Queerness in Japan: The Bishōnen Revival in Boys' Love Manga

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ABSTRACT
Following the introduction of Western-Christian ideas in the Meiji era (1868-1912) that sought to regulate expressions of gender and sexuality, and the consequent institutionalisation of these ideas in Japanese society, contemporary Japanese queer communities have since faced difficulties. From discrimination to social retaliation, the hostility towards gender identities and sexualities seen as transgressive to heteronormativity have resulted in the hesitation of queer individuals to out themselves or to create a visible community. Instead, they have turned towards other means to privately explore their sexuality and gender and engage with other queer-identifying people. This has been most notable through the manga genre known as BL (boys' love) and its use of the historic bishōnen aesthetic (an androgynous beauty defying a classically Western male-female gender binary). This paper focuses on the revival of the bishōnen aesthetic in manga, examining how BL manga magazines have created an underground queer community, as well as how readers have utilised bishōnen characters as self-inserts to understand their sexualities and genders.

1. Introduction

Despite its well-documented history of male homosexuality, contemporary Japan has remained rather closed off towards identities seen as transgressive to heteronormativity. In no small part, this has been largely due to the Westernisation process in the Meiji era (1868-1912) during which Western-Christian ideas of 'proper' (heteronormative) expressions of gender and sexuality were introduced to the country. While some progress towards acceptance has certainly been made since then, on a whole Japanese society continues to operate under a restrictive framework when it comes to expressions of queerness. For instance, although same-sex activity is not illegal, same-sex marriages remain unrecognised across Japan with the validity of civil unions varying between cities (Human Rights Watch 2016, 16). Furthermore, the Japanese constitution provides no legal recourse for discrimination against one's sexual orientation or gender identity in matters of securing, or retaining, employment, housing, or care access (Human Rights Watch 2016, 16). Social hostility is also quite prevalent. In middle and high school for example, queer-identifying youth often fall victim to *ijime*, an intense form of bullying involving verbal abuse, psychological and physical harassment, and extreme social isolation (Human Rights Watch 2016, 38-44). Because of these factors, contemporary Japanese queer communities have largely remained 'hidden' from the public. However, this is not to say they are absent: rather, their presence has been highly embedded in specific popular cultural movements. In particular, as anime and manga (graphic novels) flourished in the 1970s, so did the underground queer community as anime and manga embraced the *bishōnen* (beautiful youth) aesthetic. A concept rooted in the pre-Western feudal periods, the *bishōnen* figure embodies a specific sort of queer androgynous beauty that has made them popular for consumers and creators alike. As such, this paper will focus on the revival of the historically queer *bishōnen* figure in manga, examining how this revival has facilitated both the creation of a 'hidden' queer community accessible through BL manga magazines, as well as the private exploration of its consumers' sexual and gender identities otherwise seen as transgressive to Japanese heteronormativity.

2. Usage of Terms

Throughout this paper the term *bishōnen* will be used often. Although in its written form [美少年] *bishōnen* means beautiful youth and is not inherently gendered, contemporary anime and manga have used it to describe androgynous

male characters drawn with male genitalia, and, to varying degrees, other 'classically' male features (i.e. a completely flat chest). As such, this paper uses *bishōnen* to describe androgynous presenting characters who are considered biologically male by their creators, as well as the overall aesthetic of androgynous beauty they represent.

Additionally, some clarification is required on the terms of sex and gender. When sex is used in this paper, it is either in reference to the biological attributes, such as the reproductive organs that determine one as 'male' or 'female' at birth, or the act of engaging in intercourse. When gender is used, it is in reference to the socially constructed roles, expressions, and behaviours associated with one's gender and how they identify in relation to these. Furthermore, to be inclusive of gender performances, terms like women-identifying and male-identifying will be used during the discussion of the differences between these two groups' interaction with BL manga.

3. History of the *Bishōnen*

Before addressing how the fictional *bishōnen* has been revived in manga, it is prudent to contextualise their historical role and the shifts that led to their wider cultural erasure. To do so, it is best to turn to the Tokugawa period (1600-1867) as this era gives the best example of what queerness historically looked like and how it was received. For the most part, male homosexuality was viewed as an "elite social practice with a style, etiquette and aesthetic of its own" (McLelland 2000, 20). Primarily practiced between status groups, such as a master with his servant/apprentice or between samurai, it operated similarly to Greek pederasty wherein these relationships consisted of a *chigo* or *wakushū* (a passive younger man) and a *nenja* (a dominant older man) (McLelland 2000, 19-20). This dynamic influenced male relationships to a great extent and was widely viewed as acceptable in society.

The Tokugawa period also saw a fixation on young men who embodied an androgynous beauty that was neither fully masculine nor fully feminine. In particular, these men, who became known as *bishōnen*, were venerated for this androgyny that enabled them to cross-dress as women in classic Japanese theatre, like *kabuki* or *nōh*, and for their versatility during *kagema* (prostitution) (MacDuff 1996, 248; McLelland 2000, 21). With regards to prostitution specifically, the *bishōnen* were sought after for their fluid gender presentation that could be tailored to their partner's preferences. For instance, depending on these preferences, *bishōnen* individuals could present themselves as more feminine (by wearing a women's *kimono* or hairstyle) or more masculine (by wearing a man's *hakama*).

Even prior to the Tokugawa period though, it should be noted that homosexuality was still framed as an elite practice and that the *bishōnen* aesthetic was highly desirable. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Muromachi aristocracy were well-known for having beautiful androgynous male lovers, and the medieval term *yūgen* (an elegant and mysterious beauty) was often used to describe these men before the popularisation of the term *bishōnen* (MacDuff 1996, 248-9). What this shows then is that both male homosexuality and an appreciation of gender expression outside of the male-female binary were long-standing traditions in Japanese history. Rather than being the aesthetics of a specific time period or moment, it was an ingrained part of Japanese culture that was not only tolerated, but also seen favourably. The *bishōnen* especially played into this, particularly in the Tokugawa period as they were idolised for their queer gender presentations and seen as objects of sexual desire.

However, with the beginnings of the Meiji era in the 1800s and the increasing presence of the West and Christianity in Japan, foreign discourses around sexuality changed the stance on homosexuality: instead of being an accepted practice, it was

now seen as a “deviant and dangerous passion” (McLelland 2000, 22). From 1867 to 1881, sodomy was consequently criminalised in the Meiji legal codes, and this criminalization fed into the public framing of homosexual acts, sodomy or otherwise, as a “horrible depravity” (McLelland 2000, 23). Additionally, under these imported Western discourses, the focus on ‘reproductive’ sex that would result in the creation of a family unit (i.e. a husband, a wife, and their children) was intensified. This was particularly evident in the differences between how the Tokugawa and Meiji periods culturally understood sex. Although there was still an expectation of producing heirs through a reproductive (heterosexual) relationship in the Tokugawa period, overall there was more flexibility and acceptance of non-reproductive relationships as sex was viewed equally as a necessity and a pleasure in life (McLelland 2000, 35; Fu 2011, 904-5). Yet in the Meiji era, attitudes became more conservative. Sex was reframed as not for pleasure, but rather as a method to strictly fulfill one’s cultural responsibility of reproduction (Fu 2011, 906). As such, sex for non-reproductive purposes, like pleasure, was highly discouraged: this extended to both hetero- and homo- sexual acts (Fu 2011, 907). Ultimately, both the intensified focus on reproductive sex and the idea of homosexuality as deviant had notable consequences, especially for the *bishōnen*. As biologically male individuals who primarily engaged in non-reproductive sex via homosexual relationships, the *bishōnen* were consequently considered transgressive to ‘proper’(heteronormative) society.

As a result of these shifting attitudes towards non-reproductive sexual relationships, homosexuality became noticeably less visible during and after the Meiji period. Disappearing from public art and popular literature, it was instead expressed privately and in only specific places, such as underground gay bars, or in “closed public spaces” where anonymity could be retained, like park restrooms (McLelland 2000, 25-7). Queer gender expressions likewise became less visible. With the emphasis on heterosexual reproductive relationships, a male-female binary was delineated in which expressions outside of it, like the *bishōnen* whose fluid gender presentation was neither fully ‘male’ or ‘female’, were not accepted.

Overall, it was not until the 1970s sexual revolution as it trickled into Japan from Europe and America that new-wave efforts, via fiction and film, sought to bring homosexuality and non-heteronormative gender expression back into the Japanese public (McLelland 2000, 28). It was in the 1970s as well that manga saw a rise in popularity, and, with it, the revival of the *bishōnen* figure (Welker 2006, 841).

4. The Contemporary Bishōnen Revival

Originally, the revival of the *bishōnen* aesthetic began in the wider genre of *shōjo* manga (girl’s manga). Though *shōjo* manga included an array of tropes and subgenres, it was ultimately its off-shoot, BL, that was pivotal for the queer community. Emerging in the 1970s, BL became highly popular on the manga market, attracting a readership of all ages and genders, and was well-known for its characters who embodied the similar aesthetic of androgynous beauty prized in the feudal periods. Recongisable by their “lithe, androgynous, and sexually ambiguous [figures]” (Welker 2008, 46) and associated with overtly feminine motifs, such as rose petals framing the panels whenever they were ‘on screen’ (Welker 2006, 859), the boys in BL contradicted the masculinity of the Meiji era. Instead of short cropped hair, they tended to have longer and kempt styles, and rather than angular faces and stern expressions, their features were softer with expressive “twinkling eyes” (Welker 2008, 46). But most notably, rather than engaging in heterosexual relationships, the *bishōnen* were the lovers of other male characters. Despite being fictional, the *bishōnen* in manga embodied many of the same characteristics as the historical *bishōnen*. From their aesthetics to their relationships, many have argued that these similarities have allowed the fictional *bishōnen* to continue Japan’s longstanding tradition of queer gender performance and sexuality in a more modern way (Welker 2008, 48).

As BL and their *bishōnen* characters grew in popularity, BL manga magazines emerged to provide coverage on the genre, detailing chapter releases, upcoming titles, and interviews with artists. However, these magazines did more than just promote a surface-level engagement for casual fans: they also facilitated the creation of an underground queer community accessible through a controlled channel. This controlled access is important given the climate towards queerness and non-heteronormative sexualities in Japan. With the prevalence of bullying and discrimination, it is understandable why many queer individuals do not feel comfortable with outing themselves. Yet through these magazines, they were able to create a community and engage with other queer-identifying people privately and safely without the risks of social retaliation. To understand how this worked, it is best to turn to the example of *Allan*.

Allan was initially published in 1980 as one of the first manga magazines dedicated to the BL genre (Welker 2008, 47) and was instrumental in the early creation of the underground queer community. Primarily, it accomplished this through coded language and references. For example, a special issue on Shinjuku claimed the area was "crowded with beautiful boys [read as *bishōnen*] like those in the world of *shōjo* manga" (Welker 2008, 49). By positioning the 'boys' in Shinjuku as the 'real life' *bishōnen* from manga, characters of which were colloquially understood to be queer, the magazine subtly signaled to its readers where like-minded (i.e. queer) people could also be found. It should be noted that today, Shinjuku is pretty known for being one of Tokyo's more queer-friendly areas (Welker 2008, 49), and that this association was already being made in the 1980s through *Allan*'s 'beautiful boys' references.

Furthermore, *Allan* also provided a column for personal ads in which queer people could communicate from a distance under pseudonyms. Though these ads covered a range of topics, they were primarily used to search for romantic or sexual partners. Generally, posters either relied on popular *bishōnen* characters, such as Gilbert Cocteau (the passive *bishōnen* lead from *Kaze to ki no uta*), or the overall aesthetic to frame their gender identities and preferences. Through utilising specific *bishōnen* characters, posters could situate themselves on a spectrum of masculinity-femininity by presenting themselves as more "boy" (masculine) or more "beautiful boy" (feminine) and similarly apply the same spectrum to their preferences in a partner (Welker 2008, 55-56). Notably, this description of one's *bishōnen* aesthetic was not limited to male-identifying posters; women-identifying posters also used the same criteria to describe themselves and their partners. Between both groups though, most wrote under gender-neutral pseudonyms (i.e. like Kaoru) to indicate that their biological sex, or even that of their partners, mattered less than their adherence to the aesthetic gender performance of being more masculine or more androgynous (*bishōnen*) (Welker 2008, 56).

Ultimately, whether it was through signaling queer-friendly spaces to its readers or by encouraging communication and connection through ads, these interactions were largely sanctioned by, and confined to, the safety of BL magazines. Though anyone could obviously purchase a copy if they wished, the employment of pseudonyms greatly reduced the risks of queer people being accidentally discovered by their real-life associates during their search for romantic or sexual partners. Likewise, by using specific terminology as it applied to certain contexts, such as popular *bishōnen* characters and their gender presentations, there was an added fail-safe in that only community members would fully understand what was being discussed. All of this created an underground queer community which, for the most part, was being facilitated through BL magazines and the *bishōnen* aesthetic.

5. Woman-identifying readers and BL

As mentioned earlier, the revival of the *bishōnen* aesthetic arose out of a subgenre of *shōjo* manga known as BL. Yet, despite BL's exclusive focus on

male-male relationships, its greatest consumers and creators were, and still are, women (Welker 2006, 841). Although there is some debate over what women-identifying readers get out of consuming male homosexual content, I argue that BL and its *bishōnen* characters provide an outlet to privately explore sexuality and gender identities in a space free from the gendered expectations of their day-to-day realities. In Japan's context specifically, these expectations can be quite exacting on women-identifying readers as double standards. For example, although relaxed in recent years, women are still generally expected to marry young (sometimes through *omiai* (arranged marriage)) and their sexual life remains largely socially sanctioned through marriage (McLelland 2010, 90; Fu 2011, 906). This mentality is exemplified in how women's contraceptives continue to be strictly regulated (McLelland 2010, 78). Comparatively speaking, the sexual life for men is not as regulated nor contained to marriage, as is illustrated by Japan's thriving sex industry and the relative ease of access to condoms (McLelland 2010, 78-9). Of course, it should be noted that this is not a contemporary double standard. Historically, it has always been, more or less, acceptable for men to engage in non-marital sex as the 'phallic myth' dictates men require an outlet for their sexual desires to avoid their build up and alternative expression through violence (Fu 2011, 906). Additionally, in the case of queer sexuality, women's experiences have been often discounted. For example, lesbianism in Japan is less tolerated in the media than male homosexuality as it is framed as a 'passing phase' rather than something to consider seriously (Welker 2006, 842; McLellan 2010, 83).

In a large part, these double standards for women have derived from the aforementioned emphasis on reproductive relationships. With the conservative understanding of sex's purpose being for reproduction in the Meiji era, a new slogan was introduced by the state: *ryōsai kenbo* (good wife, wise mother) (Fu 2011, 905). This slogan was aimed at policing women's behaviour and consequently restructured gender relations in Japanese society. Under this idea of 'good wife, wise mother', women who wished to be seen as socially respectable were not allowed to pursue their sexual desires outside of the "sanitised realm of marriage" (Fu 2011, 906). Although men were likewise discouraged from engaging in non-reproductive, non-marital sex, it was culturally seen as sometimes necessary for the functioning of society (i.e. by limiting crime and violence) because of the persisting phallic myth. Prostitution, therefore, became a sanctioned way for men to work through these desires. However, while there were no repercussions for men hiring prostitutes, women employed as such were considered immoral and failing to embody the 'good wife, wise mother' ideal. So while this slogan did not eliminate non-reproductive or non-marital sex, it did create highly gendered beliefs of what women and their role in Japanese society is (Fu 2011, 906). Furthermore, the repression of sexual desire outside of marriage, as well the cultural framing of womens' 'respectability' being tied into wife- and mother- hood, has continued to persist today.

Within the context of manga and fiction, women have not fared any better. For instance, the *shōnen* (men's manga) genre is openly hostile towards women through its hyper-masculine and violent characters, degrading and inequitable sex scenes, and lack of healthy or romantic relationships between its male and female characters (McLelland 2010, 79-81). Meanwhile, the commercial and widely distributed *shōjo* manga (that is manga geared towards women but not necessarily BL) typically features heterosexual pairings wherein the focus is on the 'reproductiveness' of the relationship. In fact, the typical end goal for such couples in the heterosexual *shōjo* genre is their marriage or the birth of their child. So for some, especially queer women who do not necessarily envision themselves in these conventionally heterosexual relationships, this can be too close to the realities and gendered expectations dictating their everyday lives.

On the contrary, BL is removed from these realities. It does not embody the male-female aggression that *shōnen* manga does, nor does it centre on the heterosexual relationships hallmark of the general *shōjo* genre. Rather, it is a realm

of its own that, for women-identifying readers, is pure fantasy. This fantasy is further enforced by the fact that BL plots are often set elsewhere (i.e. in far-off Europe) and are consequently removed from Japan's societal pressures. Additionally, the focus in BL manga is not on the reproductive, but rather the emotional development of a relationship. Reading along, women-identifying readers can live vicariously through these relationships as they watch the male leads fall in love, grow in closeness, and overcome trials and tribulations until they become a couple. In certain cases, this reading experience can even translate into a self-insert facilitated by the androgynous appearance of the *bishōnen* characters. Despite being biologically male in their stories, it is actually common practice for artists to not focus on the *bishōnen's* penis, especially when they (the *bishōnen*) take on the 'passive' (bottom) role during sex. Usually, this is done by portraying their genitalia ambiguously (i.e as an outline), whiting it out, or omitting it entirely (Nagaike 2015, 197). In doing so, more attention is drawn to the feminine features of the *bishōnen* character, such as their softer faces and bodies, allowing women-identifying readers to interject themselves into the story and experience the fictional relationship through the eyes of the *bishōnen*. This can also work in reverse for readers who do not necessarily see themselves as the passive *bishōnen*, but rather as a fantasy stand-in for their preferred partner. In this case, the previously mentioned physical ambiguity works in favour for women-identifying readers to manipulate the story to include their preferred partner's gender, such as another woman.

This aforementioned point of the *bishōnen* being a potential stand-in for another woman in its consumer's queer fantasy plays into how lesbianism has been understood and received in Japan. With their attraction being discounted, lesbian and queer women have come to co-opt BL and its more accepted male homosexuality in order to find pseudo-representation. In one interview for example, Mizoguchi Akiko, a lesbian activist, claimed she "'became' a lesbian via reception, in [her] adolescence, of the 'beautiful boy' comics of the 1970s." (Welker 2008, 47). Hers is not the only story like this. Women-identifying posters appeared with frequency in the personal ads columns in BL magazines, like *Allan*, to seek out sexual or romantic relationships, sometimes with other women, that could replicate what they were reading in manga.

As the greatest consumers and creators of BL content, it is clear that women-identifying readers have found enjoyment and purpose in the genre. I argue then that BL provides something the heterosexual *shōjo* genre does not: a removal from their realities and the gendered expectations dictating their relationships and sexual desires. There is an evident sense of emotional fulfilment women-identifying readers derive from consuming male homosexual relationships, and this has to do with the fact that there is no pressure for the couples in BL to marry, have children, and settle into their parental roles. Rather, they (the *bishōnen* characters) are free to engage in just the emotional aspect of their relationships and experience a love uninfluenced by these pressures. Ultimately then, BL grants women-identifying readers the ability to participate in a queer expression of love outside of heteronormativity, enabling them to privately explore their sexualities and desires that otherwise would be seen as transgressive for their non-reproductive nature. Additionally, through this exploration as facilitated by self-inserting and through their use of BL magazines' ad columns, they have been able to keep their preferences hidden and their involvement in the queer community out of public view.

6. Man-identifying Readers and BL

Although women-identifying readers are BL's main consumers, it would be remiss to say they are the only ones who partake. Despite being a bit rarer, there are male-identifying creators and readers who use BL in a similar manner: to facilitate a private engagement with their sexuality and gender independent from heteronormative expectations. This mostly refers to the expectations around masculinity. Generally speaking, Japanese boys are taught, both formally (i.e. in

school) and informally, that they should embody a specific kind of masculinity: assertive, dominant, aggressive, and opposed to romanticism (Nagaike 2015, 192-5). Historically, this type of masculinity emerged in the Meiji era, but it was most noticeable in the militarism that defined the first decade of the Shōwa period (1926-1936) (Fu 2011, 905). During this time, the phallic myth became a culturally embedded narrative wherein male virility was framed as both a "powerful and dangerous force" either beneficial or detrimental to society (Fu 2011, 906). As previously discussed, this narrative impacted gender relations in Japan, particularly for how men and women related to one another.

This sort of masculinity is also the kind heavily reflected in fiction as well, like in the *shōnen* genre. Male characters in *shōnen* manga are usually drawn as hyper-masculine with harsh features and overly-exaggerated muscles and exhibit sexually aggressive behaviours towards the women in their stories (McLelland 2010, 80). Furthermore, healthy or romantic relationships are rarely depicted in *shōnen* stories as interactions between the male leads and the supporting female characters are typically confined to violent and inequitable sex scenes (McLelland 2010, 81). Despite these issues, the *shōnen* genre remains highly popular among young boys. More importantly though, these stories reproduce a specific narrative of masculinity and heterosexuality in which its consumers are encouraged to replicate by embodying the same aesthetics and attitudes of popular *shōnen* characters.

Existing on the opposite end of the spectrum, BL and its *bishōnen* aesthetic are removed from the *shōnen* world. Embodying a different kind of masculinity, the queer characters depicted in BL are highly attuned to their emotions, accepting their feelings as they derive from love and romanticism (Nagaike 2015, 195). In the Japanese context specifically, this attunement of *bishōnen* characters is read as less classically 'masculine' and more 'feminine'. Additionally, although some BL stories do feature explicit sex scenes, usually the plot's primary focus is not on the sexual. On a whole, it does not adopt the *shōnen* stance of there being an ingrained, aggressive sexual drive in men that mindlessly dictates all of their actions and relationships; rather, the attention is on the development of the romantic and emotional side of their characters first and foremost (Nagaike 2015, 195). Therefore when reading BL, much like how it is for women-identifying readers, male-identifying readers can vicariously experience a different kind of relationship (i.e. romantic and non-toxic) excluded in the *shōnen* genre and engage with a masculinity otherwise transgressive to the 'ideal' gendered behaviour in Japanese society. For example, one online reader explains "I somehow feel myself freed from [established] gender consciousness [through reading BL]. I'm not at all skilled at expressing masculinity in a particularly appropriate way." (Nagaike 2015, 193). Appropriate here is defined as hyper-masculine, aggressive and sexually dominant towards women. Overall, this quote is quite telling in BL's function. For those who are queer in their gender performance (in that they find themselves unable to perform society's expected gendered roles), BL can provide catharsis. Such catharsis is achieved not only through experiencing these *bishōnen* characters' relationships and alternative gender performances, but also through engagement, via online forums and BL magazines, with a community of queer individuals in a similar position.

In terms of the *bishōnen* aesthetic, it should also be considered how this assists in the self-inserting practice. As discussed earlier, women-identifying readers primarily relied on the more androgynous traits of *bishōnen* characters, like their slender bodies or omitted genitalia, to insert themselves into the narrative. I argue that this works in a similar manner for male-identifying readers, especially when considered alongside the unrealistic standards set by the *shōnen* genre. In *shōnen* manga, male characters are typically defined by their bulging muscles and large frames, making them look like pro-wrestlers. This is contrasted to the *bishōnen* who lack this extreme muscle definition. For the majority of male-identifying readers, the slender bodies of the *bishōnen* protagonists would look more realistic and

relatable. Additionally, although there is a tendency for artists to forgo drawing the genitalia, this can actually further the self-inserting process. While for women-identifying readers the lack of a penis makes the *bishōnen* body more recognizable (i.e. more feminine), for male-identifying readers, it can work to create a blank space wherein their own genitalia can fictionally occupy. However, compared to women-identifying readers, there is a varying degree in how male-identifying readers accomplish this self-inserting, or how they sexually relate to the characters in BL manga. In an online survey, 111 male-identifying readers were asked, if placed into a BL manga, would they prefer to be the *seme* (the penetrator, or dominant top), or the *uke* (the *bishōnen,* or bottom recipient) (Nagaike 2015, 196). In the survey, 41% responded *uke*, 19% *seme*, and 40% as switches, meaning they had no preference when it came to being the dominant top or bottom recipient (Nagaike 2015, 196). In this survey as well, 21 male-identifying readers identified as heterosexual in real life; yet within this heterosexual category, only 5 said they would exclusively be a *seme* (the dominant top) (Nagaike 2015, 196). What is interesting to note from this survey is that real-life sexuality does not always translate over to the reading experience of BL. Furthermore, the prevalence in the answers for being the *uke* recipient or a switch suggests a queerness being explored through these BL self-insert sexual preferences. By placing themselves in either the recipient or dominant top role, male-identifying readers are given the space to fictionally explore homosexual or bisexual desires where it may not be safe to do so in real-life and where it is seen as transgressive for its non-reproductive nature. Or, for a different matter, they can rely on these terms to better articulate their sexual identity and preferences within the wider BL community, particularly in the search for partners, when conventional labels (like homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual) can feel too restrictive.

7. Conclusion

Given Japan's contemporary climate towards queerness, it may be tempting to think that intolerance of non-heteronormative gender identities and sexualities has always been part of Japanese society. However, considering the feudal periods' acceptance of homosexuality and their idolisation of queer figures, like the androgynous *bishōnen*, it is highly remissive to approach this intolerance as ingrained in Japanese culture. Rather, it is more accurate to understand it as a repercussion of the Westernisation process occurring in the Meiji era. In the wake of the importation of Western discourses pertaining to sexuality and gender ideals, there was a noticeable shift in how queerness was socially framed. With a newfound focus on the reproductivity of heterosexual relationships, and the subsequent gendered expectations around 'proper' behaviour and expressions, long-standing traditions of homosexuality and queer gender performances were discouraged, censured, and erased. This was particularly evident in the case of the *bishōnen*. Once venerated for their androgynous gender presentation, they had all but disappeared from the public until they returned in the most unexpected manner: manga.

Revived through the BL genre, the fictional *bishōnen* and the queerness they embodied quickly gained popularity among creators and consumers alike. As a product of the global 1970s sexual revolution, BL became a staple on the manga market with magazines (i.e. *Allan*) legitimising it as a new category independent from the already established *shōnen* and *shōjo* genres. In the end, it cannot be understated how important these magazines were. More than just legitimising the genre and furthering its popularity, these magazines facilitated the creation of underground queer communities. In a context where expressions of queerness are still generally met with a degree of hostility, and where queer individuals feel uncomfortable outing themselves, this underground community as accessed through BL magazines has become an invaluable tool for queer individuals to communicate and interact without drawing unwanted attention. This understanding of BL as a tool is likewise important to note for how it operates on an individual

level as well. Through its characters and its employment of the *bishōnen* aesthetic, BL has provided the means, through self-inserting, for the private exploration of the sexual and gender identities of its readers, ultimately providing both emotional fulfillment and catharsis.

Overall, although queerness remains less visible in Japan now than compared to the past, it nonetheless persists, albeit subtly. United by a love of fictional *bishōnen*, it is clear that queer individuals have carved out a space for themselves and have continued to resist heteronormative expectations in a rather unique and unprecedented way.

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