Homosexuality in Fushigi Yuugi and Gravitation: An investigation into the cultural background of homosexuality in Japanese animation

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This paper will delve into the following issues: how the Japanese view homosexual males and how the agency of the reader and/or viewer impacts the depictions of visual displays of intimate behavior by homosexual males. The purpose of this paper will be an attempt to define some sort of answer to each question within the context of the Japanese cultural products of *manga* and *anime*. I am going to dissect shifting sexualities as they are represented in two different examples of Japanese anime aimed at slightly differing audience groups. The two shows that I will focus on are: *Fushigi Yuugi* (predominantly aimed at teenagers, both female and male) and *Gravitation*, (aimed predominantly at teenage females). Both of these shows address the gender shifting boundaries of male homosexuals and each involves either visuals of cross-dressing, sexual intimacy between two males, or both. It is my contention that the two shows I will be examining offer conflicting views of homosexuality because of the agency of the target audiences. Whereas *Fushigi Yuugi*, which is aimed at both males and females, degrades it, *Gravitation*, supremely popular among teenage females, attempts to give a more realistic and, ultimately, progressive representation.

**Historical Views on Homosexuality in Japan**

Historically, a study of homosexuality in Japanese culture shows that it flourished prior to the Meiji period when Japan was opened to the West, and more importantly, to Western ideas of homophobia. Joseph Hawkins in *The Gay and Lesbian Review* states that:
Before the Meiji period (1868-1912), Japanese society sustained such male homosocial enclaves as the military, monastic Buddhism, the Kabuki theatre, and urban centers of male prostitution... Within the highly articulated homosocial æsthetic prior to 1868 and extending back to before the 1600's, the love object of Buddhist priests was typically a young androgynous boy, while the samurai favored a strong, resolute youth, and the Kabuki theater's aficionado focused on a transgendered person that signified the "female" in a filtered and interpretive form. (Hawkins, 2000: 36)

The relationship between Buddhist and boy/pupil was a staple which underlay the “Buddhist system of education,” and the same was true for the samurai and his page/apprentice, (Williams, 1992: 71). These relationships functioned not only as an expression of love but also as a part of the education process of young boys from the 1400’s until at least 1868, (Ibid). The reactions of Jesuit missionaries pre-Meiji were censorious: “Nobody, neither man nor woman, young or old, regards this sin as abnormal or abominable; this sin is well known among the bonzes [Buddhist monks], and is even a widespread custom amongst them,” (Ibid). Another missionary writing about monks said, “The abominable vice against nature is so popular that they practice it without any feelings of shame. They have many young boys with whom they commit wicked deeds,” (Ibid).

As for the Kabuki element, it was originally performed by women but became a tradition of only men, who would dress up as women in order to play the female roles. Many of these men took male lovers, and started dressing in women’s clothing in daily life, thus “transvestism entered Japanese popular culture through Kabuki and grew to represent traditional Japanese culture in the full flower of its civilization,” (Ibid) What is more, the Kabuki fashions were taken as models for many townswomen, who designed their own clothing after the men performing as women on stage, (McLelland, 2001.A). This is an early example of the agency of female viewers in appropriating a male
dominated arena into something which is actually directed at them—in an act which reinforces the cross-dressing male as more female than the female.

Once the country was open to the West, the censorious reaction against open homosexuality was given full reign and the Meiji court quickly attempted to modernize the country according to Western ideals. For example, the first stature against sodomy was included in the *Shinritsu Koryo*, “Outline of the New Law”, in 1873. However, it was not enforced very strongly as male-male sex indiscretions were largely ignored and from 1876 to 1881 only twenty cases of sodomy were tried and found guilty under the new law. So in 1883, the law was repealed and since then there has been no law prohibiting homosexual behavior in Japan, (Hawkins, 2000: 36).

Indeed, Jennifer Robertson notes that,

…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. (Robertson, 1998: 145)

This tolerance is extended even to homosexual sex, which, although it is not to be spoken about, is easily available in Japan, since there is no legislation relating to sex between two men or sex between two women, and, in fact, the consent laws for heterosexual sex in Japan is even placed at the age of 13, (McLelland, 2001.B.).

One reason for the easy acceptance of same-sex relations in Japan, primarily in the pre-Meiji period, can be claimed as due to geography. Japan is an island with very little room for expansion; thus there was pressure to maintain low levels of population growth, (Ibid, 1992: 71). One way to accomplish this was to encourage same-sex relationships which would satisfy the sexual urges while not resulting in pregnancies. However, upon the opening to the west and the advent of industrialization the need for an
ever-increasing workforce can be blamed as an additional reason for the construction of anti-gay societal feelings. In addition to industrialization and Western homophobia, the pre-World War II mobilization included pronatal tendencies; the “wartime pronatal stance emphasized the desirability of reproductive activities and the elimination of nonprocreative sex,” (Hawkins, 2000: 36).

Post-World War II, the situation of homosexuals in Japan has not particularly improved. Though it is now more acceptable to be “out” in Japan as a gay male or lesbian, it is still possible to be discriminated against if you are—in renting apartments and in work environments, as two examples. The life of a homosexual in Japan is currently nothing like the North American example of San Francisco’s Castro Street, as one Japanese gay man talking about his experiences cites, “I...walked down Castro Street. Seeing all the gay people that lived there walk around with pride written all over their faces was quite mind-boggling to me. These people had taken on being gay with a sense of honor and pride. They were gay people whose faces really shone,” (Summerhalk, 1998: 181). Though large cities like Tokyo have comparable “gay districts”, they are much smaller and much less well-known locally as well as globally. It is interesting that Japan, which has a much more liberal homosexual history, has so adopted 19th century Western attitudes against homosexuality that they are now more conservative than the West.

I will now go into discussing the two shows which form the basis of this paper before completing the analysis of the current state of homosexuality in Japan as represented in manga and anime in the conclusion.

Cultural Representations in Anime
Fushigi Yuugi

*Fushigi Yuugi* follows the adventures of two best friends who are just about to graduate from the Japanese version of middle school. One day at the library, Miaka finds a book which transports her and her friend Yuu back in time to an ancient Chinese court. Miaka becomes the priestess of Suzaku and enters the world of the emperor, Hotohori. Another acquaintance that she meets is named Noriko—an incredibly powerful women who is first introduced by saving Miaka from the rubble of a collapsed pavilion. Noriko is also one of the beautiful women of the court who are aspiring to be Hotohori’s bride.

Eventually Miaka discovers that, in fact, Noriko is a male pretending to be a woman. The instant of this discovery is quite amusing in that it occurs when Noriko’s clothing slips down far enough to reveal that she has no breasts. At this point, in an attempt to grasp the fact that Noriko is a male, Miaka’s mind flashes through a series of images of hyper-masculine body-builders—an ideal that Noriko with the typical *bishounen* (“beautiful boy”) body build could never actually attain, despite her preternatural strength.

Thus, in *Fushigi Yuugi*, homosexuality is presented in the form of deliberate cross-dressing in order for a male to fake the position of a female in the court society. This duplicitious act has been taken on by Noriko for two reasons. The first is that Noriko once had a younger sister who died in a tragic accident involving a horse-drawn carriage. At a young age, Noriko began dressing up in his sister’s clothing in order to keep her memory alive—in order to give her the life that she should have had. As time goes on, Noriko subsumes his male personality to the female one and truly becomes a woman mentally if not physically. Thus it comes to pass that Noriko becomes a
homosexual transvestite who feels emotional love towards males—this is the second reason she continues to dress in drag—because she has fallen in love with the emperor, Hotohori.

In a way, the cross-dressing Noriko provides one non-threatening character for Miaka to confide in and identify with as the vast majority of other characters in the series are male. She thus does not threaten Miaka as a romantic interest as do two of the other characters in the show. She does, though, threaten Miaka as competition as she is both in love with one of the men in love with Miaka and taunting Miaka by flirting with the male that Miaka is in love with. Noriko is more of a woman than Miaka can be and forcefully displays her attraction to the male characters which Miaka can only hint at. Noriko has longer hair, feminine clothing, and a beauty mark. Miaka is clumsy, girlish and almost always shown in her school uniform. Noriko is a woman to Miaka's girl.

Once she is ousted as a man, however, the show has a recurring theme that Noriko’s predilection for wearing the clothing of women and desiring other men is perverted. There are two ready examples of this. One occurs when two characters both named Nyan-nyan, who are healers, offer to heal Noriko after they have healed Miaka of various injuries. She replies, “I am not injured,” and they reply quickly as if they have set her up for this quip at her expense with, “Of your perversion.” Noriko responds with comedic violence, which only serves to highlight her more male qualities while the damage has already been done by highlighting the view held that she and her desires are perverted. A second example is when Miaka and Noriko meet again after an absence. They run towards one another, (at this point they’re friends), and clasping hands they jump up and down while Miaka inquires, “Are you still gay?” to which Noriko replies,
“Are you still stupid?” Although it is endearing that their relationship has progressed so far that they are able to insult one another in a caring way, at the same time it defines being gay as an unavoidable, and unflattering, character trait.

In a way, the humor with which Noriko’s character is at times treated does degrade the image of homosexuality within this particular series. 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,’” (McLelland, 1998). This gives further credence to the idea that Japanese society and its media is creating a space in which homosexuality is utilized as a comedic element—a stereotype which can only further the injustice with which homosexuals are then treated. The same article goes on to say that, “On television, in particular, the homosexual man is represented as an okama. In media portrayals okama look like fakes, trying to be women but noticeably failing. Okama are represented as the opposite of 'normal' men,” (Ibid). This applies quite accurately to Noriko in that she fails in her efforts to look like a woman with her lack of chest and the repeated displays of unfeminine physical strength. She is also presented as not “normal” by the references to her “perversion.”

Ultimately, however, it is clear that the heterosexual element in this type of shoujo romance cannot admit a homosexual character. Japanese anime critic, Wendy Goldberg, posits this theory in her essay entitled, “The Homosexual Male in Shoujo Anime.” In this essay, she writes the following:

I propose that these males parody and yet support the main heterosexual pairing...that the homosexual male is a displacement of female heterosexual desire that cannot be fulfilled by either sex or orientation, and because he copies the heterosexual female, he supports these norms. (Goldberg, 2001)
Noriko flirts most outrageously with the character of Tamahome, a warrior with whom Miaka falls in love. By aggressively pursuing the desire which Miaka feels for Tamahome, Noriko is parodying the heterosexual pairing which will eventually result in Miaka and Tamahome’s relationship. Noriko’s role in the beginning is merely to act where Miaka cannot, as she is still too immature and unsure of her feelings at the beginning of the series. At the same time, Noriko’s pursuit of Tamahome is presented comically in that she is continually tying him up with spare fabric and sitting on him so that he cannot escape her bedchamber. Her tactics are Neanderthal at best, and display a callous disregard for normative flirting techniques in the face of using brute strength to conquer someone—possibly an early hint that she is not really female.

Then, in the middle of the series, Noriko’s character is killed by a creature who is half-man and half-beast. Noriko’s death proves that while the series “flirts with subverting the heterosexual norm of the heroine and her love interest, ultimately, these norms are satisfied and secured by male homosexuality. The homosexual male is able to portray feminine desire when the heroines cannot and yet at the same time, never fulfill the destiny of heterosexual love,” (Ibid). Noriko provides a foil for Miaka—someone who can pursue males at the beginning as a more mature, older woman figure, whereas Miaka is not yet able to do so. Then, by Noriko’s death, the romantic storyline of Miaka’s relationship with Tamahome, which has become an insistent weight on the show, can move steadily forward. Over the course of the series, Noriko has changed and put aside the female clothing to dress as a man. She even cuts her long, beautiful hair in order to look more male in the episode immediately prior to her death. This owes in large part to the character of Miaka for whom Noriko wants to be a better man. In the end,
Noriko dies performing one last splendid, heroic act on Miaka’s behalf. Noriko, though she changes into a man predominantly for Miaka, will never be able to take the place of a male in whom Miaka would be romantically interested, nor can she achieve a homosexual relationship with one of the other male characters. She is sacrificed in order for the show to progress along “normative” heterosexual lines. What’s more, she is killed by a brute, a wild man whose sheer size and power delineate his overwhelming masculinity. In the face of such a man, Noriko’s gender-shifting character is broken in the pursuit of heterosexual norms.

**Gravitation**

*Gravitation* is a penultimate example of homosexuality in anime and manga, and a complete opposite from *Fushigi Yuugi*. Written first in a *manga* version, as was *Fushigi Yuugi*, it subsequently was turned into an *anime* show of 13 episodes with one OAV in 1999. The story follows the character of Shuichi, a high school singer/music composer, who falls in love with Eiri Yuki, an author of female romance stories. Though they profess to not be gay, the two engage in an extraordinary amount of homosexual behavior, including: moving in together, hugging, kissing, and even having anal sex. Shuichi acts the roll of the bottom, or in Japanese terminology, the *uke*. He whines a lot, cries even more, and is constantly on edge over the relationship. In the relationship it is clear that Yuki is the dominant force, the one who Shuichi looks up to. There is an unequal footing in their relationship in a way because for the most part it is Shuichi who needs Yuki and Shuichi who pursues Yuki, while Yuki is aloof and condescending. Thus, Yuki is the *seme*, or top, in the relationship and dictates how it will proceed. This
can also be seen in terms of height. In Japanese anime, homosexual couples generally have one character taller than the other and the taller one is always the seme.

In contemplating the show Gravitation, Charles Solomon writes in an article for the Los Angeles Times that “Eiri is an older, dominant figure; Shuichi is younger, physically smaller and more vulnerable. April Gutierrez, a spokeswoman for Yaoi-Con, notes, "Shuichi is definitely the high school girl analog. People who don't like Gravitation think he's too much like a girl,"” (Solomon, 2004: E.3). People who are irritated by the fact that Shuichi acts like a girl offer an interesting perspective into the progressive nature of Gravitation—if they’d rather not have him acting like a girl, it means that him being a male in a male-male relationship is what they want.

Interestingly it turns out the Yuki’s family is affiliated with a Buddhist temple and Yuki, as the oldest son, is supposed to have taken over the business. However he is refusing to do so and causing his father much grief. At one point, in both the manga and the show, Yuki returns to the family estate and dresses in Buddhist regalia. At this point, Shuichi, missing Yuki unbearably and afraid that Yuki is about to leave him, rushes to the family home dressed up in female clothing—a sundress covered in sunflowers, pink bow in the hair, and bright red lipstick. The Buddhist connection is fascinating in regards to the history of homosexuality in Japan discussed at the beginning of this paper. The idea that Yuki is affiliated with Buddhism and that he is clearly the sensei character in the relationship—as evidenced by how he introduces Shuichi to male-male love in the forms of teaching him how to kiss and also how to have homosexual intercourse—backs up the cultural origins of homosexuality in Buddhist orders.
One critic of *shounen-ai* (boy-love) *manga* and *anime* states that “while the books and films are certainly full of pretty youths with button noses, angular chins and huge saucer eyes, the sexual content is generally slight or incidental… It's often implied romance or simply touching, maybe some kissing, too,” (Thompson, 2003: 43). However, I would have to disagree with this, particularly in the case of *Gravitation*.

While it is true that Shuichi has the physical characteristics named above, Yuki does not. In addition, though the romance element is a key point in the story, so is the deflowering scene of Shuichi by Yuki where graphic images of unknown liquids spatter the pages. In addition there are some visuals of Shuichi being raped later on in the series. Even though at no point is there an actual showing of penetration, or even ever the hint of male genitalia, the basic idea is conveyed quite concretely. Not only is it presented openly without reserve, it’s also unapologetic. Shuichi’s refrain throughout the course of the story is that he won’t let Yuki go, that Yuki belongs to him. There’s a possessive element on Shuichi’s side even though he accedes to all of Yuki’s demands, he still manages to control the existence of the relationship merely by his tenacity. Shuichi says things like, “Even though I’m a man, I won’t let Yuki go. I love Yuki. Yuki is MINE!”

**Ideas of Agency**

Even though *Gravitation* is an excellent example of homosexuality in Japanese print and visual media, it is not a standalone example. McLelland argues that “these stories about men bonking created by and for women do not ‘trivialize gay life’ because they are not about ‘gay’ men,” (McLelland, 2001. A). He then furthers his theory by stating that:
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 *bishounen* or 'beautiful boys/youths.' They are drawn in such a way as to suggest an androgynous ideal... *bishounen* 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. (McLelland, 1998)

McLellend presents us here with two very compelling ideas—one, that *shoujo* representations of homosexuality are not “trivializing” it and two, that they provide an outlet for female rebellion against “gender stereotypes”.

It’s an interesting notion to think that because they do not identify as gay males, they are not actually “trivializing” the lifestyle choice of openly gay males, in fact, I believe they are doing worse than just trivializing it, simply because of the false representation of it. First off, just by making the males look androgynous, they are not presenting actual gay males. Even though gender queers may resist visual identification, it’s not to the pronounced degree as *shounen-ai* makes it appear with their long-haired representations of “beautiful boys”. This trivializes actual gay life and the real life men who make it up by preventing such a beautiful false image the reality cannot compete.

The media creates an unattainable ideal for homosexuals. Young homosexuals looking at these types of *anime* and *manga* who develop inferiority complexes thinking that “‘being gay meant being a smart and beautiful member of the elite’ and that homosexuals “must be cute and pretty,’” (McLelland, 1998).

Representations of gay relationships directed at women present a fantastical image of what being gay means and how two people in a gay relationship will act. This is done in order to appease female desires for a best partner. The idea being that a gay man will, theoretically, treat her better than a straight man because he’ll be more willing
to talk about feelings, help with housework, dress nicer, smell better, and “snuggle” without sexual overtures, (McLelland, 1998). However, this is fantasy and not reality, the gay man does not and will not love the woman and, in an investigation of gay Japanese media, McLelland suggests that gay men have more in common with straight men than with women: “Representations of gay men in women’s media, then, tell us little about these men in Japan…and rather more about Japanese women’s problematic relationship with traditional images of masculinity,” (1998). The factor of traditional masculinity as something which women are trying to come to terms with, or trying to avoid by fantasizing about androgynous male love, is tied into the female agency involved in reading/watching shounen-ai and yaoi.

There are several competing theories as to why, starting in 1953¹, representations of homosexual male-male love in manga and anime became such a draw to female readers. Though these theories do propose different rationales for the phenomenon, they are not necessarily conflicting. I think it is possible that all the reasons are equally valid; they all describe something in the female Japanese psyche to explain why they might be drawn to images and storylines of male-male love. In order to understand why the two shows I described above are both in their own ways symptomatic and reflective of the desires of the consumer society, I will now attempt to give scope to some of these theories.

One theory is that yaoi/shounen-ai "explores female views of masculinity and of the male body in ways that do not degrade or threaten the female viewer and which allow her to focus enthusiastically and openly on all the sexual-romantic things that men do,” (Solomon, 2004: E.3). Another way of putting this is that the female viewer can watch a

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¹ First homosexual themed anime: Ribon, c. 1953. (Schodt, 1988: 96).
male-male love story without feeling her femininity besmirched. The love that a male shows to another male has nothing to do with the female viewer because she does not exist in the piece. This negates the possibility of her being sexually stereotyped as male versions of pornography might make her. The female is not threatened by overt male sexual activity in watching male-male scenes of sexual intercourse, because it is not a woman being taken advantage of in the scene, and hence she can disassociate herself from the potential for rape. Or, on the other hand, it could be that with no women in the picture, there is no one for the female viewer to feel jealous over. She can appreciate any acts of “sexual-romantic” behavior between two males without attempting to take the place of one of them as most women will do when there is a female in the picture. On the plus side, the male characters in shounen-ai manga and anime are generally very beautiful, and either completely androgynous, or quite feminine in appearance. With one such beautiful male to feast the eye on, “you can double your enjoyment adding a second guy,” (Ibid). In Fushigi Yuugi there are numerous men with “long hair, long limbs and slender, hairless bodies,” for the female to appreciate. There is also, however the annoying female character who pops up and ruins your enjoyment of it. Gravitation, on the other hand, is predominantly male, and the only females that come between the two main male characters are either quickly gotten rid of or are related to one of them and thus, not a threat.

A second theory is that women enjoy seeing two males together because their relationship is on a more equal footing than that which a Japanese woman can enjoy with a Japanese male. The feminist Ueno Chizuko claims that, “neither men nor women are sleeping with the opposite sex, they are sleeping with a system,” (McLelland, 1998).
This “system” which always works to disadvantage women is part and parcel of female inequality. In another article, McLelland argues that, “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,” (McLelland, 2001.A). He goes on to describe how Confucianism as an ideology has long repressed the female in Japanese society due to the importance it places on patriarchal values. The woman’s place is within the family system and mostly concerned with reproduction. He quotes one Japanese fan of ‘homosexuality’ as saying, “‘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,’” (Ibid). In a way, then, women can be seen as appreciating the relationships between men in anime and manga because it shows a relationship on an equal footing—love between two males, where at least one of them is a beautiful, androgynous stand-in for her own desires. The argument devolves that the beautiful men are projections of the female audience’s own femininity, and that “in a society as sexist as Japan, women can only identify with truly autonomous figures in male form,” (Ibid).

One critic took this idea even further and posited the theory that not only would women rather watch male-male love because it could satisfy a fantasy desire for equality in their own relationships with men, but that they would go so far as to wish that they themselves were male. Brian Ruh wrote:

Some readers have told me they enjoy the stories because they present an idealized masculine world. Some speak of despising femininity and even of wishing they had been born male, rather than female. For most such women, yaoi and shounen-ai allow them to indulge in the fantasy of loving a man as a man, or, to rephrase it, as an equal, free of predefined gender expectations. (Ruh, 2001)
What is interesting that this critic brings up is the element of fantasy involved in both the writing and the reading of this subject matter. In reality, obviously, gay male love is not the equality that women might believe it is—even as I described in the section on *Gravitation* wherein there is a definite power dichotomy between the two male characters.

In a way, the “trivialization” of gay relationships that I discussed above does not follow through in *Gravitation*, although nor does it present a very accurate picture of homosexuality with the characters constantly claiming they’re not gay even while having sex with another man. Acceptance is something that the show does eventually bring when the two come out on national TV, as well as the voices of other characters throughout the show who say that it’s not important what gender it is as long as it’s love. A sentiment which is echoed in *Fushigi Yuugi* though this obviously falls apart when the gender becomes very important and the gender queer has to die in order to reaffirm that heterosexuality is the way to go. Though *Gravitation* does not present a complete picture of male-male love, it does at least focus on that love and give it a scope and an openness which *Fushigi Yuugi* is sorely lacking. Though these anime came out only five years apart, *Fushigi Yuugi* in 1995 and *Gravitation* in 1999, the differences in representation are astounding.
List of Works Cited


