



## Male Homosexuality and Popular Culture in Modern Japan

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### Introduction

1. There has recently been much discussion in the field of lesbian and gay studies about Dennis Altman's theory of 'global queering'[1] which outlines the influence of the Civil Rights' Movement in the US and Europe on the development of lesbian and gay 'identities' which then, through the 'globalising' influence of post-industrial wage-based economies, consumerism, the mass media and tourism, in turn begin to affect indigenous understandings of homosexuality in societies where traditionally there has been no notion of a personal identity founded on the gender of sexual object choice. In this theory, the US is often assumed to be somehow in advance of the rest of the world and the models pioneered in that country for increasing the social space accorded to lesbian and gay lives are generalised as suitable models for lesbians and gay men in other countries to adopt.
2. Japan, as the world's only fully 'modernised' non-western culture, is an important testing ground for Altman's theory. To what extent have indigenous Japanese understandings of same-sex desire, fashioned in a religious and political climate quite different from that in western countries, been influenced by western models of lesbian and gay identity? Until recently, it was impossible to answer this question for, even five years ago, there was practically no information available in English about homosexuality in modern Japan and there was only one book and a handful of academic papers concerning Japan's well-attested historical tradition of male homosexuality.[2] Today, there are a number of books which deal with the historical background of male homosexuality in Japan in considerable detail and others which look at homosexuality in modern Japan from biographical, cultural, literary or anthropological perspectives.[3] There is now sufficient information available about male homosexuality[4] in contemporary Japan to begin to make interesting contrasts with understandings of homosexuality in western societies.
3. Unfortunately, despite the new information that has recently been made available, some researchers still insist on viewing 'homosexuality' in Japanese society through western eyes and evaluating the situation facing lesbians and gay men in accordance with western models of what it means to be 'a lesbian' or 'a gay.' An obvious example of this approach is the collection of interviews with Japanese lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual individuals collected by Barbara Summerhawk et al. and published in 1998 as *Queer Japan*. [5] Summerhawk complains of the 'difficulties' Japanese gay men have in 'the identity-development process' (emphasis mine) as if there ever could be a singular, universal 'gay identity' and suggests that Japanese gay men who do not wish to express themselves in

terms of this imported terminology are in 'denial of their own oppression.'<sup>[6]</sup> I have taken issue elsewhere<sup>[7]</sup> with the extremely bleak impression that Barbara Summerhawk gives of lesbian and gay life in Japan in the introduction to her volume. What I wish to do in the present paper is stress how representations of (primarily male) homosexual love and even sex permeate Japanese popular culture to an extent that would be unimaginable in the US or Europe and that 'homosexuality' in Japan is therefore very differently conceptualised.

8. However, I must point out that the visibility of 'homosexuality' in Japanese media such as comic books, women's magazines, TV dramas and talk-shows, movies and popular fiction has not created the space for individuals expressing lesbian or gay 'identities' to come out in actual life. Yet, as recent research has shown,<sup>[8]</sup> the notion of 'coming out' is seen as undesirable by many Japanese gay men and lesbians as it necessarily involves adopting a confrontational stance against mainstream lifestyles and values, which many still wish to endorse.
9. Just as the starting point for discussion of what 'homosexuality is' in the Japanese context will be different from that in America or Europe, the end point can also be expected to differ. Altman anticipates this when he comments that although 'new identities may develop' when non-western societies interact with western cultures, he is quick to point out that 'their development is not predictable through western models.'<sup>[9]</sup> This paper attempts to outline what 'homosexuality' is made to mean in a variety of Japanese popular media and thereby account for the relative lack of 'identity politics' expressed by gay people in Japan.

### Japanese terms describing 'homosexuality'

10. Discussion of 'homosexuality' is common in a wide variety of Japanese media. However, it is almost impossible to give clear content to any of the terms which are currently in use because they tend to mix up same-sex desire with cross-dressing and transgenderism for both men and women. Although Japan has had a wide range of vocabulary for describing the partners involved in male homosexual interactions, some of which date back hundreds of years, there has been a marked change in the nature of these terms in the modern period. During the Tokugawa period (1600-1867), the *nanshoku* (sometimes transcribed as *danshoku* and meaning 'male eroticism') code contained a wide variety of terms for describing the partners involved in homosexual acts depending upon such factors as age (their junior or senior role), status, gender identity, and the context in which the acts took place. These terms described sexual styles or sexual roles that individuals adopted and not some inner identity or essence based on a preference for a same-sex sexual partner. It was assumed that men who found women attractive could also be attracted by a *wakashuu*, literally 'young boy,' or by a female-impersonator (*onnagata* or 'woman-shape'). Significantly, the term *onnagirai* ['woman-hater'] which was used to describe those men who preferred not to be sexually involved with women, suggests that it was not their preference for boys that was considered unusual but their antipathy towards women. However, during Japan's rapid modernisation in the Meiji period (1867-1912), this understanding of homosexuality as one 'Way' [*doo*] of enjoying sex began to be displaced by western sexualological terms such as *dooseiaisha* (the Chinese-character translation of 'homosexual,' literally 'same-sex-love person') which suggested that homosexual desire was characteristic of a certain type of person: the homosexual. However, the dissemination of this idea throughout society was extremely uneven and, as will be described later, the expression of same-sex desire today does not necessarily mean that a person will be nominalised as 'a homosexual' in terms of that desire. The traditional understanding of homosexuality as a particular style or 'Way' of enjoying sex is still faintly discernible in certain media texts which speak of homosexuality as a 'hobby' [*shumi*] or a kind of 'play' [*asobi* / *purei*].

12. The novelist Mishima Yukio,<sup>[10]</sup> writing a novel about homosexual love just after the war, produced a neologism: *danshoku-ka* [i.e. *danshoku-ist*] to denote male homosexuals, although he does also refer to the usage of the word 'gay' among the occupation forces in a chapter entitled 'Gay Party.' However, at this time, 'gay' existed as a loan word in Japanese only as part of the term *geiboi* ['gay boy'] which signified a cross-dressing male hustler. The term *geiboi* is used in this sense in Matsumoto Toshio's 1968 film *Funeral Parade of Roses* [*Bara no sooretsu*]. This film, starring the famous Japanese transvestite actor Peter, is shot in documentary style and gives an interesting account of Tokyo's late-60s underground gay scene where 'normal' adult men maintained relationships with younger transgendered men who worked in Japan's *mizu shoobai* ['water trade' or entertainment business].
13. Today, homosexuality in Japan is largely conflated with cross-dressing and transgenderism due to the prominence of cross-dressed individuals featured in the media and the entertainment world. Thus, homosexual men are understood to be *okama* (literally a 'pot' but meaning something similar to the English word 'queen') and are usually represented as cross-dressed and effeminate. The use of the term *okama* derives from the slang usage of the term to refer to the buttocks and thereby to anal sex which is considered to be the definitive sexual act engaged in by homosexual men. However, use of this term is extremely loose and it can be used to describe a man who displays any transgender attribute. For instance, an article in the current-affairs magazine *AERA* (1 March 1999) on men who adopt female names and personae in order to participate in women-only Internet chat lines, describes such men as *netto okama* [Net *okama*], although here there is no relation between the adoption of a female name and same-sex attraction. *Okama* are regularly featured on TV comedy shows in Japan and can also be found in Japan's *mizu shoobai* where they serve as entertainers in *okama* bars serving a straight (and predominantly male) clientele.



Figure 1: *Okama* and *nyuuhaafu* 'hostesses' celebrate New Year with a traditional phallic symbol in a Tokyo *okama* bar.

14. Japanese homosexual women are sometimes described using another 'pot' metaphor, *onabe* [meaning 'pan'] a parallel term to *okama* which only has meaning in relation to it. However, this term is less well known than the English loan word *rezu* [from lesbian]. *Onabe*

are represented as the opposite of *okama*, being masculine in both dress and demeanour. Yet this term, too, is difficult to pin down. For instance, an article in the magazine *Da buinchi* (Da Vinci; March 1999), describes the relationship between a *nyuahaafu* ['new half': male-to-female transsexual] and an *onabe*. But it is not possible to translate *onabe* as 'lesbian' in this context, for, as the person identified as an *onabe* explains, s/he clearly understands him/herself to be a man, albeit without a penis. One further term connected with the 'pot' metaphor is the word *okoge* which is literally the burnt rice which sticks to the bottom of the pot and is a term for 'fag hag' (straight women who like to hang around gay men) but this is not generally understood, despite the popular 1992 movie of that name (which I discuss later in the paper).

15. The idea that same-sex attraction necessarily involves some kind of transgenderism or desire to be like or even become the opposite of one's biological sex is constantly reinforced by Japanese media which discuss homosexuality and transgenderism in the same context. For example, in the same edition of the popular magazine *Da buinchi* (March 1999) discussed above, there is an article on cross-dressing boy bands entitled 'Do you like men who are too beautiful?' The lead article includes interviews with some of the cross-dressed performers and goes into the history of cross-dressing in the Japanese music and theatre industry. Given the number of *katakana* (an indigenous alphabet for transcribing foreign words) terms introduced in these articles, the writers provide a glossary entitled 'Words to help you understand individuals who have gone beyond their sex [*sei wo koeta hito bito*].' The first word defined is *gei* [gay] which is glossed as 'male homosexual' [*dansei dooseiaisha*]; other words describing male homosexuals such as *homo* and *okama* are described as 'offensive.' Also defined are *lezubian* ['female homosexual'], *nonke* (a gay slang term for 'straight,' meaning literally 'no feeling,') is defined as 'heterosexual' [*iseiaisha*], *toransusekusharu* ('transsexual,' or persons who want to change their biological sex through an operation), *toransujendaa* ('transgender,' or persons who express themselves through the gender opposite to their biological sex but do not want an operation), *toransubuesutaito* ('transvestite,' or persons who want to dress as the opposite sex because of a 'fetish'), and *nyuahaafu* (male-to-female transsexuals or male-to-female transgendered individuals who have 'come out' [*kamu auto*] and work in the sex industry [*fuuzoku*]). In this list it is not at all clear how gay men and lesbians want to 'go beyond' their sex or what, if anything, they have to do with transgendered individuals. The boys who cross-dress professionally as part of their stage act [described as *imeeji kei*, or 'image group'] state that their cross-dressing has nothing to do with same-sex desire and the couple described as an *onabe* and a *nyuahaafu* are not 'homosexual' but transsexual. It is therefore not clear why the subject of homosexuality should come up at all in this context.



Figure 2: IZAM<sup>[11]</sup> of the band SHAZNA is Japan's most famous cross-dressing boy-band member. Although physically he can pass as a woman, his gender performance is masculine and his sexual orientation is presented as heterosexual.

16. Thus, Japanese gay men who want to come out about their sexual preference are faced with a problem when it comes to choosing a term to describe themselves, as most of the terms currently available tend to conflate homosexual attraction with cross-dressing and transgenderism. This problem is clearly expressed in the following extract from a campus broadsheet produced and distributed by a gay male student in 1994:

Before I wrote my first article, the first thing I had to think about was what on earth should I call myself?...The people who read my first message probably realise that I am gay - that's English, isn't it? But there isn't a word in Japanese. For example, *dooseiaisha* is a medical word and it has a discriminatory nuance, isn't it rather like a sick person? Then there's the word *homo* but that's English too and it's used on the television to make fun of people. I really wanted to use the word *gei* in *katakana*. But, are you listening? Regarding *gei*, you think of gay boys [*geibo*] and gay bars, don't you get the image of a man who crossdresses?<sup>[12]</sup>

17. It is obvious that Japanese has a wide variety of terms relating to what British sociologist James Valentine refers to as 'queer sexualities,' some indigenous and others borrowed from English. However, as Valentine comments, 'The multitude of designations in Japan for queer sexualities may sound as if there are subtle discriminations being made between different types of sexual orientation. Yet the assorted categories tend to be interchangeable.'<sup>[13]</sup>
18. In the remainder of the paper, I shall look at various representations of 'homosexual' men in a variety of Japanese media and show how the pervasive media association of same-sex desire with transgenderism works against the development of a personal identity based upon sexual-object choice for those gay men who express 'normal' gender identities. The case of popular culture aimed at women is particularly interesting in this respect.

### Male homosexuality in Japanese women's media

19. Japanese women's interest in male homosexual love stories is not a recent phenomenon but can be traced to developments in women's comics (*manga*) in the early 70s. The manga industry in Japan is immense, 470 million copies of various manga being published every year<sup>[14]</sup> which appeal to different demographic groups: school boys, university students, businessmen, female office workers and housewives. In manga directed at 'young women' (so-called *shojo manga*) love between 'beautiful boys' [*bishoonen*] has been a recurrent theme. Although these stories are told using the 'comic' format, referring to them as 'comics' fails to communicate their artistic quality or the depth of feeling they can arouse in their readers. Midori Matsui<sup>[15]</sup> quite rightly refers to the early boy-love manga (which run into many volumes) as 'Bildungsroman' and these texts should be taken seriously as major products of Japanese women's culture. From the very beginning these manga depicted 'bed scenes' [*beddo shiinu*] where homosexual sex was implied and the late 70s saw women writers become increasingly audacious in their representation, not simply of homoerotic attraction, but of homosexual sex. As Sandra Buckley points out 'for a period in the 1970s the comics-for-girls were a major testing ground for the censorship laws' and the sex they depicted was not heterosexual but homosexual.<sup>[16]</sup>
20. Although the boy-love genre in girls' comics has undergone a number of transformations, it is still very much alive today. Young women have, since the mid-80s, become increasingly involved in manga production themselves. In the 80s, huge *komiketto* [comic markets] held all over Japan became venues for young amateur artists to distribute their work. From 1990-1992 when such markets were at their peak of popularity up to a quarter of a million people would attend each one and, of these, seventy-five per cent were young women.<sup>[17]</sup> Although in 1993 women's manga represented only 8.8 per cent of all commercially published manga, the actual number of titles published is still very large because of the sheer volume of Japan's manga industry. Furthermore, the number of amateur women manga artists vastly outnumbered that of men.<sup>[18]</sup> These amateur women artists pioneered a new genre of manga which came to be termed YAOI. This is an acronym formed from the first letters of the Japanese words *Y*Ama *n*ashi [no climax], *O*chi *n*ashi [no point] and *I*mi *n*ashi [no meaning] and refers to those boy-love stories in which there is less romantic plot development and more emphasis placed on the sex scenes between the male characters. This parallels the PWP (Plot, What Plot?) genre of 'slash' fiction developed by amateur American women writers which imagines sexual scenarios taking place between the male heroes of popular TV dramas.<sup>[19]</sup> However, unlike slash which is an amateur genre distributed privately by fans through self-produced 'zines' or on the Internet, YAOI comics are also commercially produced and on sale in bookstores throughout Japan where they are sold without restriction to their target audience of young women (from their mid-teens onward). The number of commercially produced YAOI manga is, however, small in relation to the vast number of privately circulated YAOI comics which are disseminated both in printed form and, increasingly, on the Internet.<sup>[20]</sup>
21. However, I would describe the romantic and sexual relationships in these stories as 'homosexual' deploying the inverted commas to show that what is being described here is a very specific construction or, better, 'fantasy' of what male homosexual love means. Not only are the male characters not supposed to represent 'gay men,' they do not really represent 'men' either, in that they are referred to as *bishoonen* or 'beautiful boys/youths.' They are drawn in such a way as to suggest an androgynous ideal: they have tall, slender bodies, high cheek bones and pointed chins, wide eyes and long flowing hair. Also, they behave in a rather 'feminine' manner, expressing the emotionality and vulnerability often associated with female characters in more mainstream fiction.



Figures 3 and 4: Beautiful boys make out in a popular women's YAOI manga.  
From the comic book *B-boy*, courtesy of Biburosu Publications, Tokyo.

22. Various commentators have, then, argued that the *bishoonen* are not really 'men' but fantastic, androgynous creatures created by Japanese women as an expression of dissatisfaction with current gender stereotypes and the 'narrow life paths' which restrict women in the real world.<sup>[21]</sup>
23. Gay men tend not to identify with the beautiful youths in women's manga and feel that these figures are figments of women's imaginations. One gay man interviewed in Yajima Masami's collection of gay life stories says that these images had a negative effect upon him when he encountered them in high-school. He got the impression from women's comics that 'being gay meant being a smart and beautiful member of the elite' and that homosexuals 'must be cute and pretty.' As he was neither cute nor beautiful, he worried 'what will become of me?'<sup>[22]</sup> Another of Yajima's informants says that he was familiar with homosexuality from childhood and that although he considered it 'taken-for-granted' [*atarimae*] because of its widespread representation in women's comics, the plot lines suggested to him that it was 'an unforgivable but beautiful relationship.'<sup>[23]</sup> The highly idealised 'homosexual' characters and fanciful plots in women's comics therefore do little to foster a sense of recognition or identity in gay male readers.
24. Yet, despite the rather 'fantastic' representation of homosexually-inclined beautiful youths which commonly occur in women's manga, these representations do seem to have affected the way some Japanese women regard actual gay men. Starting with a series of articles in the women's magazine *CREA* in February 1991, entitled 'Gay Renaissance,' Japanese women's media began to interest themselves in Japan's gay subculture which resulted in what has since been termed Japan's 'gay boom.'<sup>[24]</sup> One article in *CREA* under the headline of 'Women who plan on spending a pleasurable life with gays' explains that women's interest in developing not just friendships with gay men, but cohabiting relationships, results from the negative image they have of traditional masculinity and masculine roles. In this article, and others like it, it is assumed that gay men are radically different from their straight counterparts and can even be 'best partners' [*besuto paatonaa*] for women. Mainstream magazines such as the tabloid-style *SPA* (18 March 1998) have also picked up on this trend and begun to run articles on the 'boom' in 'friendship marriages'

[*yuujuo kekkon*) which are supposed to be increasing between straight women and 'gays' [*gei*]. The women interviewed in the *SPA* article, entitled 'Women who choose gays and gays who choose women,' mention a number of attractive features supposedly possessed by gay men which their straight counterparts lack. These include their willingness to negotiate roles within the marriage and to help with housework. The writer mentions that it is a cause for concern that straight men are assumed not to have these qualities, but the assumption that these qualities are characteristic of gay men goes unchallenged.

25. The fantasy of the gay man as a woman's 'best partner' is most clearly developed in two 'gay boom' movies directed at a female audience which focus on the relationships between straight women and gay men. In *Okoge*[25] the heroine Sayoko, who is an independent-minded career woman, finds herself attracted to gay men as she associates straight men with the sexual abuse she received at the hands of her step-father. When she attempts to match-make on behalf of a gay friend she ends up being raped by a 'gay' man (who turns out to be straight). She becomes pregnant as a consequence and although she tries to make a life with the baby's father, he continues to abuse her. Eventually she leaves him to set up home with her gay friend with whom she has been in love all along. *Twinkle*[26] is another movie featuring a relationship between a gay man and a straight woman. In this movie, the couple agree to a 'camouflage marriage' [*kamofuraaji kekkon*] to escape the intense pressure from family and colleagues to get married. After a series of emotional traumas arising when the husband is 'outed' to his in-laws, it becomes clear that they have actually fallen in love and they decide to continue as a married couple, albeit making space in their relationship to accommodate the husband's boyfriend. In both the above relationships gay men are shown to be offering women the kind of love, appreciation and respect denied to them by straight men. However, there is no suggestion that the gay men have been converted to heterosexuality, for in these narratives it is heterosexual men and the sexist 'system' which produces them that is irretrievably 'other' to the female heroines.
26. In popular culture aimed at women in Japan, it seems difficult to represent heterosexual sex positively as women are always disadvantaged by Japan's patriarchal value system. Feminist Ueno Chizuko makes this explicit when she argues that 'neither men nor women are sleeping with the opposite sex, they are sleeping with a system'[27] and despite the personal dynamics which operate in individual relationships, 'the system' always works to disadvantage women. Hence, when women themselves create fantasies about sex, it is frequently homosexual sex which is depicted. As one Japanese woman confided to lesbian author and activist Sarah Schulman, 'Images of male homosexuality are the only picture we have of men loving someone else as an equal. It is the kind of love we want to have.' [28]
27. Above, I have outlined how representations of male homosexual love are common in women's manga and have been so since the 1970s. The very idealised representations of 'beautiful youths' common in these stories seems to have generated the idea in many women's minds that contemporary 'gay' men resemble these figures. In fact, in a recent book written by Nomura Sachiyo, one of Japan's top female TV personalities entitled *Can You Judge Men? Here are 17 Checkpoints*, she draws a picture of the homosexual man which seems to come straight out of women's manga. For instance, she says that homosexuals are always neat, their clothes are fashionable and clean and they smell nice. Their apartments, like their personal appearances, are meticulous and contain tell-tale signs of homosexuality such as lace curtains, rose-patterned wallpaper, rococo-style furniture and chandeliers. She concludes that 'homosexuals are, as you would expect, somehow lady-like.' [29] Women's media in Japan constantly reiterate the idea that gay men are substantially different from straight men and that they more closely resemble women both in their appearance and in their sensibilities. The *CREA* (February 1991) article mentioned above stresses that friendships with gay men involve an intimacy that is impossible with



straight men, with one woman stating, 'When we snuggle up together, it's not in the least unpleasant, it feels like petting a cat.' This latter comment betrays two important assumptions - the first being that straight men have a difficulty dissociating intimacy from sexuality (snuggling up to a straight man would become 'unpleasant') and that gay men, like pets, enjoy this kind of intimacy. The article further suggests that having to constantly compete with men on unequal terms causes many women in Japan to feel exhausted [*tsukareru*] but that a gay partner can 'relieve this exhaustion.' Hence, unlike the patriarchal 'other' against which women have to battle in order to win social space for female subjectivity, gay men are women's allies, described as nurturing women in much the same way that women are expected to nurture men.

28. However, a look at specifically gay Japanese media suggests that with regard to their attitudes towards sex and their relationships with women, Japanese gay men have much more in common with straight men than they do with women.<sup>[30]</sup> Representations of gay men in women's media, then, tell us little about those men in Japan who primarily experience sexual desire directed towards other men and rather more about Japanese women's problematic relationship with traditional images of masculinity.
29. Women's idealised representations of gay men also tend to be rejected by gay men themselves. After all, gay men are characterised by their love of other men, not women. One man in Yajima's collection of life stories articulates the feelings of many of the gay men to whom I have spoken when he says that 'the "gay boom" is really about Japanese women ... constructing a fantasy which refuses the distortions and bad influences thrust upon them by a patriarchal society.'<sup>[31]</sup> Many of the married gay men interviewed in the *SPA* article mentioned above also seem to be more interested in the institution of 'the family' than they do in their female partners. One man comments that 'the meaning of marriage is to establish a stable family; sex is just an added extra. I want to have a family more than sex.' Another man comments, 'My image of marriage is walking about town with my kids.' In this construction, the wife has been entirely elided.

### Homosexuality in mainstream media

30. If male homosexuality is sympathetically, albeit unrealistically, treated in Japanese women's media, what about more mainstream media directed at society as a whole? Generally when a 'mainstream' audience is anticipated, the homosexual man is still represented in 'feminine' terms although he is received not so much with sympathy as irony or humour. However, such representations are still commonplace. In 1994, the gay-rights group OCCUR, in one week of evening-time television monitoring, recorded fourteen references to homosexuality and/or transgenderism treated as 'something to be laughed at.'<sup>[32]</sup> On television, in particular, the homosexual man is represented as an *okama*. James Valentine says of the *okama* stereotype: 'In media portrayals *okama* look like fakes, trying to be women but noticeably failing.'<sup>[33]</sup> *Okama* are represented as the opposite of 'normal' men (*noomaru*, a loan word from English and *futsuu*, the Japanese equivalent, are the main terms used to describe 'straight' men in Japanese). Japanese television loves to present documentaries and 'wide shows' (live variety programmes) detailing 'surprising' things or events and *okama* are often featured on these shows either as subjects of investigation or as studio guests. However, when they appear they do so only to be laughed at. One recent TV show<sup>[34]</sup> illustrates how discussion of homosexuality is introduced for comic effect. The programme, entitled 'Japanese people, here is something strange I tell you: the statement "homosexuals should be killed" leads to a riot in the studio,' featured a 'debate' between a group of Japanese-speaking foreigners and some Japanese homosexual men and women who were invited to discuss the topic of homosexuality in front of a Japanese audience. Most of the

foreigners were selected from countries in which homosexuality is still illegal, including India, Pakistan, Iran and Ghana, and whose nationals are not normally featured on Japanese TV as Japanese-speaking 'talents.' The audience found the vehemence and animation with which some of the foreign guests derided homosexuals as evil and sick people to be particularly hilarious. This is partly to do with the difficulty Japanese people have in understanding why some foreigners get so upset about homosexuality, but also to do with the spectacle of the Japanese-speaking foreigner. That the 'foreigners' were as much on display as were the 'homosexuals' is evident from the fact that although the Japanese guests had name plates, the foreign guests were identified only by their country of origin. The spectacle of these non-white foreigners (a very small minority group in Japan) using the Japanese language in an extremely animated diatribe against homosexuals generated, among the Japanese audience, not concern but comedy.

31. Print media too often associate the homosexual man with the 'feminine' even when there is little actual evidence for doing so. For instance, an article in the popular tabloid magazine *FOCUS* (1 April 1998) entitled 'The Finance Ministry again! The homo connection of an employee arrested for drugs: his secret after 5 "hobby",' exposed a civil servant for his drug abuse and what it termed his 'homo play.' The writer described the man's obsession with extremely cute things and was at great pains to stress that since the man involved was not married, the cute things on his desk and in his car could not be put down to a wife or daughter. They must therefore be the result of his *shumi*, which is the usual word for 'hobby' but here signifies something more like 'proclivity' or 'taste,' specifically his taste in sexual partners. Given the widespread assumption that same-sex desire signifies transgenderism (or even a desire to be the opposite sex) the writer makes a 'natural' association between homosexual 'play' and an affinity for 'cute things' (here gendered as a female interest). It is significant in this article and many others like it that the homosexual activities of the man involved are described using the terms *asobi*, meaning 'play' as well as the English loan-word *purei*, and the Japanese term *shumi* meaning 'hobby' or 'taste.' In Japan, it is commonly assumed that Japanese men have a variety of sexual peccadilloes and that so long as they indulge in them out of sight and do not let them interfere with family obligations, they are largely tolerated. Indeed, the article mentioned above relates this scandal to another recent affair involving senior members of the Finance Ministry who were caught using their expense accounts in a *nopan shabushabu* (a Japanese steak restaurant in which the waitresses wear 'no panties'). The writer was not so much upset that senior Government officials had been found in such a restaurant but that they were there at the tax-payers' expense.
  
32. As American anthropologist Jennifer Robertson notes<sup>[35]</sup> 'as long as an individual's sexual practices do not interfere with or challenge the legitimacy of the twinned institutions of marriage and household, Japanese society accommodates - and in the case of males, even indulges - a diversity of sexual behaviors.' This tolerance is extended even to homosexual sex, which, although it is not to be spoken about, is easily available in Japan, where there is no legislation relating to sex between men or sex between women.<sup>[36]</sup> Hence, many Japanese gay men resist the western notion of 'gay rights.' For instance, one gay man writes into a Japanese gay Internet BBS 'You can do whatever you want with regard to love and sex so why is it necessary to support "gay lib"?' Another man writes that 'being gay is basically a personal problem so I can't agree with gay-lib thinking.' As Dutch anthropologist Wim Lunsing has argued 'sexuality is not thought of so much in terms of what is right or wrong as it is in Anglo-American contexts, but rather as play, something people may engage in if they wish to do so.' The lack of religious and legal sanctions against non-marital, non-vaginal sexual expression on the part of men, then, means that 'sexuality may not be easy to politicize.'<sup>[37]</sup>

## Conclusion

33. Above, I have suggested that representations of and discussions about male homosexuality are frequent in Japanese popular culture but that their reception differs according to the anticipated audience. Women tend to produce and consume homoerotic stories about *bishoonen* [beautiful youths] whom they fantasize as ideal men. This has led in some women's books, magazines and movies directed at a female audience to a discourse which posits the homosexual man as a sympathetic best friend for women and even a woman's 'best partner.' However, where a male gaze is anticipated, men who transgress to the feminine are treated humorously. 'Homosexuality' is a topic which will always get laughs and therefore asides and references to it are a staple of many Japanese TV documentaries and 'wide shows.'
34. Despite the frequent and widespread references to homosexuality in a variety of Japanese popular media, none of these representations really show actual men or women who experience same-sex desire going about their daily lives much as 'normal' people do. There is hardly any discussion in Japanese media about homosexuality as a specific 'identity' or 'lifestyle choice.' Yet, compared with the US, there is little overt hostility in the media directed towards homosexuals either. One reason why the debate program discussed above was so interesting and amusing to a Japanese audience was the extreme vehemence with which some of the foreign panellists derided homosexuals. Such strength of emotion was seen as 'surprising' from a Japanese cultural position which views 'homosexuality' either as a fantasy romance for women or a staple of TV comedy. As *The World Press Review* states, 'Homosexuality is not the hot social and moral issue in Japan it is in the US or Western Europe.'<sup>[38]</sup> One wonders what Evangelist Jerry Falwell, who derided the *Teletubbies*' character Tinky Winky as a gay role model,<sup>[39]</sup> would think about Japanese girls lining up to buy homosexual soft porn because it depicts romantic relationships that are 'more pure' than those between men and women!
35. Japan is certainly no paradise for men or women who experience exclusive same-sex sexual attraction, and it is true that there is little space at present in Japanese society for developing a lesbian or gay 'identity' or living a lifestyle centered around one's same-sex desires as is possible for certain individuals in most major cities of the western world (but hardly so outside them). However, to claim, as Barbara Summerhawk does in her introduction to her collection of Japanese lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual people's lives that 'a majority of Japanese gay men live in contradiction, a constant struggle with their inner self, even to the point of cutting off emotions and a denial of their own oppression'<sup>[40]</sup> is clearly mistaken. Not only has Summerhawk not spoken to 'a majority' of Japanese gay men but her diagnosis of their mental states rests upon an unexamined confidence that the experience of same-sex desire *means* the desire to *be* 'a lesbian' or 'a gay' in the late-twentieth-century Anglo-American sense of these terms. Such an assumption is undermined even by some of her own interviewees. Indeed, one gay man commented that 'Japan has a very different history when it comes to discrimination ... I have never had to face termination of employment because I was gay ... I have never come across someone thrown in prison because he was gay ... there is no religious concept of homosexuality as a vice, drawing out a sense of self-contempt ... for me in Tokyo, subscribing to [the concept of 'gay rights'] is like carrying around someone else's baggage.'<sup>[41]</sup>
36. The fact that in Japan 'homosexuality' is not constructed as the anti-social, anti-Christian, anti-family, absolute signifier of the 'other' that it has become to conservative groups in the US, suggests that the gradual acceptance of lesbian and gay lives in Japan may be achieved without the animosity, the fighting and the panic that such (limited) acceptance has

so far occasioned there. As Wim Lunsing, who has worked extensively with gay and lesbian groups in Japan, points out, 'In Japan, when push comes to shove, not many people can say what is wrong with homosexuality,' and he consequently thinks that the future holds 'much promise.'<sup>[42]</sup>

37. Just what the future does hold for gay men and lesbians in Japan is difficult to predict. We need more research on what Peter Jackson has called the 'micro-histories'<sup>[43]</sup> of sexual identity formation with regard to Japan's recent past as well as more extensive interview data from men and women in contemporary Japan who experience and express same-sex desire. It is to be hoped that more resources will be directed at this study soon, for the recent history of homosexuality in Japan is of great interest for lesbian and gay studies. The rapid transformations which have taken place in Japanese society over the last century have shown that it is possible to 'modernise' without having to 'westernise' and that it is therefore problematic when we try to understand Japanese culture through terms which have a very specific history within our own.

## Endnotes

[1] See Altman's article 'On Global Queering' and the responses to it in *Australian Humanities Review*, July (1996).

[2] The book is: Tsuneo Watanabe and Jun'ichi Iwata, *The Love of the Samurai: A Thousand years of Japanese Homosexuality*, London: GMP, 1989; the papers include Margaret Childs, 'Chigo Monogatari: Love Stories or Buddhist Sermons,' in *Monumenta Nipponica*, 35:2, (1980), pp. 127-151; Christine Guth, 'The Divine Boy in Japanese Art,' in *Monumenta Nipponica*, 42:1, (1987), pp. 1-23; and Paul Schalow, 'Kukai and the Tradition of Male Love in Japanese Buddhism,' in *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender*, ed. Jose Cabezon, New York: State University of New York Press, 1992.

[3] For instance, John Treat, *Great Mirrors Shattered: Homosexuality, Orientalism and Japan*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999; Stephen Miller, *Partings at Dawn: An Anthology of Japanese Gay Literature*, San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1996; Wim Lunsing, *Beyond Common Sense: Negotiating Constructions of Sexuality and Gender in Contemporary Japan*, London: Kegan Paul International, 1999a; Gary Leupp, *Male Colors: The Construction of Homosexuality in Tokugawa Japan*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

[4] Female homosexuality in Japan has so far received far less academic attention. However, the following book by American anthropologist Jennifer Robertson contains some discussion of lesbianism: *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

[5] Barbara Summerhawk et al., *Queer Japan: Personal Stories of Japanese Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transsexuals*, Norwich: New Victoria Press, 1998.

[6] Summerhawk et al. *Queer Japan*, p. 11.

[7] Mark McLelland, 'Essay Review of *Queer Japan*,' in *Sexualities*, vol. 3, no. 1, (Spring 2000): 150-53.

[8]. Mark McLelland, (in press) *Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan: Cultural Myths and Social Realities*, Richmond: Curzon Press; and Wim Lunsing, *Beyond Common Sense*, 1999a.

[9] Dennis Altman, 'Rupture or Continuity? The Internationalization of Gay Identities,' in *Social Text* 48, vol. 14, no. 3, (Fall 1996): 77-94.

[10] Mishima Yukio, *Zenshuu* (complete works), vol. 5, *Kinjiki* (translated into English as *Forbidden Colors*), Tokyo: Shinchoosha, 1973.

[11] For further analysis of the 'Izam' phenomenon see Todd Holden's paper, "'I'm Your Venus'/'You're a Rake': Gender and the Grand Narrative in Japanese Television Advertising,' in this issue of *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, issue 3, (January 2000), part 4, paragraphs 13-16 and Figures 66, 67a, 67b and 67c.

[12] I am grateful to George Ohama for passing this pamphlet on to me.

- [13] James Valentine 'Pots and Pans: Identification of Queer Japanese in Terms of Discrimination,' in *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender and Sexuality*, ed. A. Livia and K. Hall, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 108.
- [14] The *Guardian*, 8 October 1991, p. 12.
- [15] Midori Matsui, 'Little Girls Were Little Boys: Displaced Femininity in the Representation of Homosexuality in Japanese Girls' Comics,' in *Feminism and the Politics of Difference*, ed. Sneja Gunew and Anna Yeatman, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1993, p. 180.
- [16] Sandra Buckley, 'Penguin in Bondage: A Tale of Japanese Comic Books,' in *Technoculture*, ed. Constance Penley and A. Ross, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, p. 173.
- [17] Sharon Kinsella, 'Japanese Subculture in the 1990s: Otaku and the Amateur Manga Movement,' *Journal of Japanese Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2, (1998): 300.
- [18] Kinsella, 'Japanese Subculture in the 1990s,' p. 300.
- [19] See Constance Penley, 'Feminism, Psychoanalysis and the Study of Popular Culture,' in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg et al., New York and London: Routledge, 1992.
- [20] Mark McLelland, 'No Climax, No Point, No Meaning? Japanese Women's "Boy-Love" Sites on the Internet,' paper presented at the workshop Japanese Popular Culture in Hong Kong, Bishop Lei International House, Hong Kong, December 10-12, 1999; see also Mark McLelland, 'The Love Between "Beautiful Boys" in Japanese Women's Comics,' *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, (March 2000).
- [21] This is argued by both Matsui, 'Little Girls Were Little Boys,' and Buckley, 'Penguin in Bondage,' as well as Tomoko Aoyama, 'Male Homosexuality as Treated by Japanese Women Writers,' in *The Japanese Trajectory: Modernization and Beyond*, ed. Gavin McCormack and Y. Sugimoto, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- [22] Yajima Masami, *Dansei dooseiaisha no raifuhisutorii* [Male homosexuals' life histories], Tokyo: Gakubunsha, 1997, p. 307.
- [23] Masami, *Dansei dooseiaisha*, p. 176.
- [24] On Japan's 'gay boom' see Wim Lunsing, "'Gay Boom" in Japan: Changing Views of Homosexuality?' in *Thamyris*, vol. 4, no. 2, (1997): 267-93.
- [25] Murata Takehiro, 1992.
- [26] Matsuoka George, released in Japan as *Kira kira hikaru*, 1992.
- [27] Ueno Chizuko, *Sukaato no shita no gekiba* [The theater under the skirt], Tokyo: Kawade Bunko, 1992, p. 140.
- [28] Sarah Schulman, *My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life During the Reagan and Bush Years*, London: Cassell, 1994, p. 245.
- [29] Nomura Sachiyo, *Anata otoko no kantei dekimasuka? Chekkupointo wa kono 17kasho* [Can you judge men? Here are 17 checkpoints], Tokyo: Kuresutosha, 1995, pp. 135-40.
- [30] Mark McLelland, 'Gay Men as a Woman's Ideal Partners in Japanese Popular Culture: Are Gay Men Really a Girls' Best Friends?' in *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal English Supplement*, vol. 17, (Winter 1999): 1-34.
- [31] Yajima, *Dansei dooseiaisha no raifuhisutorii*, p. 178.
- [32] Ito Satoru, *Dooseiai no kiso chishiki* [Basic information about homosexuality], Tokyo: Ayumi shuppan, 1996, p. 45.
- [33] Valentine, 'Pots and Pans,' p. 103.
- [34] *Koko ga hen da yo nihonjin: 'dooseiaisha wa korosu' hatsugen de sutajjo dai boodoo ni* was broadcast on TBS at 10.00 pm on October 13, 1999. The statement that caused the most commotion was made by an Indian

man who said that 'If my child became a homosexual, I would kill him. Homosexuality is unforgiveable...you can't give birth to babies from your arse hole.' Rather than criticise these opinions, the studio hosts seemed to encourage the guests to be more outrageous. For instance, when a Ghanian man asked a Japanese homosexual man 'Tell me how two guys do it together,' Ito Terii, one of the hosts, replied 'stick out your arse and I'll show you.' The homosexual guests were, however, much more civilised. In reply to the above question, a Japanese lesbian said 'Asking how two guys do it together is on the same level as me asking you how you do it to yourself.'

Gay activist, [Ito Satoru](#), discusses this programme on his homepage and points out that despite the underlying racism and homophobia of the producers who conceived of the programme not as a 'debate' but a 'show,' it still represents an advance for lesbians and gay men in that they were invited to participate and defend themselves. In the end, the Japanese gays came out looking rather better than did any of the foreign panelists, or indeed, the Japanese hosts themselves.

[35] Robertson, *Takarazuka*, p. 145.

[36] Steven Pinkerton and Paul Abramson, 'Japan,' in *Sociolegal Control of Homosexuality: a Multi-Nation Comparison*, ed. Donald West and Richard Green, New York and London: Plenum Press, 1997.

[37] Lunsing, 'Japan: Finding its Way,' in *The Global Emergence of Gay and Lesbian Politics: Nationwide Imprints of a Worldwide Movement*, ed. Barry Adam et al., Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999b, p. 316.

[38] *World Press Review*, vol. 40, issue 9, p. 24.

[39] The allegation appeared in the February 1999 edition of Falwell's magazine *National Liberty Journal* and was picked up by Reuters news service on February 22, 1999.

[40] Summerhawk et al., *Queer Japan*, pp. 10-11.

[41] Summerhawk et al., *Queer Japan*, p. 153.

[42] Lunsing, 'Japan: Finding its Way,' 1999b, p. 316.

[43] Peter Jackson, 'Global Queering in Thailand: Peripheral Genders and the limits of Queer Theory,' paper presented at IASSCS Second International Conference, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK, July 1999.

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