

The contradictions of pop nationalism in the manga *Gate: Thus the JSDF Fought There!*

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Biography

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Though Japan's post-war constitution forbids maintaining the means of waging war, the Japanese Self Defense Force (JSDF) is one of the most powerful militaries in the world. This contradiction has become increasingly important in recent years as the JSDF has expanded its role and public profile, and as the state has moved closer to re-writing the constitution to allow for a more robust military policy. Alongside this military contradiction is a nationalistic one. The hyper-nationalism of the Pacific War left a general suspicion of overt nationalism amongst Japan's population, but in recent years casual forms of nationalism have emerged that decouple pride in national identity from political commitment. This article focuses on the manga *Gate: Thus the JSDF Fought There!* to unpack the relationship between nationalism and the JSDF's ambiguous position. In this manga Japan is invaded through a mysterious portal from a fantasy world, allowing the manga to depict the JSDF in combat. While the manga hews close to official JSDF self-representations, in attempting to show the JSDF at war the manga's images, characters and narrative foreground contradictions inherent in the JSDF and in Japanese forms of nationalism.

Keywords: Japan, nationalism, pop nationalism, manga, *Jieitai*, Japanese Self Defense Forces, JSDF

Introduction

In the afterword to the first volume of his military-fantasy light novel *Gate: Thus the JSDF Fought There!* (hereafter *Gate*), the author and former Japanese Self Defense Force (JSDF) serviceman, Takumi Yanai, offers the following advice to prospective JSDF recruits:

Don't be too noble. Don't speak of protecting democracy, or protecting the nation, or anything else you don't believe yourself. The interviewers are generally wise to that. To date, I've applied six times (including to the JSDF), so I'm not mistaken. The interview is the place where you demonstrate your determination and attitude.

To the last, say that you are choosing this road for yourself, and the interviewer will remember you well. In an extreme case, even if you say “It’s so that I can eat”, if you can show them your determination, it will work. (Yanai 2013; author’s translation)

This seems sound advice. The JSDF’s own public relations material generally avoids references to the nation, the emperor or the flag, instead motivating potential recruits through language of personal achievement and career stability (Frühstück 2007). The JSDF’s unique history helps to explain this avoidance of overtly nationalistic or idealistic language. While Japan’s post-war constitution prevents the nation from maintaining the means of waging war (Cabinet Office 1946), the JSDF is one of the most well-equipped military forces in the world. In the 70 years since the end of the Pacific War the JSDF has laboured, with mixed success, to shake off its associations with the Imperial Japanese Army, an institution that was widely discredited and reviled in the post-war era (Frühstück 2007).

In the last 25 years the JSDF has, however, undergone significant shifts in public opinion, partly because of more active public relations and partly because of external events. Successful disaster relief operations at home and abroad (not least after the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake) and an increasingly volatile regional political landscape have convinced many Japanese of the value and necessity of the JSDF (Cabinet Office 2012; Fushishige 2016).

Over this period the JSDF has become increasingly visible in Japan, with several fictional and factual accounts of the JSDF in television, film and manga. For the first few decades of the JSDF’s existence they were rarely featured in Japanese popular fiction. Notable exceptions were the Godzilla films, where the JSDF were often portrayed as incapable, and the 1974 anti-war novel *Sengoku Jieitai*, adapted into a manga in 1976 and a Sonny Chiba film in 1979. More positive representations of the

JSDF emerged from the 1990s, for example in *BEST GUY* (1990), an action film set in the Japanese air force. As the JSDF increased their public profile there was a sharp increase in positive depictions of the JSDF, for example in the 2002 *Godzilla* film *Godzilla Against Mechagodzilla*, in which the SDF score a rare victory over the eponymous monster. By the mid-2000s the JSDF had become a fairly frequent topic in Japanese popular fiction, with novels such as Hiro Akiwara's SDF trilogy (2003-2005) and anime such as *Yomigaeru Sora-Rescue Wings* (2006). It was in this period that *Gate*, the manga series treated in this article, first emerged as a web novel.

At the same time as the JSDF has experienced a rise in Japanese public consciousness there has also been a shift in how Japanese conceive of their relationship to the nation. Several writers have noted the rise in Japan of various forms of nationalism, including forms that decouple nationalism from Japan's military history and even from contemporary political issues (e.g. Fukuoka 2017; Kayama 2002; Kitada 2005; Sakamoto 2008; Sasada 2006).

In this article I argue that the increased visibility of the JSDF in Japanese popular culture should be understood in relation to changes in popular Japanese national consciousness. To make this argument I show how the JSDF and contemporary nationalism appear as interwoven themes in the popular manga series, *Gate: Thus the JSDF Fought There!* (Yanai, 2011-2018). I will describe how characters, narrative and imagery in this manga betray a suspicion of both official and far-right nationalism and establish in its place a form of national pride based on personal relationships and Japanese popular culture, a strategy that has strong echoes of JSDF public relations rhetoric. Indeed, as I will discuss later, after the success of the franchise, the JSDF featured characters from *Gate* in its own recruitment drive. But while the JSDF's official rhetoric papers over contradictions in this strategy, the manga draws these

contradictions into focus, demonstrating the dangers of a depoliticized nationalism. I am not arguing that this is an intentional critique. Rather, in attempting to form a military fantasy narrative around the ideology of a depoliticized nationalism, the contradictions inherent in this ideology are foregrounded. The manga establishes in its main character, Itami Youji, a form of popular nationalism that seems to reject official and militaristic forms of nationalism, but Itami cannot resist the excesses of this militaristic official nationalism, and his depoliticized version of national identity is repeatedly co-opted by nationalistic political interests.

Japanese nationalisms

At several points over the last 25 years authors have asserted that young Japanese people have become more nationalistic (e.g. Matthews 2003; Sasada 2006; Postel-Vinay 2017). Penney and Wakefield (2008) sound a warning note over some of these assertions, arguing that the failure of the right-wing textbooks advocated by the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform to find a place on many Japanese school curricula demonstrates the relative marginality of right-wing neo-nationalism. However, discussions of changes in nationalism are not always referring to overt right-wing nationalism of the kind represented in the textbook reform controversy. According to Edensor (2002), nationalism cannot be reduced to a specific government policy or captured in an individual opinion poll. It is a dynamic discourse composed of myriad texts, institutions, educational programmes, public policies and more, at different levels of formality and intentionality. The current article focuses not on extreme right-wing nationalism, but on alternative forms of nationalism within this dynamic discourse.

Much work on contemporary Japanese nationalism sees the recession as a major turning point in conceptualisations of the nation (e.g. Yoshino 1992). Yoda (2006) describes two responses to the Japanese recession, beginning in the 1990s, in terms of

nationhood. First, there is a conservative impulse to renew a sense of national identity, seen, for example, in the textbook reform movement or the manga of Yoshinori Kobayashi (for example his *Sensoron [On War]* from 1998). Second, there is a liberal impulse to displace the national with the individual as the main locus of meaning. The replacement of the national with the personal in the context of national public institutions can be seen in the JSDF's emphasis on personal narratives above national narratives in their public relations from the 1990s (Frühstück 2007, 2017).

The idea of a personalized nationalism may seem contradictory, but it is a phenomenon identified in one way or another by several Japanese writers. Kayuma (2002), for example, describes *petit nationalism* (*puchi-nashonarizumu*) as a moderate form of nationalism that contrasts with the more extreme nationalism of wartime Japan. While wartime Japanese nationalism was marked by absolute devotion to Japan (*chuukun aikoku*) and absolute obedience to the emperor (*zettai fukujuu*), *petit nationalism* is a casual love of country displayed through national sporting events, interest in the Japanese language, and the learning of traditional Japanese crafts.

Some writers (Hiroko 2008; Goldstein-Gidoni 2001; Perkins 2010) have equated *petit nationalism* with Michael Billig's (1995) 'banal nationalism'. However, while both concepts identify a casual form of nationalism there are important differences. Banal nationalism is 'endemic' to all nations—a constant though passive reminder in everyday life of the existence of the nation that allows for the active mobilisation of nationalist feelings in times of crisis. *Petit nationalism*, on the other hand, has a particular historical context, arising amongst a generation that Kayama (2002) argues feels insecure and alienated. Furthermore, banal nationalism happens below the level of consciousness. The young people that Kayama identifies engage consciously in forms of nationalism—waving flags at sporting events and claiming to love Japan. This differs from more overt

forms of nationalism not by being unconscious but by its disconnection from any coherent nationalistic political position. For example, while young Japanese people may wave flags, they do not have strong positions on politicians visiting the Yasukuni shrine, war reparations, or Japan's defence policy. It is, in Kayama's terms, an innocent or naïve form of nationalism (*mujaki-na*). In this it is closer to Takahara's (2006) 'nationalism-as-hobby' (*shumi-ka sareta nashonarizumu*) or Kitada's (2005) cynical or ironic nationalism—each linked to Japan's so-called 'lost generation'—than it is to Billig's banal nationalism.

While right-wing neo-nationalism is characterized by a political commitment to specific readings of Japanese history and pursuance of specific national policies, particularly in relation to defence, these more casual forms of nationalism decouple love of the nation from political ideology. They may be mediated through traditional symbols of the nation—the Emperor, the flag, the anthem—but these symbols are shorn of their political significance, becoming, in the words of Kan Sanjung, 'icons to have fun with' (*moriagaru tame no aikon*) (quoted in Fukuoka 2017, 357). However, the decoupling of nation and politics is not absolute. Fukuoka (2017) finds that young Japanese who willingly display their nationalism by waving the hinomaru national flag at sporting events are perfectly aware of the flag's historical military associations, but they can consciously disavow these associations. This disavowal does not entirely strip the flag of its historical significance for these young people.

For many of these authors, casual, popular or petit nationalism comes from the fact that Japanese essence and history are no longer feasible as a basis of Japanese identity. Yet the desire for a form of communal sharing at something like the national level has not gone away. Iida argues that new forms of popular nationalism 'are not inclined to articulate and fixate the essence of nation, they nevertheless contribute to the

recovery of personal identity by giving direction and shape to a vague and inarticulate desire for communal sharing of time and space' (2003, 699). Popular nationalism decouples itself from the nation, but it ends up constructing in its place a form of communal sharing that looks a lot like the nation, but without the politics. This creates, for Iida, a gap in culture; a situation where culture can no longer address questions of national political significance. This gap is also a space for the recoupling of politics and national pride.

Youth nationalism, or the shifting relationship to the nation among young people of the last 25 years, is often related to pop culture. Sakamoto (2008) sees 'pop nationalism' as one way in which ordinary Japanese people relate to the nation through images and narratives in popular culture. Again, these images and narratives are usually cut-off from any overt political or historical significance but can still spark a casual or playful sense of national pride.

The deployment of Japanese popular culture to motivate a dehistoricized, depoliticized, individualized national pride is seen in JSDF public relations. Frühstück (2007) shows how JSDF public relations altogether avoids bombastic nationalistic rhetoric and often draws on familiar aspects of Japanese popular culture to establish a more moderate form of national pride, using popular culture to 'camouflage, normalize and trivialize the armed forces in the eyes of the public' (2007, 12). While there are exceptions, this approach to public relations remains the main strategy of the JSDF today (e.g. Frühstück 2017). One recent example of this is in the mobile game *jieitai korekushon* (JSDF 2015). In this game the player controls miniature JSDF servicemen deployed within an ordinary household. Combining a cute aesthetic and a domestic setting, the game sees soldiers crawling beneath bookshelves and jumping over drawing pins. The prospective JSDF recruit is not to be motivated by scenes of exotic battlefields

or high-tech firearms (as in the US military's America's Army), and certainly not by a sense of love for or responsibility to the nation (as in the Chinese military's Glorious Mission), but by an individual challenge cloaked in the iconography of the small, the personal and the domestic.

As already mentioned, nationalism is not a single policy and cannot be located in a single institution, text or opinion poll. Edensor identifies a vast range of actors in nationalism's 'cultural matrix' (2002, 17). Institutions overtly founded to promote a particular form of national identity exist. But so too do writers, artists and filmmakers employing existing forms of national identity as a resource for generating popular fictions. These fictions, read by millions, can subtly alter the standing of different forms of nationalism in public discourse. In the Japanese cultural matrix, manga holds an important position (Ito 2005).

For Edensor, it is often in everyday practices that forms of nationalism are reproduced through 'unreflexive identifications' (2002, 20). One might argue that the casualness of manga reading leads to forms of identification that, while perhaps less committed, are also less critical than forms of identification that happen through more overtly politicized texts. So *Gate* is worth examining as an example of entertainment manga putting into the public sphere a form of nationalism; making it available for 'unreflexive identification' to its many readers. But *Gate* is also worth examining for the specific form of nationalism it does put into play. The manga represents the depoliticized petit nationalism discussed by Kayama, Fukuoka and others. In the main protagonist, Itami Youji, nationalism is marked by a mundane, casual, and ironic commitment to Japan, not through high culture, national essence or history, but through contemporary pop culture. However, in attempting to represent petit nationalism in comic form and encapsulating it in a fantasy-military genre, the manga brings to the

fore some of the contradictions inherent both in a depoliticized nationalism and in the JSDF's own self-image, and also demonstrates how these contradictions make possible the re-coupling of pop nationalism with expansionistic nationalist projects.

Gate: Thus the JSDF Fought There!

Takumi Yanai first wrote *Gate: Thus the JSDF Fought There!* as a serialized web novel between 2006 and 2009. Its popularity saw it adapted for a print serialisation between 2010 and 2011. The manga, which is the main focus for this article, began in 2011 and is coming to its conclusion at the time of writing in 2018. A television anime was broadcast in 2015 and several spin-off manga have been commissioned that centre on different characters or adopt different generic styles.

The main story—the same broad narrative in the novel, manga and anime—begins with a mysterious gate to another world opening up in Ginza, Tokyo. The JSDF repel an attack from what turns out to be an imperial power in the other world. Japan sends a JSDF force through the gate and establishes a military base in what becomes known as the 'Special Region' (toku-chi). The story's protagonist, Itami Youji, leads a reconnaissance unit tasked with winning the 'hearts and minds' of the locals.

Itami as pop nationalist

Itami is a self-confessed otaku. He joined the JSDF to fund his collection of amateur-produced manga (doujinshi), avoids work and frequently runs away from danger. However, his knowledge of strange monsters from manga and anime make him particularly well-suited to survive and prosper in the Special Region, where he encounters beings that seem to be derived from the manga he reads. He establishes a strong friendship with three girls in the Special Region, each representative of a particular type in manga genres: Lelei the magician, Tyuka the elf and Rori the goth

loli. Though he is characterized as a slacker and a coward with no sense of patriotism, Itami shows great bravery when either his hobby (collecting doujinshi) or his friends are threatened.

Itami embodies a casual and non-politicized nationalism that is reminiscent of the pop nationalism discussed above, and also of the JSDF's self-image as seen in its public relations. Itami's colleague, Yanagida, is the antithesis of this. We meet Yanagida in a scene where Itami has just saved a group of villagers and returned them to the Japanese base (issue 7). While Itami cannot see the connection between the refugees he has just saved and Japanese national interests, Yanagida interprets the refugees as the key to unlocking the natural resources of the Special Region. When he describes the Special Region as a 'treasure mountain' for Japan, Itami sarcastically calls Yanagida a patriot (*aikokusha*). In the anime, as this conversation happens the sun rises behind Yanagida, a clear association being made between a particular form of official nationalism (the rising sun of the hinomaru national flag) and a heartless utilitarianism that transforms needy refugees into a national resource.

It is clear whose side the manga is on. Yanagida is depicted as a suspicious character, frequently emerging from shadows, smoking cigarettes, with one eye hidden behind his spectacles. He is a bureaucrat, working within the system of the JSDF but never inspiring others. This contrasts sharply with Itami, a slacker who frequently disobeys orders yet earns the admiration of all of the people he works with—particularly those from the Special Region. The manga clearly prefers Itami's ability to connect to people on a personal level through a sincere and honest understanding of himself to Yanagida's relinquishing of his personal identity to an overarching national system.

Suspicion of official nationalism

Itami's rejection of overt nationalistic characteristics is echoed throughout the manga, with several images and themes casting suspicion on official nationalism. Political leaders in *Gate*, for example, are often cast as villains when they advance national objectives. The gate that has appeared in Tokyo is viewed by the US, Russia and China as a potentially valuable asset, unlocking resources and land for whatever nation controls it. All three countries attempt to capture this asset, but the manga focuses mostly on the US, whose president stoops to assassinations and blackmail in his failed attempt to control the gate. On the other side of the gate the Emperor of the Special Region displays a remarkable lack of feeling for his subjects, whom he condemns to death by forcing them to march against the JSDF despite the Japanese force's superior power (issue 2). This disregard for his soldiers draws strong parallels between the imperial army in the manga and the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) of the Pacific War, and this association is reinforced throughout the series. Frühstück (2007) argues that the US military and the IJA are the two most significant 'others' against which the JSDF defines its military identity, and they are both represented in *Gate* as alternative, less desirable forms of militarism.

The villainous leaders relinquish personal or individual ethics in favour of national (or imperial) interests. But there are characters that go the other way, sacrificing national interests out of a sense of personal morality, and these are cast in a positive light. Political leaders who show an individual sense of ethics find themselves at odds with their commitments to the nation. When the Japanese prime minister discovers that the US intend to blackmail him he resigns, thus neutering this move, though at the price of his political position (issue 21). In another story arc, the diplomat Sugawara faces a similar conflict between personal morality and national responsibility

when a young girl from the Special Region he has befriended seeks assistance from him. He chooses to help her even though this contravenes the commands of his superiors. This is signalled as the right thing to do, earning the admiration of several of the ‘good’ characters in the story (issue 63). These episodes illustrate the conflict between personal and national responsibility, coming down on the side of personal responsibility.

Images of the nation also reveal hostility toward official nationalism. Throughout the manga flags are almost exclusively associated with political elites. They appear in the offices and buildings of political and military leaders from the Empire and Japan and also of other nations vying for control of the Special Region, often in establishing panels preceding scenes of political chicanery by Japanese, imperial, Chinese or Russian leaders.

The first flag we see is the black flag of the Empire, raised atop a hill of Japanese corpses outside the Ginza Wako building (issue 1). The image is rich in associations, echoing the iconic photograph from 1945 of US marines raising the stars and stripes during the battle of Iwo Jima. The image transposes the defeat at Iwo Jima to Ginza Wako—a high-end retail store associated with cosmopolitan fashion, cosmetics and foods. The image shows a stark confrontation between the moribund philosophy of nationalism, represented by the black flag, and a more cosmopolitan and global Japan, represented by Ginza Wako; a Japan whose openness is guaranteed through global circuits of consumption that predate the war. Indeed, throughout the manga Japan serves as the representative of the world in the Special Region—chiming with Japan’s prevailing self-image as the gateway between western modernity and Asian tradition. In this image Japan appears less as a nation than as a trans-national (indeed, trans-world) node whose national essence is less important than its capacity to link worlds.

Alternatives to the nation

Gate presents as an alternative to these official nationalisms a casual nationalism that is personal, cosmopolitan and playful, and has much in common with the petit nationalism discussed by Kayama (2002).

Itami and his friends from the Special Region comprise a social unit that becomes an alternative family for its members, who have each been cut off from their families either by estrangement, death or illness. Itami's friends are also stateless, rejecting the Empire's claims on them as citizens (issue 15). For Itami, the group also becomes an alternative to his JSDF unit. Half-way through the manga Itami abandons the unit he commands in order to help Tyuka (issue 39). He turns away from official, national and Japanese affiliations and toward unofficial, multi-national and foreign affiliations, going on a mission that is not part of the JSDF's remit with a team composed of non-Japanese. Instead of being discharged, Itami remains in the service, spending the rest of the manga in a JSDF unit composed of him and his (non-Japanese) friends.

This episode shows up two aspects of JSDF national ideology, an ideology that clearly dovetails with petit nationalism as discussed by Kayama (2002). First, Itami is able to maintain a position in the JSDF despite an explicit disavowal of responsibility to the national interests so long as he maintains a humanistic sense of responsibility to his closest friends. While Itami is often represented as selfish, caring only for getting enough money and time off to collect doujinshi, he maintains a strong sense of responsibility to the people he knows personally. This comes across clearly in Itami's decision to take in refugees despite their lack of any strategic value to Japan and the fact that taking them in will go against the orders of his superiors (issue 7). It is seen again in a discussion with Yanagida in which Itami tries to make Yanagida see his

subordinates as human beings with their own unique characteristics and dreams instead of as interchangeable servicemen or pawns in a larger game of international manoeuvrings (issue 38). Itami's stubbornness in seeing others as human beings rather than national citizens with or without strategic value is represented as a praiseworthy attribute, and fate approves of his choices. Regularly, his choosing of personal responsibilities above national ones leads fortuitously to gains in national interest. By taking in refugees Itami increases the store of Japan's knowledge of the Special Region; by abandoning his unit he opens up an area of rich natural resources for Japanese exploitation. After these missions he is usually both rewarded and punished, but the rewards always outweigh the punishments (issue 46). In pursuing his own sense of responsibility to other individuals Itami does two seemingly incompatible things. He succeeds in disavowing his responsibility to the nation and following instead a personal morality based on responsibility to friends. And yet he remains within the JSDF. In fact this is not a paradox at all if we consider how Itami's disavowal of national interests coincides with the prevailing suspicion of overt nationalism in the JSDF. Itami is not a rogue in the JSDF but an ideal type: a JSDF soldier who is motivated by personal interests, and in being so motivated achieves benefits for Japan.

Pop nationalism

Throughout the manga the Special Region and its citizens are explicitly paralleled with the fantasy worlds of Japanese popular culture. When Itami first visits the Special Region he is amazed at how close it is to his doujinshi (issue 2). Japanese manga, anime and films serve as the touchstone by which the Japanese characters understand the Special Region. The older serviceman Kuwabara, on seeing an ancient dragon, understands it as a 'one headed Ghidora', a reference to a monster from the Godzilla films (issue 2). Younger servicemen have more recent references. At one point Itami

loses consciousness and wakes up in a mansion, having been rescued by three fantasy maids familiar to him from the manga he reads. He thinks for a moment that he has woken up in a maid hotel in Akihabara (issue 14). When Itami brings his friends to Japan for a few days they are frequently mistaken for cos-players, with Rori recognising herself in some of the merchandise and literature in the goth loli genre (issue 19).

In terms of the fiction, then, Itami's friends are foreign. But in a certain sense they are Japanese, or at least products of the Japanese popular imaginary. On one level, this aspect of *Gate* is simply catering to an otaku fantasy—the realization of the fan's favourite characters or character types, and the establishment of an intimate relationship between fan and character. If one feature of Japanese fans is the strong desire to 'seek intimacy with the object of their attention' (Kelly 2004, 9), then Itami has reached a level of fandom most could only dream of. Itami acts out for a certain kind of reader the fan's fantasy of total intimacy with the character.

But in representing this fan fantasy in the context of a national military adventure, the manga also complicates Itami's relationship to the nation. It allows Itami to do two things at once. On the one hand he disavows official nationalism and replaces it with an ethical system based on personal bonds and responsibilities. But on the other hand, these personal bonds become elevated back to the level of the nation due to the fact that Lelei, Tyuka, Yao and especially Rori are clearly representative of a Japanese imaginary. That is, Itami's friends may not be Japanese within the fiction, but they are explicitly represented as types from Japanese popular culture and understood as such by other characters. Crucially, though, while the girls spring from Japanese popular imaginary, this imaginary already has a transnational character. As represented in this manga, the magician, the elf and the goth loli all are Japanese adaptations of European

and North American cultural themes. They create, then, a cosmopolitan Japanese nationalism rather than a parochial or inward looking one.

They also create a version of nationalism that is playful and popular. Indeed, throughout the manga Japan is represented at its best not through high culture (poetry, art, craft) or official political symbols (the Emperor, the flag, the anthem, the political system) but through popular culture. For example, when two princesses from the Special Region visit Tokyo they become intrigued by BL manga, a genre which features stories of romantic relationships between men produced for young women. When they ask their guide to bring them to see more ‘art’, he takes them to a gallery. When they express their disappointment, he realizes that they considered BL manga fine art (issue 20). This episode conceptualizes the nation not in terms of high culture but in terms of the low culture of genre manga.

This episode is one example of a recurring theme in the manga—the switching of high and low, official and unofficial. One thinks immediately of the carnival here, as discussed by Bakhtin (1984). For Bakhtin, the medieval carnival, and the forms of art and literature he associated with it, served to turn the world upside down. Official authority was temporarily suspended as the carnival initiated an alternative order. In this manga, the fantasy world and characters of the Special Region facilitate a ‘carnivalisation’ of Japanese society. In doing this, the manga establishes a national sociality based on cosmopolitan, playful, popular cultural texts, paralleling both pop nationalism and also the JSDF’s uses of popular culture to establish a sense of national solidarity.

The parallels between Gate and the JSDF’s own self-image did not escape the notice of the JSDF. In 2015, with the success of the TV anime version of Gate, the JSDF teamed up with Alphapolis, the manga’s publisher, using characters from the

franchise in a recruitment drive. Itami and his friends appeared on posters with information on signing up, with the slogan: 'Become yourself to protect someone' (dare ka wo mamoreru jibun ni narou). The posters contain no flags or references to the nation. The identity of the 'someone' who the potential recruit is being encouraged to protect is left to the recruit's own imagination (Frühstück 2007, 2017).

However, it would be a mistake to read *Gate* as pure propaganda. *Gate* is a commercial franchise using the JSDF as a theme to create a story in the military-fantasy genre. To meet the needs of this genre, the franchise must do something that JSDF propaganda generally refrains from: It must show the JSDF in a real theatre of war. When this happens, when the ideal-typical JSDF soldier is made to fight, the contradictions inherent in this identity become manifest. As the debate over the re-drafting of the constitution and changes in Japan's military continue, the contradictions of the JSDF and Japanese nationalism are increasingly important. It is to these contradictions that I now turn.

Contradictions in pop nationalism

So far, my argument suggests that *Gate* simply echoes the attitude to the nation that is seen in the various kinds of pop nationalism summarized at the beginning of this article and evident in official JSDF public relations. However, while the rhetoric within JSDF public relations is tightly constrained by its official goal, this is not the case with *Gate*. The formal conventions and audience expectations for a military fantasy manga include the need for conflict, and this forces the manga to disclose paradoxes at the heart of the JSDF. Many of the representations of the JSDF in *Gate* are in line with official rhetoric, but there are moments when the contradictions of the depoliticized and individualized nationalism and of a pacifistic military at the heart of this rhetoric are laid bare. This generally happens in two ways. First, while the manga presents the JSDF as a

humanitarian and defensive institution, the manga trades in an economy of military desire drawn from conventional forms of aggressive militarism. Second, while Itami disavows official forms of nationalism, his pop nationalism as I have described it above, is easily exploited by official nationalistic projects.

A pacifist military at war

The manga in general depicts the JSDF as a defensive institution committed to pacifism, with the use of force a last resort in the defence of the nation; a depiction that echoes JSDF official rhetoric. Much is made of the JSDF's humane treatment of prisoners and generosity towards citizens of the Special Region. After battles the soldiers pray for the souls of their dead adversaries (issue 6), and the JSDF is admired in the Special Region for its humanitarian conduct—indeed it is the JSDF that introduce the concept of humanitarianism to the civilization on the other side of the gate. JSDF members are unimpeachable in their ethics. The relationships between the women of the Special Region and the male JSDF soldiers are marked by sexual tension and possibility but with only one exception these relationships are unconsummated, the manga being full of scenes of male JSDF soldiers resisting the impulse for sexual contact out of a sense of propriety and professional ethics.

The JSDF's commitment to peace is contrasted with the belligerence of other nations. Japanese politicians and generals are acutely aware of the moral risks they are taking when they enter the gate. The Japanese media draws parallels between Japan's position vis-a-vis the Special Region and the position of European explorers and imperialists vis-a-vis the colonies of Africa, America and Asia (issue 9). They discuss the baleful effects of a modern force making contact with peoples unable to compete in military or technological terms. When the JSDF do enter the gate, care is taken to define and limit the terms of engagement, with explicit mentions of the dangers of mission

creep as experienced by the US's campaign in Afghanistan (issues 65, 71). When Itami's platoon protects a village against a dragon he must account for his use of force in front of a special meeting in the Japanese National Diet (issue 18).

All this is very different from how other nation's characters conceive of war. The US president is represented as a belligerent and scheming character, whose first instinct when the gate emerges is to invade the Special Region (issue 2). Similarly, the Special Region's emperor sacrifices thousands of his soldiers in a war he knows to be unwinnable (issue 2). His son, Prince Zorzal, tortures and rapes prisoners of war, and engages in false flag operations and scorched earth tactics that bring misery to his own people (issue 33).

While the manga brands the JSDF as a peace-loving, humanitarian organisation with high standards of ethical behaviour, the genre requires the manga to trade in a military economy of desire involving the spectacle of sexualized violence. The military spectacle is manifest, for example, in the meticulous detailing of military equipment, which is discussed by characters at some length. These passages seem squarely aimed at the 'military maniac' audience, a community of Japanese military fans with deep knowledge of military technology and history (Penney and Wakefield 2008). Coupled with this attention to detail in the technology of combat is imagery that engages in a spectacularisation of battle, with several full-page panels and double-page spreads of the JSDF in action, usually heavily dominating a vastly inferior force from the Special Region. As a military-genre manga, *Gate* invites the reader to enjoy the spectacle of warfare. The comic book form gives this spectacularisation of battle a particular character, providing a visual intensity not present in the web novel. The comic also involves a more detailed depiction of violent acts than the anime, which was toned down for a television audience. Furthermore, the comic form extends battles in a

different way than these other forms. For example, the first 15 pages of chapter 12 depict a sequence of panels featuring discrete images of destruction of bodies and buildings. This serves to prolong the battle in the reader's imagination, encouraging the reader to take pleasure in these scenes of destruction. The characters themselves clearly also enjoy combat. For many of the JSDF service members the Special Region represents an opportunity to break free from the JSDF prohibitions on full military action in the real world. When the air force is called in to the Special Region for deployment, one of its commanders is so happy that he weeps (issue 61). One pilot on a reconnaissance mission in the Special Region comments favourably on the fact that there are no US or civilian planes there. The other pilot responds 'The sky is all ours Kurihama' (issue 27), neatly encapsulating the frustration of some JSDF soldiers in being part of a military that does not fight, citing both the US alliance and the Japanese civil society as hindrances to their martial ambitions.

The spectacle of battle is highly sexualized. This is a theme that runs right across the manga, but two characters in particular exemplify it: the female JSDF member Kurabayashi and the Special Region demigod Rori Mercury. Kurabayashi is an expert in hand-to-hand combat and takes great pleasure in fighting. Rori is a god of war, also relishes combat, and even experiences orgasms when she is nearby dying soldiers. In issue 11 they fight side by side, with male JSDF soldiers looking on and attempting to hide their sexual arousal. In scenes like this the sexual consummation denied the Japanese soldiers (and, at one degree removed, the reader) due to the JSDF's professional codes of conduct is transposed into battle. The manga retains the JSDF's clean image while still pandering to the expectations of sexualized violence of the military-fantasy genre.

The manga's embracing of bellicosity has a national element. While much of the manga labours to separate the JSDF from other kinds of militaries—particularly the US military—at key moments the JSDF seems to openly follow a template of US military aggression. Much military rhetoric in *Gate* is derived from the US military. For example, as previously mentioned, Itami's mission is to win the 'hearts and minds' of the locals, a reference to the pacification strategy of the US during the Vietnam War (issue 2). Indeed, the US in Vietnam looms large as a source for scenes and images in the manga. In one scene, the JSDF, consciously copying a famous scene from the US-made Vietnam film *Apocalypse Now*, play Wagner's 'Flight of the Valkyries' as they lay waste to an invading army. In episodes such as this the representation breaks free from the template of the JSDF as a uniquely humanitarian military, operating within a standard conceptualisation of aggressive militarism developed through US cinema (Frühstück 2007).

The co-opting of pop nationalism

The indebtedness to American popular culture in the *Apocalypse Now* scene and the sexualization of violence throughout the manga undermines the manga's representation of the JSDF as a uniquely humanitarian military. Once let loose in a military zone and freed from the restraints of the real world, the JSDF end up acting like the militaries the manga ostensibly contrasts it with. Despite the importance of humanitarianism to the JSDF's self-image in the manga, the JSDF engage in two acts of torture (issues 35 and 41), an illegal invasion (issue 39), and the desecration of a holy site (issue 15). These actions are usually represented as existing in a grey area, where the reality of war complicates simple ethical distinctions. Nonetheless, the JSDF's lapses from its self-image as a protective and pacifistic institution demonstrate the impossibility of maintaining this self-image in the context of a real (if fictional) war.

I have argued that Itami is the ideal-typical JSDF soldier motivated not by a profound love of country but rather by a need to preserve his own lifestyle and protect his friends. Itami's contradictory nature is also more broadly representative of the JSDF. In some scenes he is presented as a slacker, he unashamedly admits to cowardice, and says that he only joined the JSDF to fund his hobbies. In other scenes, though, he shows great bravery and strategic knowledge in well organized and executed military operations. Some characters call him a tax thief—an insult often used in relation to the JSDF—while others celebrate him as a great hero. In this, Itami personifies the ambivalent public image of the JSDF in Japanese society—both a high-powered military force and a joke; both an unnecessary tax burden and an indispensable aid in times of natural disasters.

Itami's ambivalent character, then, makes him a perfect representation of the ideal-typical JSDF soldier. But Itami's ambivalent relationship to violence and war also presents the manga with a significant challenge in terms of character coherence. Itami's frequent shift from otaku slacker to disciplined soldier remains a puzzle to the reader, and the manga deals with this not by explaining these shifts but by making them a source of puzzlement to the characters too, often for humorous effect. Itami's subordinate, Kurabayashi, is often perplexed in attempting to reconcile the slacker she knows with his achievements as a military serviceman (issues 13, 21). The manga includes a running joke where Itami's superiors discuss how such a slacker could possibly have passed the toughest training regime in the JSDF to become part of the elite S-class (issue 17).

Itami's contradictions do not make sense, even to the other characters in the manga, because the manga is trying to do the impossible—to depict the ideal-typical JSDF soldier fully participating in a shooting war. Itami is a contradiction because the

JSDF soldier is a contradiction. Itami in fact leads the illegal invasion into neutral territory (issue 39). He also orders one of the acts of torture (issue 35). But Itami remains strangely innocent in his characterisation. He leads the invasion not in order to exploit the region but in order to save his friend. The fact that his actions open up the region for Japanese exploitation is incidental. He sanctions torture not for the national interests but to find the whereabouts of a single hostage. Again, he is motivated by personal concern for the wellbeing of another human being rather than the national interest.

Itami's actions here are best described as naïve; a term also used to describe pop nationalism more broadly. Itami's pop nationalism, however, is naïve not in the sense that it is harmless or innocuous, but in the sense that it is easily exploitable. Throughout the manga we see the naivety of Itami's nationalism put into the service of a military expansionism, exploitation and conquest in which he does not believe.

When Itami invades territory, he does so not to further a national agenda but because he thinks doing so will help his friend. Yanagida—the representative of an official version of nationalism—plays on Itami's personal affections and his sense of responsibility to his friends to manipulate him into action (issue 37). This illegal invasion points to the dangers of Itami's form of naïve nationalism. Itami's openness makes him an easily manipulable character to further official military agendas—agendas that are often aggressively expansionist. His ability to move from a casual form of nationalism based on his consumption of popular culture to the hot nationalism of a Japanese warrior demonstrates what Iide (2003) describes as the danger of pop nationalism—that it empties national feeling from any considered political position and allows for an unthinking form of national obedience.

Conclusion

Gate is part of a nationalism in Japan that ‘consum[es] the “nation” as a depoliticized icon’ (Sakamoto 2008), explicitly locating this form of nationalism in relation to the JSDF’s depoliticization of national service. But it also, in the incoherences in its narrative, demonstrates the impossibility of fully depoliticizing the nation, particularly in the context of the military. The manga, then, brings together two aspects of contemporary Japanese national identity—its formation as a naïve identity through popular culture and its deployment in an official military context. For Iida (2003) the danger of popular nationalism is that it decouples images of nation from politics, thus creating an ‘apolitical cultural space’. However, texts like Gate, by laying bare the decoupling of nation and politics and demonstrating, if in a highly fantastical and stylized way, the incoherences of this decoupling, serve to illuminate the implications of this move.

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