National Heroes and the Struggle for Masculinization in Meiji Japan

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Stories in newspapers about the deeds of military officers fighting in the Russo-Japanese War as well as historical biographies about men who defined the course of Japanese history through political action fostered the rise of adventure (bōken shōsetsu) and hero novels (eiyū shōsetsu) as popular genres of adolescent literature in the late Meiji period. The adventure and hero novels of authors Oshikawa Shunrō (1876-1914) and Uka Senshi (1857-1930) promoted hero myths that structured gender identity in Meiji Japan by providing masculine models for emulation and identification. Adventure novels resonated with young boys since their narratives enacted the symbolic struggles of adolescence. In these texts, Japanese hero narratives often function as cautionary tales against the lures of romantic love and the loss of male autonomy resulting from dependence on the maternal. Consequently, juvenile fiction, particularly the adventure and hero novels of the late Meiji period are important sources for understanding gender attitudes in prewar Japan.

This paper will examine hero myths in late Meiji period juvenile fiction through a close textual analysis of adventure and hero novels. This analysis reveals that the promotion of heroism in juvenile fiction contributed to a misogynist view of women, rooted in the fear of a regressive return to a state of maternal nurturing and dependence, since femininity was perceived as inimical to the nation. In the conflation of the hero with the nation in the search for a transitional object in adolescent development, women and femininity become rejected through the process of object-splitting in the ideological construction of hyper-masculine heroes.