

Kamingu Auto: Homosexuality & Popular Culture in Japan

Research >
Japan

Representations of sexual and gender nonconformity have long been apparent in Japanese popular culture, in modern times dating back at least to the Taisho period (1912–1926). Today, the most visible images of male homosexuality (outside the gay press) occur on television and in women's comics that specialize in the homoerotic adventures of *bishonen* or 'beautiful boys'. Beginning in the early 1970s with classics such as Hagio Moto's *The Heart of Thomas* and Takemiya Keiko's *Song of the Wind and the Trees*, the genre has expanded to include a wide range of titles dealing with the love between boys, and to a lesser extent between girls. Readers claim that the forbidden and often tragic love between boys is somehow more 'pure' and more 'equal' than that which exists between men and women, constrained as they are by the reproductive demands of the family system.

By Mark J. McLelland

Television has long been a site supportive of gender and sexuality play. Transvestite 'talents' (*tarento*) such as Peter and Miwa Akihiro have had uninterrupted entertainment careers since the 1960s. They frequently appear on panel shows, and in 2000 Miwa's career was the subject of an appreciative documentary of the Japanese television station NHK. In the early 1980s, male-to-female transgender singer and model Matsubara Rumiko was a big hit, both as a singer and television personality, and through her a new term was introduced into Japanese: 'new-half' (*nyūhāfu*), now used to refer to male-to-female transgendered individuals who work in Japan's sex and entertainment industries. Gender-bending *enka* singer Mikawa Ken'ichi is one of

Japanese television's biggest stars, appearing almost nightly on a variety of different shows. His exotic 'visual effects' performance on behalf of the men's team of the *Red and White Song Contest* at the New Year is the highlight of the show. Although sexually ambiguous female personalities are more difficult to come by on Japanese television, the aggressive self-presentation of hostess and singer Wada Akiko clearly transgresses acceptable modes of female behaviour, as does that of 'Dump' Matsumoto, a former female wrestler. *Otokoyaku*, that is women actors who specialize in the male roles in the all-woman theatre troupe Takarazuka, can also graduate into television careers when they retire from the theatre, usually in their early thirties, and they maintain many of their masculine mannerisms. Indeed, in the recent film version of the classic Heian-period (794–1185) *Tale of Genji*, the role of Prince Genji was played by a former *otokoyaku*.

'Gei puraido' and lifestyle

In the early 1990s, however, Japanese media experienced a 'gay boom' in which television programmes, magazines, newspapers, and movies began to move away from the stereotypical treatment of gay and transgendered people as providers of entertainment and focused instead upon real people and real lives. The widespread interest in gender and sexual nonconformity created by the boom enabled a number of gay and lesbian activists to publish their own 'coming out' narratives and thus *kamingu auto* became a new English loanword often repeated in the media. The early 1990s also saw the birth of the Men's Movement in Japan and the inclusion of masculinity (there was already a tradition of women's studies) as a topic for analysis in some university courses. This led to an increase in more highbrow treatments of gender and sexuality, with special journal editions being dedicated to specifically Japanese forms of sexual diversity.

Gay media, which had tended to be oriented towards erotica, representing homosexuality as a sexual practice as opposed to an 'identity' or a 'lifestyle choice', also began to diversify during this period, albeit slowly. Japan's first lifestyle-oriented gay magazine, *Fabulous*, first published in 1999, was not a success and folded after only four issues. However, *Queer Japan*, also first published in 1999, is a more highbrow, identity-oriented publication that is still going

strong. The Internet is also an important new development which has provided a forum for the discussion of lifestyle and identity issues previously lacking in the gay media, and gay, lesbian, and transgender websites have been instrumental in further dispersing a range of English loanwords such as *gei puraido*, *homophobia*, and *kamingu auto*.

In recent years there has been an increase in both the number and diversity of representations of sexual minorities, predominantly gay men but also including lesbians, and since the legalisation on sex-change operations in 1998, of transsexuals and transgender individuals too. This comes at a time of great stress in Japanese society when fixed notions of family, education, and work practices are under strain in the face of the longest recession in recent history and when the divorce rate is rising and the birth rate is falling. A voluble discourse of complaint is apparent in the media where increased space is being given to individuals whose gender performance hardly supports established roles and to members of sexual minorities. It is increasingly the case that strict insistence on reproductive heterosexuality within the nuclear family as the paradigmatic life path is beginning to weaken. For instance, Japan's Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō is divorced (and remains unmarried). 'Salaryman Kintarō', the hero of one of Japan's most popular soaps (and comic books) is a single father, and gay activists such as Itō Satoru write columns in daily newspapers and magazines about their vision of a Japan free from discrimination on the basis of gender and sexuality.

Despite the fact that many same-sex desiring and transgendered individuals in Japan feel severely constrained by social expectations, as evidenced by the many online problem pages that exist, there is the feeling that the old certainties that made possible Japan's 'economic miracle' are increasingly being brought into question. Neither male nor female homosexuality is illegal in Japan and activists who in other societies have had to wage battles against restrictive legislation and unequal age of consent laws have been able to pursue other causes. The recent inclusion of mention of lesbian and gay people in a Tokyo Metropolitan white paper on human rights suggests that things are moving in Japan, and in a positive direction. ◀

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'Schoolboys make out in the girls'. Taken from the comic B-Boy.