension:

西暦 2004 年、地球は突然謎の地球外生命体に襲われた。空を覆い隠す UFO の群れ。残酷にして冷酷無比な侵略者！逃げ惑う人々。圧倒的な価格力の差。警察も防衛軍もなす術もなく敗れ去り、そして地球は新たなる支配者を迎えることになる。はずだったのに。

A.D. 2004, the Earth is suddenly attacked by mysterious extraterrestrials. A horde of UFOs covers the entire sky. Extremely cruel and merciless invaders. Swamped in panic, human beings have no way to escape. In the face of a significant difference in technology, the police and the defense forces have been helplessly defeated. And then, the Earth meets its new ruler. It should have been so. (My own translation from the Japanese)

With the phrase “it should have been so” echoing in the background, a playful military-march-music-like theme song starts to play with the alien soldiers in military postures to emphasize the theme of invasion: “ケロッ！ケロッ！ケロッ！いざ進め、地球侵略せよ” (“Kero! Kero! Kero! March forward, invade the Earth”).⁶

The “camera” then instantaneously shifts to “reality” where the alien soldier Keroro is held captive by the Hinata siblings and is forced to run house errands. Riding the vacuum like a motorcycle, Keroro exclaims: “I’ll be invincible once I master this newest powerful weapon of Pekopon.” Overtly excited, he crashes into Natsumi, who gets so angry that she beats Keroro to the ground while yelling at him “ボケガエル！” (“Stupid frog!”). Overhearing the noise from outside the house, Fuyuki rushes inside immediately to rescue, not his sister, but Keroro because Fuyuki believes his sister is more powerful and dangerous than the alien soldier. With Natsumi

⁶ Lyrics from *Keroro Gunsô*’s theme song “ケロッ！とマーチ” (*Kero! to March*) in the same episode.

overpowering Keroro, their fight is soon settled with the alien's defeat. This fast-paced action scene is followed by the return of the mother, Hinata Aki, who not only warmly accepts Keroro as a new family member but also decides to give him a room in the basement. Even though Natsumi strongly protest to her mother's decision, she knows clearly that she cannot change her mother's mind.

Following the characters, viewers are invited to the basement of the Hinata household. Instead of a dark, damp and mysterious cave (as the mother wishes it to be), Keroro's "lair" appears to be a bright, comfortable "normal" room. He turns the basement into a brand new luxury room furnished with computer, TV and stereo set, and calls it his "frontline base (前線基地)," a foothold to gather information for his invasion. However, for his invasion Keroro needs the Keron Ball, the ultimate weapon that has been taken away by Natsumi on their first encounter. In an attempt to retrieve it, Keroro sets up several traps to tie up both siblings, only to find out that his weapon has been severely damaged during their previous fight. Frustrated and irritated, Keroro declares that as soon as he returns to the mothership and gets the weapon fixed, he will re-launch his invasion, reminding the siblings: "我が輩が侵略者ということ忘れるなであります" ("Do not forget that I am still an invader"). Stunned by Keroro's real political agenda, Fuyuki cries out: "酷いよ、軍曹！友達なのに" ("That's so cruel, Gunsô! We are friends"). To Fuyuki's innocent and wishful words, Keroro coldly replies: "それはそれ、これはこれであります" ("That is that, this is this"). Right at this very moment, a message from his headquarters is delivered through the Keron Ball by radio:

本隊より潜行部隊へ。同胞の一部がペコポン人と接触した模様、すこぶる危険な状況である。これに伴い、遺憾ながら本隊は一時ペコポン圏より撤退する。諸君への救助を断念せざるを得ない、健闘を祈る。

Headquarters to preliminary squad, someone has encountered Pekoponians on the surface and is in extreme danger. Consequently, we unfortunately have to retreat from the Pekopon area. We regret that we must give up on rescuing you all. Good luck. (My own translation from the Japanese)

“どういうこと？” (“What does that mean?”) Fuyuki asks. “仲間に置き去りにされたみたい” (“It seems like he has been left behind by his comrades,”) Natsumi replies sarcastically. Taken by surprise, Keroro immediately changes his arrogant attitude and whispers gently to the family: “お友達であります” (“we are friends”). This episode then ends with a voice-over indicating: “Thereby, Sergeant Keroro was officially posted to the Hinata household,” with the sound of vacuuming echoing in the background implying that Keroro goes back to running errands for the family.

In this opening episode, while the narrative pokes fun at its intense fighting scenes and funny interaction between the characters, it is structured around a parodic representation of Japan’s military expansionism during World War Two reconfigured as Keroro’s invasion. In this parody, the *anime* plays with the similarities between the two texts including loading Japan’s military symbols, cultures and hierarchy onto its alien characters (as discussed earlier) to generate fun and laughter. However, it is important to emphasize that *Keroro Gunsô*’s use of parody does not aim to ridicule or to criticize the real, historical events considering the fact that the *anime* purposefully displaces its audiences from Japan’s past to the context of “alien” invasion in modern era. The modern parody, as Hutcheon explains, implies an “ironic critical

distance” between the parody and the parodied text, in which the irony is “more playful than ridiculing, more critical than destructive” (“*Parody*” 202). While parody is deployed for many different critical operations, it is used in *Keroro Gunsô* to reconstruct an alternative history, or “creative memory” as noted by Lachmann, which critically challenges and subverts established historical truths (141). *Keroro Gunsô*, the parody, re-constitutes a fantasy in contemporary Japan, promoting a claim that the imperialistic alien soldiers are funny and controllable (therefore unthreatening) invaders who are, most importantly, pacifist heroes.

As mentioned earlier, this “imperialist soldier,” Keroro, is portrayed as a cute and adorable frog-like species from outer space. From his appearance, we can see that Keroro is 55.5 cm tall (much shorter/smaller than the “humankind” characters, the Hinata siblings), with a round head, smooth and colorful skin, big eyes and a constant smile on his face (Yoshizaki 13). He shows up with his “ultimate weapon,” the Keron Ball, in his hand. In fact, all the weaponry appearing in this *anime* is remodeled to appear less violent and deadly. Be it pistol, rifle, or even machine gun, the major weapons Keroro and his other comrades use for their “invasion” are round-edged and emit laser lights instead of bullets (presumably with an attempt to avoid any potential bloody scenes). While these arrangements in the character design are employed to create commercially marketable images for cultural consumption, they help transform the masculine, powerful and threatening image of an invasion soldier into a cute and unthreatening one. According to Kanako Shiokawa’s exploration of the function of cuteness in Japanese *anime*, the specific elements of being small, delicate, round, simple, and smiling in *anime* culture are important qualities attached to the notion of *kawaii*/cute, where “smoothness and roundness are preferred over shades and angles” (95). By depicting the aliens as “round” and “smooth” and stripping them of any signifier related to harm, destruction, terrorism and death, *Keroro Gunsô*

destabilizes the image of “imperialist soldiers” and replaces it with a cute, lovable and most importantly, unthreatening image.

As funny and unthreatening as he appears to be, Keroro is still an invader whose military identity is constantly problematized and mocked as the target of this parody. In this first introductory episode, the *anime* keeps reminding the audience that Keroro is a soldier (軍人, *gunjin*), a sergeant (軍曹, *gunsô*) and most importantly, an invader (侵略者, *shinryakusha*). In leading the audience on to expect him to be “cruel and merciless” with overwhelmingly dominant military power (as envisioned in Fuyuki’s nightmare), the story offers a series of counter-expectations to reverse such stereotyped images. As his platoon gets abandoned by the imperial army, Keroro turns from a soldier into a house servant whose main task of invasion is now replaced by running errands. On his initial encounter with the siblings, Keroro loses his weapon, the Keron Ball, to Natsumi. With his military power (symbolized by the Keron Ball) taken away from him, Keroro finds himself in a subordinate position within the matriarchal system in the Hinata household where the mother and older sister take control of everything.

However, even if Keroro is the “enemy” in this oppositional relationship (the invader versus the invaded) to the Earth/the Hinata’s, he is never portrayed as a real “villain” throughout the story. Rather this imperialist soldier is presented as a hero, or more specifically a “flawed hero.” There are many moments dedicated to highlighting his heroism. For example, Keroro and his teammates tirelessly launch one invasion after another (revolving around which the story unfolds), holding a strong belief that they are able to achieve the goal of conquering the Earth/Pekopon and contribute to their empire’s expansionism without aggressive destruction. When some other extraterrestrial invaders (the real villain in the narrative) appear and crisis arises, the Keroro platoon aligns themselves with humankind/the Japanese family to protect the

Earth against the villainous power (or even their own empire as shown in episode 101 to 103, which will be discussed again later). As Antonia Levi remarks in her studies of heroism in contemporary Japanese media culture, “it is not necessary for a *manga* or *anime* hero to be a saint, to fight for the right side, or even to be successful. Anyone who sincerely gives his or her best efforts to almost any task can be a hero” (72). Admittedly, Keroro has many flaws and weaknesses and he also makes all sorts of careless mistakes in his military tasks (which make the story funny and comical to the audience). On top of that, he also fights for the “wrong side” considering his role as an “invader.” However, Keroro’s loyalty, devotion and commitment to fight for world peace not only exonerate him from being a villain/war criminal, but also turn him into a heroic character, although flawed, in this story. The Japanese definition of what constitutes a hero not only plays an important role in justifying the “invader” as a “hero,” but also is “one factor that helped the nation deal with its defeat in World War Two” (Levi 72).

The resurrection of the Imperial Japanese Army as a pacifist invader/flawed hero in *Keroro Gunsô* entails more than parody because history is constantly twisted and reversed in Yoshizaki’s parodic representation. The Imperial Japanese Army, the official ground-based armed force of the Empire of Japan, is well known for their fanaticism and brutality against civilians/the invaded in World War Two. In the name of a holy war for their emperor and in the pursuit of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, they cruelly fought and conquered numerous countries including China, Korea, Indonesia and many others, leaving nothing behind but massive death and destruction. John Dower describes Imperial Japan as a “blood-soaked monster” and remarks on its military that:

From the rape of Nanking in the opening months of the war against China to the rape of Manila in the final stages of the Pacific War, the emperor’s soldiers and sailors left a

trail of unspeakable cruelty and rapacity. As it turned out, they also devoured themselves. (22)

Indeed, the Imperial army's brutality and atrocities in war not only inflicted an unimaginable amount of suffering on the invaded land, but also brought home a catastrophic outcome as well. Their "holy war" resulted in horrific destruction of two cities by atomic bombs (dropped by the US army to end the war over Hiroshima and Nagasaki), deaths of millions of people (soldiers and civilians alike), and eventually, the loss of their entire empire. In reality, the actual Imperial Japanese Army was brutal and violent demon-like invaders responsible for massive slaughter and war atrocities, especially against China, the "Pokopen" (as called by the Imperial soldiers). However, in *Keroro Gunsô* the imperial/alien invaders are lovable, playful, and pacifist heroes who save not only Japan but also the Earth, the "Pokopen/Pekopon" (as called by the alien soldiers) from evil power. Therefore, the reconstruction of imperial soldiers as pacifist heroes not only can be interpreted as an essential irony of this parody, but also an ultimate fantasy in postwar Japan presented in this carnivalesque *anime*.

The carnivalesque parody/fantasy in *Keroro Gunsô* is best understood within the context of Japan's current conflicted relationship to its wartime history. As Ethan Thompson remarks in his reading of *South Park* (animation creators: Trey Parker and Matt Stone, 1997), a popular American comedy animation, as a site of carnival culture, "parody is the language through which a liminal space is created for considering contemporary political and social discourses" (221). How, then, should we interpret the fantasy of a different "past" embodied in *Keroro Gunsô*'s parody in relation to current Japanese society? More importantly, how does such fantasy liberate its (Japanese) audience from the social anxiety surrounding the real, serious historical past? For further exploration, it is significant to take into consideration Japan's social and political

environment around the millennium, when *Keroro Gunsô* was released (*manga* in 1999, *anime* in 2004).

From the state of devastation after World War Two, postwar/modern Japan has been successfully rebuilt into one of the most influential economic systems in the world, reborn with a “commitment to ‘peace and democracy’” (Dower 30). However, it has been well argued that Japan today is still imprisoned in its endless postwar. Carol Gluck, for instance, proposes that there are at least three postwars in Japan: the first one was the “real postwar, that is the immediate postwar period of reform and recovery”; the second one refers to the postwar from the perspective of Japan’s rapid economic rise after the war; the third one, seemingly the longest, is Japan’s international postwar that requires Japan to “confront its aggressive past in Asia and relate its own national history responsibly to the national histories of other countries” (Gluck 94). While the first postwar came to an end in the mid-1950s and the second one sometime during the 1970s or 1980s,⁷ the third postwar has just begun to cease since 1989 but its influence remains strong even in today’s Japan. Even though it has been more than half a century since the end of the war, how Japan deals with its imperial past continues to be a critical and important issue that significantly influences Japan’s international relations.

Japan in the late 1990s and early 2000s witnessed a series of social and political events that demonstrated a strong desire to re-interpret or even rewrite its historical past. The most controversial one was the campaign of publishing a new history textbook by the Japanese Society of History Textbook Reform (新しい歴史教科書をつくる会). The group, founded in 1996, posed a provocative challenge to history education in postwar Japan, arguing that history textbooks used in Japan have been disseminating a “masochistic” representation of the nation’s

⁷ Gluck explains that although some historians declared that the second postwar ended sometime in the 1970s, Japan as “postwar” is still spoken of through the 1980s (Gluck 93).

history (Foundation, “趣意書”). Since its foundation, the group has been active in publishing the *New History Textbook* (for junior high schools), which promotes a revised, “positive” view on Japan’s imperial history. Heavily criticized by a large number of Japanese historians and educators, their new textbook justifies Japan’s war of aggression by whitewashing the violent record of its wartime past and downplaying Imperial Japanese war crimes during World War Two. Nonetheless, it was officially approved by the Ministry of Education in April 2001. According to the Japanese Society of History Textbook Reform, the *New History Textbook* has achieved a commercial success of selling more than 760,000 copies in Japan (Foundation, “つくる会の歩み”). The fact that such a distorted representation of Japan’s wartime history is authorized by the state government has caused a great deal of heated debate in Japan as well as internationally.

Another equally, if not more, controversial event occurred later the same year when then-Prime Minister Koizumi Jun’ichirô publicly and explicitly promised to pay an official visit to Yasukuni Shrine on 15 August 2001, Japan’s memorial day of the end of the war. Yasukuni Shrine is a religious site dedicated to the war dead and those who died on behalf of the Empire of Japan. Among those enshrined there are multiple convicted and executed class-A war criminals, and therefore Yasukuni is inextricably linked with Japan’s rampage and atrocities during wartime. Jeff Kingston noted that Yasukuni is regarded as “a symbol of a shameful era of militarism” by many Japanese including progressive politicians, who publicly spoke against Koizumi’s visit (241). However, despite the disapproval of the majority of the Japanese public and the strong protests of the Chinese and Korean governments, Koizumi visited Yasukuni Shrine on 13 August, two days prior to the anniversary of Japan’s surrender as the nation’s Prime

Minister.⁸ It is obvious that his visit was not purely to commemorate the souls of fallen soldiers because there were alternative sites for political leaders to pay their respects to the war dead. Chidorigafuji, for example, is a national Japanese cemetery for the unidentified war dead near Yasukuni Shrine and the Imperial Palace in Tokyo. It is a public institution frequently visited by the Shōwa Emperor and other Prime Ministers. Yet, as Kingston points out, “the issue [which site to visit] is not the souls of fallen soldiers. The issue of the shrine is about national pride and reviving a more glorious, unapologetic narrative of Japan’s past” (Kingston 241-242). Therefore, Koizumi’s official and high-profile visit to Yasukuni Shrine on a politically sensitive day not only sent out a strong political message to invoke Japan’s national pride in its past, but also served as a formal request to re-interpret Japan’s wartime history.

These controversial events around the millennium have brought about a great deal of social disturbance in Japan and a series of large-scale demonstrations and protests across East Asia (most forcefully in China and Korea), not to mention severe damage to Japan’s international relations with its neighboring countries. However, it would be wrong to assume such social activities represent the opinion of the Japanese majority. The *New History Textbook* was rejected by the Japan Teachers Union and adopted only by a few schools, most of which are privately owned. Similarly, there has been a strong domestic reaction and opposition against Koizumi’s visit to Yasukuni Shrine. Their political agendas aside, these social events demonstrate the haunting presence of Japan’s wartime past as well as the social tensions in millennium Japan.

Therefore, *Keroro Gunsō* could be understood as a popular culture response to the social tensions surrounding Japan’s controversial past. Through its humorous parody and reversal of

⁸ See Kingston’s argument against the Japanese government’s “flexible” statement about Koizumi’s visit being “personal and private” (Kingston 241).

history, the *anime* destabilizes popular imagination about Japan's wartime history and transforms the politically sensitive past into a playful and humorous story. Rather than resolving the contemporary social/political tensions, it creates a carnivalesque fantasy where alien/imperial soldiers become heroes and their devotion and loyalty to their (lost) empire are honored and glorified. It is an ultimate fantasy that cannot be realized in postwar Japan, one that can only exist within the framework of this carnival where Japan's monstrous and brutal militaristic past is temporarily suspended and reversed. With its fantasy for an alternative history, *Keroro Gunsô* helps liberate its (Japanese) audience from the social tension and haunting existence of Japan's imperial past, although temporarily, in this carnivalesque setting.

2.2 The Subversive *Shôjo* and Japan's Patriarchal Hegemony

While the parody in *Keroro Gunsô* plays with the public imagination about Japan's wartime past, the ambiguous relationship between the Keroro platoon and the Hinata family is another focus of this *anime*. Sometimes they are friends, closely related and sincerely caring about each other. Other times they are foes, positioned on the opposing sides of the invasion and in constant conflict with one another. More importantly, their relationship is problematized by gender: while the alien platoon is led by Keroro, the male invader, the Hinata family is controlled by Natsumi, the female defender. The tension from their problematic relationship leads to a clash of gender, power struggles and chaos which, I would argue, serve as another carnivalesque strategy in *Keroro Gunsô* to challenge the social/patriarchal hierarchy in contemporary Japanese society.

As stated by Bakhtin, "carnival marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (10). The suspension of hierarchy is of particular significance in

carnival; it allows the oppressed and marginalized voice to be heard and equalizes everyone: kings or fools, ruling class or the ruled, men or women. To suspend the patriarchal hierarchy in the world of *Keroro Gunsô*, Yoshizaki imagines two societies embodied by the alien platoon and the Japanese family, juxtaposed side by side but positioned in conflict with one another. In the following reading, I focus on their binary opposition on a social, familial, and personal level. I would argue that the conflict and subsequent chaos between them represents the gender and power struggles between the patriarchal power emasculated by the war and defeat and the subversive matriarchal power in postwar/modern Japan.

The world of *Keroro Gunsô* is constituted by two parallel societies—the alien/Keroro platoon/Keron Planet and the humankind/Hinata family/Japan, whose intriguing comparison makes possible various interpretations.⁹ It needs to be emphasized that while Keroro represents Japan's imperial past as an imagined Other (as discussed earlier), the Hinata family represents Japanese citizens living in contemporary Japan (in 2004 as per the *anime* version). According to the *anime*, the alien empire/Keron Planet (ケロン星) is located in the center of the Gamma Planetary System (a fictional solar system), known for their advanced technological and military power. Although its culture and lifestyle are portrayed as quite similar to those of Japanese, this empire is strongly associated with war and militarism. On many occasions when Keroro experiences flashbacks, it is revealed that prior to his invasion mission to Earth, he spent his childhood in formal military training and education in the service of his empire's space expansionism. This alien society is governed by a military force called the Keron Army (ケロン軍), which controls the Keroro platoon and sends them (and presumably other numerous platoons) out to different planets for space invasion.

⁹ Humankind/the Earth (in comparison to the *Keronian/Keron Planet*) in this narrative refers to Japanese/Japan because all the actions and influence concerns almost exclusively Japan.

While the alien empire is identified with war and military power, the imagined Japan is identified with peace and economic prosperity. It is a peaceful and stable society with no sign of social disturbance (before the arrival of the alien invaders). Its economic prosperity can be observed from its urban landscape (similar to Tokyo in reality): the city is composed of multiple skyscrapers and shopping malls in the downtown area and schools, parks and private houses in the suburban area. A significant part of this landscape is the Nishizawa Tower (reminiscent of the Sky Tower West Tokyo in reality), a landmark that can be seen from anywhere inside the city. In the story, the tower was built by the Nishizawa Corporation, a multi-billion international company that controls “half of the global economy” headed by a Japanese entrepreneur Nishizawa Baio (the father of Momoka, a secondary character who has a crush on Fuyuki). The Nishizawa Tower is a crucial signifier that differentiates the imagined Japan from the alien empire, highlighting the economic power of this capitalist society. However, what is also noticeable is the nonappearance of any political symbol including government buildings or police stations throughout the series, indicating the absence of political power/leader in this Japanese society. This portrayal of the imagined Japan echoes with the political landscape of Japan in reality during the 1990s (when the original *manga* version is created and released). As Tomiko Yoda remarked, “Japan in the 1990s has come to be widely perceived as the site of ... the virtual absence of ethical and competent leadership” (22).

Interestingly, the presence/absence of political symbols in these two societies resonates with that of a father figure in the Keroro and the Hinata families. As mentioned before, the father in Keroro’s family is a well-respected “鬼軍曹” (“demonic sergeant”) whose presence is both dominant and authoritative. In comparison to the patriarchal system in Keroro’s family and, by extension, the alien empire, the Hinata family representing current Japan is dominated by

matriarchal power, embodied by the mother Hinata Aki and the older sister Hinata Natsumi. As the audience learns from the story, Aki is an independent, strong and powerful single mother working as a full-time manga editor. Her matriarchal power is established by her ability to provide financial support and protection to her children. She takes the place of a patriarchal leader with her power. On the one hand, her full control of both family and career manifests a rising maternal power that replaces and fulfills the absence of a patriarchal father. On the other hand, her possession and utilization of a motorcycle, a symbolic “phallus” in the world of *anime*, further emphasizes the subversiveness of her power. In Napier’s analysis of the symbolic meaning of the motorcycle in the *anime* film *Akira*, she remarked that the motorcycle is not only “the phallic symbol of power and authority” but also a symbol of “subversive flexibility against a monolithic and indifferent state” (41). While such is the case for *Akira*, her analysis can be applied to *Keroro Gunsô* as well. Aki’s skillful and aggressive way of driving her motorcycle, speeding and passing one car after another on the road in the heart of this society demonstrates her power as a matriarchal leader. The father in the Hinata family, on the other hand, remains mysteriously absent throughout the series. Even his name, Hinata Haru, is not mentioned until episode 357, the second to last episode of the *anime* series.

All the oppositions between war and peace, militarism and capitalism, father and mother, come back to the polarity and clash of gender between men and women. This conflict is further underlined on a personal level in the power struggles between Keroro on the one side and Natsumi on the other. On the one hand, Keroro represents the patriarchal power/Japan’s imperial past that is emasculated by Natsumi when she deprives him of his military power symbolized by the Keron Ball (as mentioned in the opening episode). On the other hand, Natsumi represents the matriarchal power/the female empowerment in current Japan that undermines Keroro’s militarist

masculinity. In other words, the fall of patriarchal power is accompanied by the rise of matriarchal power symbolized by Natsumi, the significant *shôjo*/girl character in this story. It is through the mobilization of Natsumi/*shôjo* that *Keroro Gunsô* poses a challenge to Japan's patriarchal hegemony.

Sharalyn Orbaugh's study on *shôjo*-ness in Japan's visual culture is insightful for our exploration of the mobilization of Natsumi/*shôjo* in *Keroro Gunsô*. She argues that,

Some of the features that had formerly distinguished *manga* for girls from *manga* for boys began to be used together, to form a hybrid genre, ... The late 1990s culmination of this trend has brought a range of cultural products that feature female protagonists in narratives that include male-associated elements such as battle, adventure, and high technology.

(Orbaugh 215-216)

Keroro Gunsô's hybridity between *shônen* (literally, boys) and *shôjo* narrative is underscored by Natsumi's empowerment and active involvement with the "male-associated elements such as battle, adventure, and high technology" as a *shôjo* character. As remarked by Napier, the rise of female power against patriarchal hegemony and the desire of "overturning the stereotype of feminine submissiveness" in *anime* may create a festive/carnavalesque resonance in today's Japanese society where "Japanese women are still relatively disempowered" (31). In this carnival world of *Keroro Gunsô* where hierarchical ranks are suspended, women/*shôjo* are changed, renewed, and empowered to be equal, if not stronger than men/*shônen*.

To elaborate this point, a sub-story where Natsumi fights against another stronger villain is worth reading in further detail because it demonstrates how the *Keroro Gunsô* mobilizes the *shôjo* against patriarchal power. The sub-story takes place in episodes 101 to 103 (originally broadcast in March 2006 in Japan). Usually, each episode in the *anime* has its own complete

storyline. The fact that this sub-story expands into three episodes shows the narrative importance and enhanced tension invested in it. In this sub-story, a new character, Lieutenant Garuru (ガール中尉), is introduced as a stronger and more powerful “villain.” A strict and dominant patriarchal figure, Garuru is Giroro (the Corporal in Keroro’s team)’s older brother who possesses advanced military skills outranking all of Keroro’s team members. Garuru’s platoon is sent by the same Keron empire to replace Keroro’s team in their task of Pekopon invasion because of Keroro’s failure to complete the mission. Without any warning, Garuru launches a large-scale attack towards the Earth and occupies the Hinata household (Keroro’s frontline base) where the mother Aki is captured and the brother Fuyuki goes into hiding. Meanwhile, he also defeats the Keroro platoon members, one by one, including his brother Giroro. The fact that Garuru would even assault his own kind immediately establishes him as the greatest villain (up to this point in the *anime* series).

In a hopeless and desperate situation, Giroro, the Corporal in Keroro platoon who excels in battles, entrusts Natsumi with a powerful mobile suit that empowers her to fight against the invincible Garuru.¹⁰ While this plot itself is a parody of another famous Japanese *manga/anime* series called *Saishū Heiki Kanojo* (最終兵器彼女, literally, “She, the ultimate weapon”) (*manga* artist: Takahashi Shin, 2000; *anime* director: Kase Mitsuko, 2002), Giroro’s empowerment of Natsumi literally transforms her into the ultimate weapon. With the help of the mobile suit, Natsumi’s power is considerably increased. There follows the high points of Natsumi’s heroic moment: she has succeeded in intercepting Garuru’s invasion, severely damaging his army, and breaking through all levels of protection to march her way into the center of Garuru’s control room. She has managed to do what her male counterparts have failed to do.

¹⁰ Mobile suit: a fictional machinery, originating in the *Gundam* Series, is a suit-like weapon equipped with various kinds of armed forces while providing protection for the user.

Natsumi's heroic, subversive power as a *shôjo* is glorified and emphasized in this sub-story. Her hybrid *shôjo*-ness embodies what Orbaugh calls "battlin' babes" underscored by her transformativity between "a normal girl" and "her fighting persona" (220). Before the battle, Natsumi can be seen as a dreamy high school girl; she is a secret admirer of a radio announcer and always fantasizes about a romantic encounter with him (*shôjo* elements). During the battle, she transforms into a fearless and powerful fighter; she fights against the villainous Garuru with her high-tech mobile suit to protect her family and the Earth (*shônen* elements).

Natsumi's "battlin-babe-ness" appears to be a challenge to the older stereotype of *shôjo*-ness where girls are expected to be "dreamy, vulnerable and fragile, who [need] to be rescued by male characters" (Orbaugh 204). In this story, it is the *shôjo*, Natsumi, who takes on action, adventure, violence, and social responsibility that are traditionally expected from a *shônen* character. Whereas the *shônen* characters such as Fuyuki and the Keroro platoon members are either too weak/infantilized to fight or helplessly defeated by the villain, Natsumi becomes the hero/heroine to protect her brother, her friends, her home and the Earth/Japan from devastation. In this carnivalesque moment, gender roles between men/*shônen* and women/*shôjo* are reversed. As Napier remarked, "in the animated space, female characters seem to glory in manifestations of power still denied them in the real world" (31). In mobilizing Natsumi's *shôjo* power and highlighting her heroism, *Keroro Gunsô* poses a threat to Japan's patriarchal hegemony—until Natsumi's ultimate defeat.

As we have seen, Natsumi is presented as a "battlin' babe," a subversive *shôjo* character in *Keroro Gunsô*. Intellectually and athletically talented, independent and determined, she demonstrates a strong potential to be a competent leader in school, at home, and when the time comes, at war. In fact, by the late 1990s and 2000s when *Keroro Gunsô* was released, women

characters were truly strong warriors/leaders in many *manga/anime* (for example, Miyazaki Hayao's *The Princess Mononoke*, Oshii Mamoru's *Ghost in the Shell*, and the *Cutie Honey anime* series, just to name a few). However, the powerful and feisty Natsumi does not win and become the leader. Instead she either gets tragically defeated by stronger male characters (Garuru), or maintains her role as a supporter for her male counterparts (Keroro and Fuyuki). In the context of gender and power struggle, I would argue that *Keroro Gunsô's* employment/manipulation of the subversive *shôjo*/Natsumi is to create, not a feminist fantasy against Japan's gender hierarchy, but a male, postwar fantasy to restore the masculinity and patriarchal hierarchy in Japan's society.

A closer examination of the *anime* reveals that Natsumi, the subversive *shôjo*, is constantly kept under the control and manipulation of patriarchal power. Natsumi's apparent "battlin-babe-ness" is not as strong as it appears. This is underlined by her gaining and subsequent loss of power in the battle against Garuru. Let us return to the sub-story discussed earlier. Empowered by the mobile suit/weapon from Giroro, Natsumi manages to intrude forcefully into Garuru's control room. However, with a snap of his fingers, Garuru defeats Natsumi completely by disengaging the mobile suit from her body. As the mobile suit gets disassembled, detached and broken into pieces, Natsumi is stripped of her power and drops to her knees. The defeat of Natsumi is followed by the revival of the Keroro platoon, who come back for a rematch to rescue Natsumi and the Earth. Consequently, this sub-story ends with the retreat of the Garuru platoon after they are defeated by Keroro, who becomes the final hero in this battle and regains the permission to continue his invasion mission and peacekeeping on Earth/Pekopon.

The battle between Natsumi and Garuru is a symbolic site for gender and power struggle in Japan. In this battle, Natsumi's power to become a feisty *shôjo* derives from the mobile

suit/the phallus entrusted by Giroro, the Corporal from the Keroro platoon. When she puts the mobile suit on her body, Natsumi instantly transforms from a dreamy girl into a robot-like warrior. The solid and impenetrable mobile suit along with destructive weapons (associated with masculinity) conceal her fragile female body; she becomes a strong, brave, and unyielding hero/heroine. However, when Garuru deprives her of the mobile suit/phallus, her vulnerability and fragility are exposed along with her female body. The strong connection between the mobile suit and Natsumi's subversive power underlines the fact she/*shôjo* is not naturally powerful; she only *becomes* powerful by the power/mobile suit/the phallus endowed by men/the patriarchal characters. As Orbaugh remarks, "females may inhabit images that demonstrate power, but that power is still enabled by and circumscribed within ultimate patriarchal hegemony" (227).

Powerful as she is, Natsumi's power is initially activated by Giroro (a male figure) and eventually deactivated by Garuru (Giroro's older brother, another more powerful male figure) by taking away her mobile suit/the phallus. That is to say, throughout the whole gender and power struggle, she remains controlled and manipulated by the patriarchal characters.

While Natsumi's defeat indicates the end of her subversion against patriarchal domination, it also symbolizes the beginning of the restoration of Japan's patriarchal hegemony. With her defeat/retreat from the battle, the gender struggle between Garuru/male and Natsumi/female turns into a power struggle between Garuru and Keroro over their ultimate domination of the Earth, to which Natsumi is unconditionally subjected. As noted by Heidi Hartmann,

Though patriarchy is hierarchical and men of different classes, races, or ethnic groups have different places in the patriarchy, they also are united in their shared relationship of

dominance over their women, they are dependent on each other to maintain that domination. (14-15)

In this symbolic battle, the dominant power is transferred from the villainous Garuru to the heroic Keroro who saves the world. Despite the fact that they are coming from different sides of the battle and different places/ranks in their patriarchy, Garuru and Keroro symbolically “united in a shared relationship” to maintain the male dominance over the subversive Natsumi, whose empowerment is merely temporary in this power struggle. It thus becomes clear that *Keroro Gunsô* does not seek to overturn Japan’s patriarchal hierarchy through the subversive *shôjo* in this gender/power struggle. As Napier noted, what Japanese carnivalesque *anime* seeks is “temporary leveling of social order” rather than complete reversal in Western carnival (30).

Considering the fact that *Keroro Gunsô* is a conservative weekly TV program for children and teenagers, it makes sense why the subversive *shôjo* can only be empowered to equally compete with the dominant male but cannot completely subvert the social hierarchy. It also explains the ambiguous relationship and contradictory co-existence between the alien empire and the Earth, the invader and the invaded, war and peace, men and women, male warriors and feisty *shôjo*.

What is particularly noteworthy about Natsumi’s symbolic defeat in the context of gender and power struggles is the re-establishment of the fundamental gender division between male heroes (Keroro) and female victims (the defeated Natsumi). While Natsumi re-transforms back into the vulnerable high-school girl, the recovered Keroro, representing the Imperial Japanese Army, comes back to fight against the villainous power and becomes the final hero who saves not only the girl but also the world. By casting the girl/*shôjo* as a war victim and the imperial soldier as the savior, *Keroro Gunsô* recuperates Imperial Japan’s masculine power as one that protects and saves lives instead of destroying. In doing so, it helps Keroro/Imperial Japan to

reassert his/its masculinity tainted by war and defeat, and to finally reclaim his/its lost glory as a pacifist hero.

As we have seen, *Keroro Gunsô* draws fun from the symbolic binary opposition between the alien platoon and the Hinata family to deal with gender conflict in Japanese society. Its carnivalesque mode enables the *anime* to destabilize the social boundary between war and peace, men and women, patriarchal and matriarchal power, transforming the social tension between them into a series of meaningful and fun narratives. With the temporary suspension of hierarchy and leveling of society order, *Keroro Gunsô* offers a liminal space for controlled chaos and subversion against the patriarchal hegemony. However, as the story/carnival comes to an end, seriousness and social hierarchies of the official life are restored; the historical truths remain unchanged, patriarchal hierarchy is reinstated, and chaos is controlled and resolved. Such is the limitation of Japanese carnival *anime*, As Napier explains,

While boundaries are crossed and re-crossed to often riotous effect, the inevitably more conservative format of a weekly television series ultimately leads to a conservative resolution. (50)

Even though Bakhtin's "second life" in *Keroro Gunsô* ends as the official life resumes, it provides the audience a carnivalesque moment, a fantasy and a brief relief from the social tension and anxieties surrounding Japan's controversial imperial past. With the re-constructing of an alternative history and rebuilding of masculine power through the symbolic alien troop, *Keroro Gunsô* helps the audience to distance themselves from the haunting history and social tension and to appreciate the *anime* as a fantasy with flawed but lovable, irresponsible but heroic, imperialistic but pacifist alien soldiers.

Conclusion

In *Keroro Gunsô*, Yoshizaki creates a carnivalesque site through his use of parody of Japan's imperial past and the manipulation of gender conflicts anchored in current Japanese society. He exploits the flexibility provided by the media of *manga/anime* to play with and to destabilize the public imagination about "invasion" and Japan's wartime history. As a popular culture response to the social anxieties embedded in millennium Japan, Yoshizaki re-constructs an alternative history with a humorous twist, blurring the line between past and present, fiction and reality.

What Yoshizaki has created is not only a popular cultural product, but also a fantasy and a re-construction of collective memory for the (Japanese) children and teenagers, or the "post-postwar" generation to use Gluck's term. Gluck writes,

There would be a vast generational sea change when those who experienced the war and *senjo* finally ceded their long prominence to children who had vaguely heard of the oil shock when they were born but for whom that Shôwa "was a distant, distant past." Only then would "the long postwar" end and the collective construction of post-postwar memory finally begin. (94)

The "generational sea change" has begun to take shape as the younger generation born in Heisei (from 1989 to present) becomes increasingly detached from Shôwa (from 1926 to 1989). With little direct experience (or even none at all) of postwar, Japan's wartime past is turning into a "distant, distant past" which is open for discursive reconstruction and negotiation. In the eyes of the post-postwar generation, Japan's imperial past is paradoxically faraway yet close by, exotic yet familiar, just like the alien characters in *Keroro Gunsô*.

Yoshizaki's fantasy/*Keroro Gunsô* is extremely popular not only in Japan but also around the world. 2013 marked the 15th anniversary since the debut of the *manga* version, which is still ongoing in Japan (with 24 volumes up to date). The *anime* version with up to 358 episodes (from 2004 to 2011) has been rebroadcast in Japan since 2012 due to popular demand. The *anime* has also been broadcast on many countries' official TV channels or via Internet streaming services such as Netflix, a popular American streaming media channel. Such immense popularity has the potential to engender a great deal of commercial impact on the culture industry as well as cultural influence on its audience in terms of the perception of imperialist symbols frequently displayed in the *anime*.

The "Rising Sun Flag (旭日旗)," is a good case in point. A symbol of Japan's militarism, the war flag was used by the Imperial Japanese Army until the dissolution of the military at the end of World War Two. Because of its association with Imperial Japan's war atrocities and brutality, the war flag is considered extremely offensive to nations such as China and Korea, who were victimized by Japan during wartime. Any display of the image inevitably causes controversy at the least, life-threatening confrontations at the most. In 2001, Zhao Wei, a well-known Chinese actress and singer who was at the peak of her entertainment career, was featured in a series of photos shot for a Chinese magazine called "時裝 (literally, fashion)," in which she wore a dress patterned with the military flag (Zhang). In 2004, Lee Seungyeon, the former Miss Korea beauty pageant winner, was involved in a series of photos where she posed as a tortured/raped comfort woman with the Japanese military flag in the background ("Nudity"). Both incidents instantly sparked tremendous public protests and caused destructive influences on their careers because of the politically incorrect display of Japan's military images. In sharp contrast, even though *Keroro Gunsô* has repeatedly displayed such politically sensitive symbols

in its *anime*, it still managed to make its way to official broadcasting world-widely even in China and Korea, and is greatly adored by a massive number of cultural consumers. Nonetheless, this is not to suggest that *Keroro Gunsô* is potentially political or even charged with a political agenda. Rather, this comparison highlights the fact that *Keroro Gunsô* has successfully incorporated controversial contents into a creative narrative that is appealing to audience across the boundaries of age, gender, or even political views.

For Bakhtin, carnival “was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed” (Bakhtin 10). It presents a liminal space where audiences can be freed from “conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted” (Bakhtin, 34). However, it needs to be emphasized that such liberation and “subversion” in carnivalesque texts are licensed, authorized, or as M. Keith Booker says, “sanctioned.” Booker remarks that “one must not forget that the carnival itself is in fact a sanctioned form of ‘subversion’ whose very purpose is to sublimate and defuse the social tensions that might lead to genuine subversion - a sort of opiate of the masses” (6). As *Keroro Gunsô*, the carnivalesque *anime*, comes to an end, audiences are returned to the reality from the “sanctioned” carnival: Imperial Japan remains to be a monstrous empire responsible for the war atrocities and brutality it inflicted on its colonies and other countries; “pacifist invasion” is merely a fictional idea while invasion is still an act of military aggression, which Japan’s declaration of being a democratic and pacifist nation opposes; the Imperial army’s militarist masculinity is inextricably associated with war crimes and rampage, resulting in the deaths of millions of people at war. The glamorized past, the splendid present and the promising future portrayed in the story might have been just a fantasy limited within the framework of carnival.

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