

Why Are Japanese Girls' Comics full of Boys Bonking?

Mark McLelland

Introduction

When I casually mention that the most frequent representations of male homosexuality in Japan (outside the pages of the gay press) appear in manga (comics) written by and for women, I am usually met with an incredulous 'Why?' This always strikes me as odd, for few people react with surprise to the fact that male pornography is full of 'lesbian' sex. If heterosexual men enjoy the idea of two women getting it on, why should heterosexual women not enjoy the idea of two men bonking? In English-speaking societies, many women do just this, and what's more they write about it and illustrate it in 'slash fiction' (Penley 1992; Cicioni 1998). This almost exclusively female genre takes the male leads from popular television dramas and 'slashes' them, making the series' homosocial and at times homoerotic subplots explicitly homosexual. Beginning in the *Star Trek* fandom subculture of the mid 70s where sexually explicit Kirk/Spock (or K/S) stories were first written, the genre has expanded to include almost any TV series where the bond between male characters is sufficiently intense to permit sexual readings. Starsky/Hutch stories were popular for a time in the late 70s, the male members of the cast of British sci-fi series *Blakes 7* were slashed throughout the 80s, and, more recently, *The X-Files*' Mulder has found himself slashed with both his boss Skinner and his nemesis, Krycek. These stores are written, collected, edited and circulated by women fans in print-version *zines* and, increasingly, on the Internet. (For an introduction to slash fandom on the Net click [here](#)).

In Japan, however, a cultural preference for 'home dramas' has meant that there have been few long-running TV programmes with male leads that are sufficiently charismatic to be slashed. Science fiction, a particularly fertile ground for western women slash fans, is not a genre much represented on Japanese television but is, instead, a staple of manga and its animation offshoots. Therefore, in Japan, it has not been TV heroes but popular manga and animation characters who have been slashed by women writers and artists.

Japan's manga industry is immense, accounting for about 38 percent of all published matter (Kinsella 1999: 568), and its creators, known as *manga-ka*, can become as famous as film or pop stars and are treated as such. Likewise, their creations, the manga heroes and heroines, have an adult fan base which would be unthinkable in western countries where comics are seldom regarded as an important product of the culture industry, much less a serious art form. Running parallel to the immensely profitable official manga business is a semi-tolerated world of amateur artists who take the copyrighted characters and produce their own *dojinshi* (fanzines) about them. Japanese copyright laws are more relaxed than those in Europe or America and major publishers realise that the amateur fan publications augment rather than challenge the sales potential of the originals. Also, the amateur market supports a huge pool of talent from which many professional *manga-ka* have emerged. Despite the fact that the manga phenomenon in Japan has received a great deal of academic attention (Schodt 1983, 1996; Buruma 1984; Allison 1996; Kinsella 2000), the women's 'boy-love' genre has been largely overlooked. What analysis does exist has tended to treat the genre as problematic, attempting to explain the sexist features of Japanese society that drive Japanese women to fantasise about homosexual, not heterosexual romance. Underlying these arguments is the assumption that in a non-sexist world women would 'naturally' choose heterosexual fantasy, itself a sexist assumption given the popularity of representations of 'lesbian sex' among heterosexual men.

Homosexuality and Japanese women's culture

Japanese women have long been avid consumers of popular entertainment that would seem to disrupt sexual and gender boundaries while at the same time being committed to normative gender performances in their daily lives. In the early modern period, *onnagata* (female-role players) in the kabuki theatre were popular role models for many townswomen who followed the fashions pioneered by men performing as women on stage (Dalby 1993: 275). Later, in the Taisho period (1912-1927), the *otokoyaku* (male-role performers) in the all-woman Takarazuka revue became national celebrities to their all-female audience (Robertson 1998). Both kabuki and the Takarazuka continue to be popular today and gender play on the Japanese screen and stage is still widespread. Indeed, in the early 90s, Japanese media underwent a 'gay boom' (*geibuumu*) wherein Japan's previously clandestine homosexual subculture was suddenly exposed in a wide range of media, from newspaper and magazine articles to documentaries, TV dramas and movies (McLelland 200a: 32-37). Much of this material was clearly pitched at a female audience, including two of the most popular 'gay boom' movies: *Okoge* ('Fag-hag,' Takehiro Murata 1992) and *Kira Kira Hikaru* ('Twinkle,' Matsuo George, 1992). Both movies star female leads who fall in love with, and eventually marry, gay men (McLelland 1999, 2000a: 98-102). But perhaps the most intriguing and consistent evidence for Japanese women's fascination with transgender/homosexuality occurs in girls' comics (*shojo manga*) featuring stories of 'boy love' (*shoonen'ai*).

Romantic stories about 'male love' (*nanshoku*) have a long tradition in Japan, usually focusing on the attraction between a priest or samurai lover (*nenja*) and his acolyte (*chigo*) or page (*wakashu*) (Watanabe & Iwata 1989; Leupp 1995). However, these early stories were written by men for an anticipated male audience; women manga artists and writers did not begin to feature love stories between 'beautiful boys' (*bishoonen*) until the early 70s. These early romances, aptly described as '*Bildungsroman*' by Midori Matsui (1993) were long, beautifully crafted tales, often set in private boys' schools in the last century. The pioneer in this field was Ikeda Riyoko whose *Rose of Versailles*, first published in 1972, was one of the first manga to replace heterosexual with 'homosexual' love. In this story, the 'hero' is actually a cross-dressed girl who is courted by both men and women alike who believe her to be a boy. Ikeda was not shy about alluding to sex and her work contains a number of 'bed scenes' (*beddo shiin*). These scenes became increasingly explicit in other women's manga throughout the 70s. Surprisingly, it was not male artists writing for a heterosexual male audience who tested the censorship laws on representations of sex but women writers writing for a female audience, and the sex they represented was not heterosexual but homosexual (Buckley 1991: 173).

Homosexuality in 70s women's manga was largely incidental to the plots which concerned the heroes' search for love, acceptance and identity. The doyenne of the manga *Bildungsroman* is undoubtedly Hagio Moto whose homoerotic manga *November Gymnasium* (1971) and *Thomas' Heart* (1972-3), about life in a European public school set at the beginning of the 20th century, remain favourites today. The first volume of Hagio's most recent work *A Cruel God Reigns*, which is about a beautiful adolescent boy who is sexually abused by his evil step-father while being secretly attracted to his beautiful step-brother, was published in 1993. By 1997, the first volume had gone through ten reprints and the entire series stretched to nine volumes.

Boy-love' and amateur manga fandom

Since the early 80s, manga fans of both sexes have been producing their own versions of their favourite manga and distributing them through the huge 'comic markets' (*komiketto*) held regularly all over Japan. The fifty-seventh such meeting was held in Tokyo in 1999 and attracted 300,000 visitors over three days ([komiketto homepage](#)). At *komiketto*, fans and artists, both professional and amateur, meet together, establish 'circles' (*saakuru*) dedicated to specific manga or genres and sell or swap their work. Many fans appear dressed as their favourite manga characters (in Japanese referred to as *kosupure* or 'costume play') and their pictures and profiles are featured on the *komiketto* homepage. These massive gatherings of manga fans are Japan's equivalent to the fantasy and science fiction conventions held in the US and Europe and are major commercial ventures. In 1991 US\$30 million changed hands at *komiketto* (Schodt 1996: 43).

Although the vast majority of manga are written by and for men and boys, most of the fans attending these gatherings are female: at their peak in the early 90s only about 35% of attendees were male (Kinsella 1998: 300). One reason why the gatherings proved so popular with women was that they were taking manga intended for male consumption and rewriting them to embody their own desires and interests. Frequently this involved introducing a homosexual subplot between the main male characters which did not exist in the original versions. One of the first mainstream comics to be 'slashed' in this way was *Captain Tsubasa*, about a school football team.

However, female manga fans do not simply slash mainstream manga, they create homosexual characters of their own. This genre is known as YAOI, an acronym of the Japanese phrase *YAMA nashi, Ochi nashi, Imi nashi*, meaning 'No climax, no point, no meaning,' indicating that these stories are about little more than sex. They clearly parallel the PWP (Plot? What plot?) scenarios created by western slash writers, who put their male characters into bed together on the slenderest of pretexts. These comics, both 'original' (*orijinaru*) and 'parody' (*parodi*) are circulated among female fans at *komiketto*, by mail, and increasingly via the Internet. [Yaoi webring for girls](#), just one of the Internet's many Japanese YAOI sites, had, in May 2000, 727 sites listed. Male fans also produce their own amateur manga and, like women's stories the themes are often sexual, except the characters are not boys but 'beautiful young girls' (*bishoojo*). Schodt (1996: 37) points out that some of these manga 'would be regarded as kiddie porn in North America'.

Western slash fiction has never been taken up commercially, and most women's slash fanzines barely make enough to cover costs. But Japanese publishing companies with an eye for profit have picked up some of the brightest amateur YAOI artists of the early 80s and published their work. One of the earliest 'boy love' monthly magazines was *June* (pronounced ju-neh) first published in 1978. In 1995, *June* was still being published, now in a 300-page bimonthly format, and with a circulation of between 80,000 and 100,000 (Schodt 1996: 120). In contrast, *G-Men*, one of Japan's most popular gay magazines, sells only 20,000 copies per month (McLelland 2000a: 140). *June* has been so successful in pioneering a new style in boy-love stories that the term *June-mono* (June stuff) now refers to boy-love stories in general. Many other boy-love manga followed *June's* lead the most famous of which is the *B-Boy* series published by Biblos. The original *B-Boy* comic, published monthly, has now been joined by the monthly *Gekkan Shoosetsu B-Boy* (Monthly B-Boy Novel) and the bimonthly *B-Boy Gold* ('gold' is sometimes added to the titles of other manga publications and signifies more hard-core content). Biblos also publish the quarterly 'Men's love novel' *Beast*, a massive 'telephone book' full of sexy illustrations, stories and comics about schoolboys and young men getting it on together.

However, the majority of YAOI manga are still produced by amateur women fans either as *dojinshi* (fanzines) or on the Internet. There are now so many amateur YAOI titles, and such is Japanese women's interest in them, that special editions of general manga and animation magazines often bring out 'boy love' specials. For instance, the February 1999 issue of *Pafu*, describing itself as a 'Boy's Love Special', contains synopses and illustrations from a wide variety of boy-love comics organised according to genre. These include 'lovely love', 'requited love', 'secret love', 'naïve love', and 'sexual love'. The edition also includes a question and answer guide to help female fans understand why they are so attracted to the genre. Some reasons suggested include 'you are attracted to a pure kind of love' and 'you wish to wrap yourself in the joy of love'. Similarly, the Internet site [Yaoi a laboratory](#) provides reviews of many amateur manga which are available from *komiketto* and speciality stores, ranked according to their 'sexiness content'. The *laboratory's* site owner also includes a quiz that is designed to evaluate the extent of the reader's addiction to 'boys love'. Questions include: 'Do you idly day-dream about what it would be like if your husband or boyfriend were gay?' and 'When you meet a cute guy do you think about whether he would be a top or a bottom?'

In case some readers are wondering whether these stories written by and for women are of a homoerotic rather than a homosexual bent, it should be remembered that an alternate reading of the acronym YAOI offered on many websites is *YAmete, Oshiri ga Itai!* (Stop, my ass hurts!). Some of the illustrations are more romantic, such as this scene from *Be-Boy* of two highschool boys celebrating graduation with a French kiss.

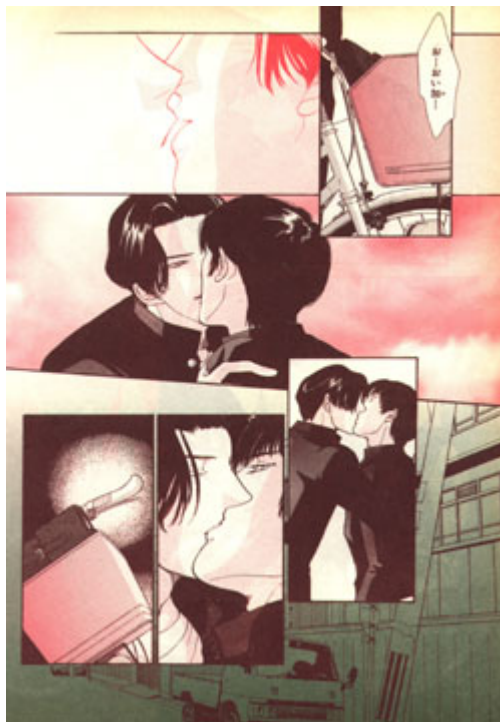


Figure 1. Schoolboys make out in this illustration from the popular women's comic *B-Boy*, 1994 vol. 18. Courtesy of Biburosu Publications.

Other stories are relentlessly sexual. For instance, the manga 'I want to lose myself in a rude kiss,' from the same edition of *Be-Boy* (1994 vol. 18), is about a highschool boy who is seduced by his art teacher. The teacher spills coffee on the boy's trousers as an excuse to get him to take them off, once removed, he proceeds to fellate him. This emphasis on sex is not restricted to the boy-love genre but occurs in other women's manga. For instance, the genre of 'ladies comics' written by and for women that developed in the 1990s troubles the assumption that manga are a male medium where images of women are debased, for, as Schodt points out, 'some of the raciest material [is] in magazines not for men but for women (and drawn by women)' (1996:

126). As Sharon Kinsella has noted: 'pornography has not been as strongly compartmentalised in post-war Japan as it has in post-war America or Britain...Pornographic images have tended to appear throughout the media as well as in specifically pornographic productions' (2000: 46); women's media being no exception.

Far from being removed from public view or placed in shrink-wrapped plastic on the top shelf of specialty book stores, YAOI manga are sold alongside other *shojo manga* or girls' comics in highstreet malls across Japan. Moreover, YAOI-themed stories are not limited to a few specialist publications but can occur in almost any Japanese girls' comic. Famous comic series that occasionally publish YAOI fiction include the biweekly *Margaret* (first published by Shueisha in 1963), *Hana to Yume (Flowers and Dreams)*, first published by Hakusensha in 1975) and *Princess* (first published by Akita Shoten in 1975). All these comics are aimed at an audience of schoolgirls but are often read by adult women as well.

The popularity of 'boy-love' among Japanese, and increasingly, western women has not gone unnoticed in the western gay press. An article in the American gay magazine *The Advocate* (February 4, 1997, p. 66) discusses the 'gay' relationship between Ranmaru and Enjoji portrayed in the Japanese animation *Kizuna* based on a manga by the female artist Kazuma Kodaka. The review is dismissive of the plot, stating that 'never once is their gayness questioned or explained'. The reason is that Ranmaru and Enjoji are not 'gay': they just happen to be two young men who love each other. This is an important point that applies also to slash fiction. These stories about men bonking created by and for women do not 'trivialise gay life' (ibid.) because they are not about 'gay' men. In women's YAOI fiction, homosexual love has been naturalised which is why so many of the stories are situated in futuristic fantasy societies where the political divides over sex and gender issues that polarise contemporary communities are largely redundant.

This does not mean that women writers do not occasionally borrow themes that relate to realities experienced by many gay men. For instance, the first attempt to deal with AIDS in any literary medium in Japan was the manga series *Tomoi*, about a gay Japanese doctor working in New York. This long and ultimately tragic love story appeared in the mid-eighties in the bimonthly women's manga, *Petite Flower* (Schodt 1996:193). A more recent manga, Ragawa Marimo's *New York New York* (1998), sets the story in New York's gay scene and narrates the troubled life of a beautiful male prostitute as he searches for love and acceptance. Scenes of homophobia, gay bashing, depression and attempted suicide are touchingly depicted before the story is brought to its heart-rendingly sentimental conclusion. However, it should be remembered that YAOI is not written by or for gay men and should not be criticised for failing to represent their concerns accurately. YAOI is a fantasy genre for women, and, as male readers of heterosexual pornography often argue, fantasy should be free.

YAOI fandom in English

Not only are YAOI manga popular among Japanese girls and women, but they are beginning to attract a sizeable following among western women too. Enter YAOI in a Yahoo search and links will be discovered to over one-thousand YAOI fan pages in a variety of languages including Spanish, German, Italian and, of course, English. One of the earliest and best web pages introducing this genre to an English-speaking audience is [***Aestheticism***](#). Some Japanese-speaking western women have done a great service to the western YAOI community by scanning and translating some scenes from the most famous YAOI stories, and have provided summaries of many more. In response to demand from non-Japanese readers, *komiketto* and some publishers now have English web pages that allow browsers to order copies of their favourite manga online direct from Japan.

Not content to simply describe the creations of Japanese YAOI artists, many western women fans are creating their own YAOI stories based on mainstream Japanese manga and animation series or creating their own characters in YAOI style and publishing them on the Web. Two of the most popular English YAOI

rings are ***Boys' Heaven***, containing 230 links, and the ***Bishounen Underground Webring***, which has 245. Given the increasing number of foreign fans of the YAOI genre, male homosexual love stories are turning into one of Japan's biggest cultural exports. However, the tone of many English YAOI fan sites is rather different from that of the Japanese originals in that the conflation of 'homosexuality' with young boys is problematic in current Anglo-American sexual regimes. English-speaking YAOI writers and illustrators are constrained to be defensive, putting warnings on their sites and using password protection to restrict access to 'underage' browsers. The *Aestheticism* site, mentioned above, goes so far as to offer a 'Legal FAQ' section where YAOI fans can post questions about censorship and the legality of some of their representations. These concerns about the legality of homosexual representations are generally not paralleled on Japanese boy-love sites since the age of consent for heterosexual intercourse is thirteen and homosexuality is not mentioned in Japan's criminal code (West and Green 1997).

Conclusion: Why boys bonking?

As journalist Richard McGregor states 'in Japan almost anything homosexual can attract an all-female audience' (1996: 229) and this includes not just manga but movies. For instance, lesbian activist Sarah Schulman was astonished to discover in Tokyo in 1992 that a lesbian and gay film festival was being held in a popular shopping mall and that 'the audience was eighty percent straight women' (1994: 245). This makes sense when contemporary male-female relations in Japan are placed in the context of Japanese history where the notion of 'romantic love' was a late arrival, imported along with the European novel at the end of the nineteenth century. In Confucian Japan, women's sexuality has long been tied up with reproduction and the family system and this has made it difficult to represent women romantically involved with men as their partners and equals. As one Japanese fan of 'homosexuality' expressed to Sara Schulman 'images of male homosexuality are the only picture we have of men loving someone as an equal, it's the kind of love we want to have' (1994: 245). Many other reasons for Japanese women's fascination with male homosexuality have been offered (Aoyama 1988; Buckley 1991; Matsui 1993; McLelland 2000b). The usual argument is that these beautiful young men are projections of the largely female audience's own femininity, the idea being that in a society as sexist as Japan, women can only identify with truly autonomous figures in male form. Yet, I remain sceptical of academic analyses which attempt to explain this extensive and complex product of women's culture since they tend to pathologise both the women readers and Japanese culture in general (McLelland, 2000c); such explanations can be reductionist and deny the complexities of both desire and identification.

I would like to conclude by rephrasing the question raised in the title of this article: Why *shouldn't* Japanese women's comics be full of boys bonking? It is worth remembering that 'lesbian play' (*rezupurei*) in the Japanese sex trade refers not to two women performing for the gratification of men but to cross-dressed men acting out their 'lesbian' fantasies with female sex workers (McLelland 2000a: 34). In Japan, as elsewhere, men seem to be granted greater license to experiment with sexuality than do women. Why should men's interest in 'lesbianism' be taken for granted whereas women's interest in male homosexuality somehow be in need of interpretation?

It is important to remember that Japanese popular culture is replete with homosexual images that would be segregated in western societies (see my on-line article [here](#) for a discussion with illustrations). For instance, IZAM, a member of Japan's most popular boy band SHAZNA lives cross-dressed as a woman.

Figure 2: IZAM is the cross-dressed lead singer of Japanese boy band SHAZNA. Cross-dressing is popular among Japanese boy bands and such groups are known as *imeeji-kei* or 'image groups'



'Peter', one of Japan's top TV 'hostesses' is a transvestite; and Maruyama Akihiro, a stunningly beautiful transvestite whose career dates back to the 60s, is still featured in TV commercials aimed at selling top quality make-up, kimono and other luxury goods to rich housewives. Mikawa Ken'ichi, Japan's top male singer of traditional chanson known as *enka*, appears on stage wearing lipstick and bedecked in colourful costumes and jewellery and uses women's language to great comic effect. Not surprisingly, given the popularity of these media stars with women fans, as well as the positive evaluation of homosexual love in other women's media, women's magazines frequently feature articles criticising straight Japanese men and idolising gay men who are considered to be a woman's 'ideal friend and best partner' (McLelland, 1999).

Of course, media representations which take place in the safe space of the entertainment world do not accurately depict the lived realities of 'real' gay men; but they are not supposed to. As one Japanese fan writes on her boy-love home page: '[boy-love] comics are like a Spielberg movie, they are an imaginary playground in which I can flee the realities of everyday life'. This widespread exposure of 'homosexuality' in Japanese popular culture, occurring even in comics aimed at schoolgirls, would be inconceivable in Anglo-American societies and is important evidence for the relativity of sexual values as well as the social 'constructedness' of sexuality. Perhaps a more relevant question to raise would be 'Why are homosexual images so strictly segregated in contemporary western cultures?'

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