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Keywords

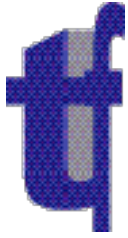
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"A Mirror for Men?"¹ Idealised Depictions of White Men and Gay Men in Japanese Women's Media

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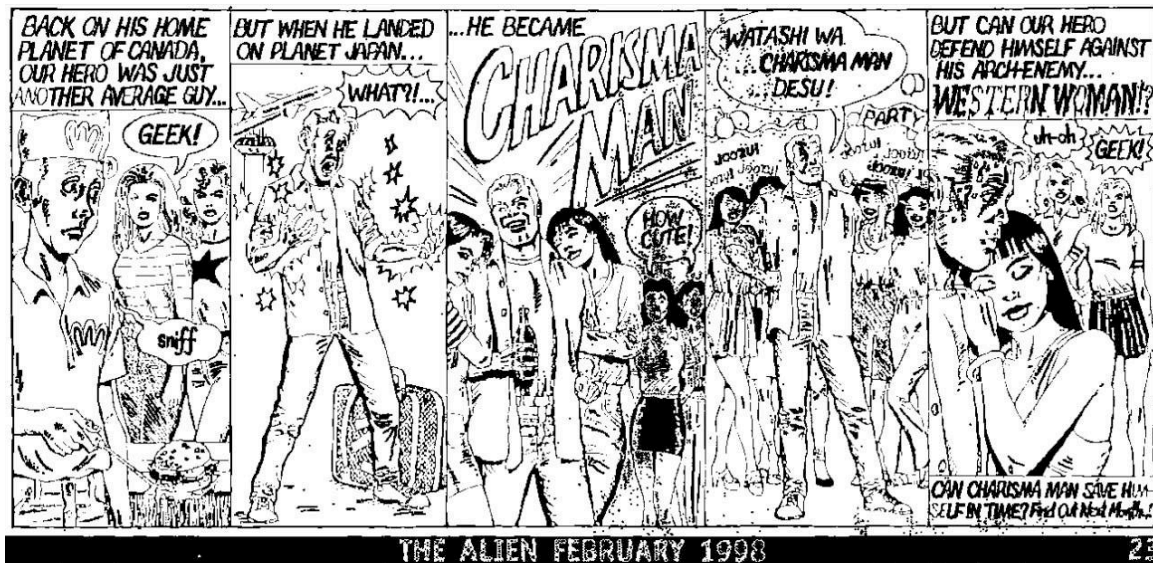
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Key terms: Japan, masculinity, homosexuality, women, media.

Introduction

In 1991 I was working as an editor in the Tokyo headquarters of the American publishing house Charles Tuttle Inc. which had brought out a Japanese phrase book entitled *Making Out in Japanese*. The book provided simple, direct, pick-up lines for English-speaking men to use on Japanese women. It quickly became Tuttle's bestselling title and a second volume with more of the same was hurriedly prepared. Soon after the book's release, Tuttle's marketing manager began to bring in articles about the book from the Japanese tabloid press and pass them round the office. The sensational and slightly hysterical tone of these articles showed that the book had touched a nerve with Japanese men who were incensed that a phrase book that helped 'foreign' (*gaijin*)² men pick up 'our' women had become such a best seller.

One female American editor, too, was incensed at the book's popularity, for, in her terms, it was being bought by male *gaijin* 'losers' who, because they were incapable of establishing relationships with western women, were pursuing more compliant Japanese women instead. This attitude was quite common among expatriate western women in Japan and is exemplified by a cartoon in a magazine aimed at Japan's foreign community *The Alien* (February 1998) which shows a greasy, unattractive youth flipping burgers in one frame observed by two white women who comment 'geek'. In the next frame he arrives in Japan and is transformed into 'Charisma Man' surrounded by adoring Japanese women. The same white women look on and, again comment 'geek'. The apparent popularity of *gaijin* men with Japanese women clearly touched a raw nerve on both sides of the racial and sexual divide.



'Charisma Man' from *The Alien*, Tokyo, February 1998

My own interests at this time were in the ways in which Japanese media constructed and at some times even celebrated the gender non-normative male body, an interest which eventually led to me writing a Ph.D. thesis and later a book on homosexuality and the media in Japan. It did not occur to me until the final drafting of my book that the image (as opposed to the reality) of 'the foreigner' in Japan had much in common with representations of 'the gay man,' at least in media consumed by women. It was a chance encounter with the work of American anthropologist Karen Kelsky,³ whose analysis of Japanese women's media discourses eulogising foreign men and disparaging Japanese men (1994, 1996, 1999, 2000, 2001), struck me as very similar to my own research on Japanese women's 'yearning' (*akogare*) for homosexual men who are, likewise, represented as preferable to straight Japanese men.

Kelsky argues that the interest some Japanese women's media show in foreign men is not based on any objective characteristics that can be said to distinguish 'western men' from 'Japanese men'. As she points out, it is 'a commentary entirely independent of the foreigner himself' (1996: 173). Instead, this discourse constitutes a 'rhetorical mirror' in which exaggerated images of white male superiority are meant to reflect back the supposed deficiencies of Japanese men. Similarly, I found that the fascination with images of aesthetic and refined 'gay men' so prevalent in Japanese women's culture have little to do with actual gay men who, in fact, share many of the attitudes and expectations characteristic of men in general (McLelland 2000a: 111-114). These fantasy images of gay men are, instead, expressions of women's dissatisfaction with the polarities of conventional sex and gender roles that restrict and restrain their movement and desires. In women's media, straight Japanese men are frequently represented as a problem; their 'feudalistic' attitudes, infantile, spoiled personalities and inferior physique render them inadequate partners for the modern, cosmopolitan Japanese woman. Such women, instead, praise the superior qualities they imagine are embodied by foreign white men, and, surprisingly, Japanese gay men. The purpose of this paper, then, is not so much to discover the 'truth' behind the representations of foreign men and Japanese gay men but instead to look at how these largely rhetorical figures function as a critique of 'ordinary Japanese men'.

The fetish of the white man in Japanese women's culture

Although I did not realise it at the time, the media interest in *Making Out in Japanese* was part of a more general moral panic about the supposed increase in young Japanese women who were aggressively seeking out foreign men as lovers which swept the Japanese media in the early 1990s. Derogatively termed 'yellow cabs,' because they were considered to be as easy to get into and out of as New York taxis, and *seibun-irebun*, since, like the 7-11 stores, they were 'open 24 hours' (Kelsky 1996: 178), these women were demonised in the media for their loose morals and frivolous lifestyles. Japan's economic bubble, which had continued to expand throughout the 1980s, had resulted in the development of a large class of young women who, through working in dead-end jobs as 'office ladies' (OL) in large corporations, while continuing to live with their parents, had, unlike their male peers, both large disposable incomes and extensive leisure time. As Kelsky comments:

The very circumstances that are marks of the OLs' inferior professional status--lack of serious responsibilities, shorter working hours, flexibility to quit uncongenial jobs--are the same circumstances which leave these women free to pursue a substantially independent lifestyle devoted to shopping, hobbies, gourmet dining, overseas travel and the satisfaction of purely personal leisure desires (1996: 176).

The male-dominated media disparagingly referred to these women as 'unmarried aristocrats' and 'parasite singles' and disapproved of their spendthrift ways and conspicuous consumption of foreign luxury goods and overseas travel which they enjoyed, not with their boyfriends, but with their OL peers.

Negative media reactions were heightened after the publication of two books by journalist Ieda Shôko: *The Women who Flocked to my Skin* (1991) and *Yellow Cabs: the Women who took off from Narita* (1992) which purported to expose the newfound popularity of foreign lovers among Japanese OL. This negative media reaction was to be expected for, as Hardacre has pointed out, since the 1970s any attempt by women to assert their right to independent sexual expression has tended to be 'stigmatized--even demonized' (1997: 14) by the tabloid press. Kinsella also argues that the press seem to be on the offensive against young women and points to 'a barrage of sexist stereotyping and insults--frequently propagated under the guise of media or academic social analysis' (1995: 250). The 'yellow cab' topos became a favourite site for the media to rehearse xenophobic anxieties about the invasion of the foreign Other. Japanese women who betrayed their race by sleeping with foreign men were seen as providing a gateway for AIDS to enter Japan; as Treat (1994: 647) points out 'AIDS in the Japanese mind is a foreigner's disease, not a gay one'. However, the participation of Japanese men in the sex trade, both at home and abroad, 'went unmentioned' in the media (Ma 1996: 65). The nadir of this kind of reporting occurred in 1993 when TBS aired a 'documentary' made up of staged footage employing a telephoto lens that purported to prove the loose morals of OLs on tour in Hawaii (McGregor 1996: 243).

The panic was not so much that Japanese men were being snubbed for foreigners in the marriage market, for, as many of the women who sought out foreign lovers pointed out, Japanese men were still considered preferable husbands⁴. The concern was over the way in which some women were using foreign boyfriends as playthings, as a way of flaunting convention and gaining status among their peers. As one of Kelsky's informants pointed out 'for playing around we want *gaijins*, for marriage we want a Japanese...it's better to keep a *gaijin* around for a little while to show off, like

a pet' (1994: 473)⁵. Despite the fact that *gaijin* in Japan are a limited and therefore prized commodity, OLs' large disposable incomes and comparatively extensive leisure time made it possible for them to invest considerable resources into finding and maintaining a *gaijin* lover. As Kelsky suggests, the *gaijin* lover became yet another commodity, a status symbol to be consumed and shown off among peers; the *gaijin* male became 'a thrilling but ultimately inert and "disposable" object' (1994: 473).

It is not the point of this article to analyse the negative response of male-dominated media in Japan to the supposed promiscuity of Japanese women or to investigate the truth behind Japanese women's supposedly voracious interest in foreign men. Rather, I look instead at how the yellow-cab controversy was used by women's media 'to find an arena in which to effectively criticize and challenge Japanese males' (Kelsky 1994: 465). As Kelsky points out, for the women who seek foreign boyfriends:

[T]he *gaijin* lover is a useful tool which allows them not only to flaunt convention and gain status among their peers, but also to engage in scathing although indirect critique against Japanese male behaviours, values and expectations. By persistently and pointedly contrasting the charms--sexual and otherwise--of the foreigner, with the alleged lack of charm of the Japanese male, these Japanese women are explicitly exercising a form of power and autonomy within the gender hierarchies of Japanese society. They transform the *gaijin* lover into a reflexive symbol through which they may reflect back the deficiencies of the Japanese male as lover, husband and friend (1994: 473).

Kelsky points out that throughout the 80s OLs developed increasingly complicated and sophisticated patterns of consumption. OLs, through purchasing western luxury goods and travelling to romantic and sophisticated western destinations, came to 'domesticate' the West in that 'Western goods were entirely contained as signifiers within a largely self-sufficient OL universe of style and status' (2001: 135). About 1987, a new phenomenon became discernible, the consumption of 'the "*gaijin* lover," the exotic sexual experience that represented the final frontier of the foreign left to consume' (2001: 136). Within Japan *gaijin* men were sought in the fashionable nightlife district of Roppongi as well as in similar areas of the port cities of Yokohama and Kobe and around Japan's many American army bases. Popular foreign tourist spots included Hawaii, Saipan, Bali, New York and the US West Coast.

This new interest of Japanese women was well reported in the press. In 1988 Cosmopolitan Japan was able to comment in an article illustrated with photos of 'heroic-looking white men' that 'We'd all like to be seen walking down the street with a *gaijin* boyfriend, wouldn't we, girls?' (cited by Kelsky 2001: 143). Men's media responded to this trend with outrage. *Shûkan Gendai* accused Japanese women who visited Hawaii of 'dancing on the tables in discos with their underpants showing for all to see.' *Shûkan Hōseki* said of Japanese women tourists that 'they may all pretend to be little ladies, but actually, in their hearts, each one wants to be the first to get a *gaijin* to bed' (cited in Kelsky 2001: 137).

Fantasies of sex with *gaijin* men were also imagined in manga and novels written by and for women, including a genre of *eromanga* (erotic comics) known as 'ladies comics' (Schodt 1996). As Kelsky points out (2001: 149) one of the most popular of these, *Comic Amour*, regularly features stories centred on white men. It is interesting to bear in mind that Japanese gay comics, of which there are four major ones, seldom feature stories about foreign men, white or black (McLelland 2000a).

Except in small clique publications⁶, foreign men are never featured as objects of desire in Japanese gay men's narratives.

Foreign men are not simply desired by Japanese women for their supposed penile prowess, however, but for what Ma calls the 'Western chivalry fantasy' (1996: 92) which she says is 'applied indiscriminately to every *gaijin* man [women] meet'. A common complaint in the yellow cab literature is that Japanese men, having been spoiled by their mothers, don't know how to treat women respectfully. As one woman who prefers foreign men, is quoted as saying: 'When I go to visit a British or Italian guy, they always...serve food and drinks themselves. But when I go to a Japanese guy's place...he tries to make me clean his room and cook his dinner' (cited in Kelsky 2001: 138). Apart from their superior physique, sophistication, international outlook and inherent sexiness, western men are understood to be *yasashii* (kind, considerate), a quality that Japanese men are said to lack.

Journalist Kudo Akiko summarised the many complaints Japanese women expressed about Japanese men in an article in the women's magazine *Fujin Kôron*⁷:

The reasons Japanese women reject Japanese men are not just physical...Women evaluate them badly in all areas--'they are childish and disgusting', 'they have a bad attitude toward women', 'they are fake and dishonest', 'they are narrow minded', 'they are bad mannered', 'they can't take care of themselves', 'they can't do housework'...Japanese men are the opposite of the Japanese GNP--they are the lowest in the world! (cited in Kelsky 2001: 138).

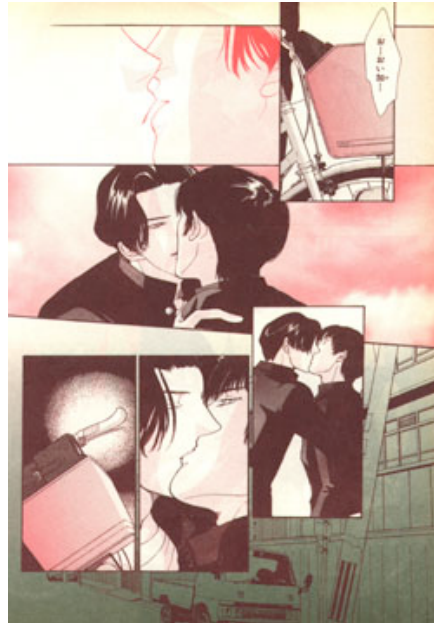
The yellow cab literature was characterised by the relentless denigration of Japanese men. For instance, in 1993, the derogatory term 'yellow cab' was reclaimed by Iizuka Makiko, a journalist living in California, who lambasted Japanese men in her book *The Guys who Can't even Hitch a Ride on a Cab*. In a series of chapters with titles such as 'Men without dreams must be dumped,' 'Infantile men must be dumped' and 'Thankless men must be dumped,' she catalogued Japanese men's supposed deficiencies, arguing that Japanese women's interest in foreign men was the result of Japanese men's 'lack of appeal' (cited in Kelsky 2001: 151).

As Kelsky points out, this discourse circulated entirely independently of foreign men themselves and was not based upon any objective comparison between Japanese and foreign men (as if there could be a meaningful comparison between such broad categories). Instead, she points out that Japanese women seem to 'know' that foreign men are chivalrous in much the same way that western men maintain orientalist fantasies about submissive Japanese women.

Gay men as women's 'best partners' in Japanese women's media

At approximately the same time as the yellow cab phenomenon was being debated in the Japanese media, a strikingly similar discussion was taking place, this time focusing on the apparent differences between Japanese straight and gay men. Between 1991 and 1994, the Japanese media underwent what became known as a 'gay boom' (*gei bûmu*) (McLelland 2000a: 32-37) in which the previously taboo topic of homosexuality began to be openly discussed and in some contexts celebrated. As in the yellow cab debate, it was Japanese women who were both key players in and consumers of this new media discussion, and the focus was, once more, on the advantages and disadvantages of different kinds of men.

The apparently sudden interest in gay men in mainstream media did not arise out of nowhere since Japanese women's media, in particular, have long been fascinated by sexually ambiguous male figures. The 'beautiful youth' (*bishônen*), for instance, common in women's comics since the early 70s, is an androgynous figure who unites the best of male and female (McLelland 2000b).



'Beautiful boys' make out in the girls'manga *B-boy*, courtesy of Biburosu publications, Tokyo

These youths, who are frequently depicted as in love with each other, are placed in typically female roles: either as victims of an aggressive, adult male sexuality or as pure romantic heroes and are consumed by women as fantasy partners. They embody a more beautiful or 'pure' form of love than that which exists between men and women, constrained as such love is by the reproductive demands of the patriarchal family system.

The event credited with having sparked the boom was the publication of a special edition of the lifestyle magazine *CREA* (February 1991) entitled 'Gay Renaissance' (McLelland 1999; 2000a). One key article was entitled 'Women who aim at spending a pleasurable life with gays'. The article assumed throughout that gay men were radically different from their straight counterparts: a subheading stated that 'Women who have gay friends basically like...splendour and refinement'. The article went on to stress that friendships with gay men involve an intimacy that is impossible with straight men, one woman stating that 'When we snuggle up together, it's not in the least unpleasant, it feels like petting a cat'.

The article further suggested that having to constantly compete with men on unequal terms causes many women to feel exhausted but that a gay partner can 'relieve this exhaustion'. Hence, unlike the patriarchal 'other' against which women have to battle in order to win social space for female subjectivity, gay men are women's allies, described as nurturing women in much the same way that women are expected to nurture men.

Other articles about gay men appeared in a wide variety of journals and magazines. These included an issue of *Gendai no esupuri* (August 1990) entitled 'Images of transgender;' *EUREKA* (May 1993) entitled 'Gay culture;' *Takarajima* (9 December

1993) entitled 'Gay men themselves tell all there is to know about the meaning of love between men;' *Hot Dog* (10 January 1994) entitled 'Homosexuality: the latest situation;' and *Marco Polo* (February 1994) entitled 'Gays in ordinary clothes.'

Mass media such as television, too, fuelled the boom by airing discussions and dramas focused on homosexuality. These included an episode of a popular television dating game that featured gay men aired in 1992 (Buckley 1994: 174) and *Dôsoikai* (Alumni reunion) (Miller 1997; 2000), Japan's first soap drama to graphically represent a love affair between men, which was aired in 1993. Several books discussing gay men written by straight women were also published at this time, including Iida Makiko's *Homosexuals* (1994), Nomura Sachiyo's⁸ *Can You Judge men? Here Are 17 Checkpoints* (1995) and Kurigi Chieko's (1996) *America's Gays: a Story of Love and Liberation*. However, despite this explosion of interest in gay men's lives⁹ and extensive discussion about them, many Japanese gay men became cynical about the media's interest, labelling it 'voyeuristic' (McLelland 2000a). One man in Yajima's collection of gay men's life stories goes so far as to state that 'The "gay boom" is really about Japanese women facing their own sexuality by constructing a fantasy which refuses the distortions and bad influences thrust upon them by male society' (1997: 178).

The positioning of gay men as like women (who also happen to *like* women) led to the view, explored in a variety of media, that gay men are better able to understand women and thus make better partners for them. This construction is apparent in two 'gay boom' movies: *Okoge* (Nakajima Takehiro, 1992) and *Kira Kira Hikaru* (Matsuoka George, 1992) and one television soap drama, *Dôsoikai* (NTV, 1993). Although the two movies and the soap are ostensibly about the relationship between gay men, the central figures in all the stories are young straight women who try to encourage and support the relationships between the men.

In *Okoge* the heroine Sayoko has been sexually abused by her father-in-law leading her to associate straight men with abuse. When she sees the gay lovers, Tochi and Goh, kissing at the beach, she finds the scene irresistibly attractive, later commenting that 'it was beautiful, your kiss.' Like the love between beautiful youths in women's comics, the gay relationship in this movie is presented in terms attractive to women. Sayoko tells the gay men that she 'feels at ease' with them. Goh, the younger of the two lovers, is gendered female in several ways in this movie. Firstly, he is an artisan, making women's handbags at home. It is he who does the cooking for Tochi and Sayoko, giving her instructions on how to make and heat up food. Furthermore, when his mother falls ill due to the neglect of his older brother and his wife, it is he, not his sister-in-law who becomes the caregiver, shown bathing and feeding his mother. His sister-in-law at one stage comments 'It's a good job for us he's gay, a normal man would never act like this!'

The connection between straight men and abuse is further reinforced when Sayoko is raped by a straight man she meets in a gay bar. (She had been warned already by the bartender that the man was straight because he was wearing a vulgar necktie and cufflinks, something a gay man would never do.) She becomes pregnant, and after giving birth, mother and child are abused and eventually deserted by the father. Destitute, she turns for help to a transvestite bar, pursued by yakuza loan sharks. The drag queens stage a battle with the loan sharks, rescue mother and baby and lend her money. Goh, distraught over the end of his relationship with Tochi, has been unaware of the crisis Sayoko has been put through. When he finds out, he moves in with her to become the father of her baby (thus fulfilling Sayoko's dream of a happy marriage with a gay man). The final scene shows Sayoko, Goh and

the baby walking late at night through Tokyo's famous gay town, Shinjuku ni-chome, surrounded by drag queens, butch clones and exotic foreigners: the gay 'other' has been naturalised. Goh, Sayoko and her baby have become a 'real' family, one defined by sentiment not role-play.

Similarly, the main character in *Kira Kira Hikaru* (Matsuoka George 1992; released in English as *Twinkle*) is a young woman. Shôko is prone to alcoholism and depression and is told by a doctor that marriage will 'cure' her malaise and is subjected to a series of *o-miai* meetings (marriage introductions) by her concerned parents. It is only when Mutsuki, a prospective groom, tells her that he prefers men, that she agrees to marry him. Like Sayoko, Shôko also tries to nurture the relationship between her husband and his lover Kon, sensing that Mutsuki cannot be happy without him. However, concerned with keeping up appearances, Mutsuki refuses to see Kon and this plunges all three into depression. Shôko, however, perseveres, and after a series of trying events the three seem to come to an understanding. Because of her persistence and her concern for his welfare, Mutsuki comes to return Shôko's love (albeit Platonically); the implication at the end of the movie is that the three of them will somehow work out a way of being together. Here is another 'real' family whose shared feelings expose the empty formalism of the more socially accepted family relationships that surround and seek to judge them.

The 'homosexual' drama that gained most mainstream attention in Japan was, however, a ten-week mini series entitled *Dôsôkai* (Alumni reunion) that was broadcast nationally on the private network NTV in the autumn of 1993. This drama was remarkable for a number of reasons, particularly for its unflinching depiction of erotic attraction between men who are shown in various states of undress, showering naked together, kissing, masturbating and making love.

Like the two gay boom movies discussed above, this drama also features a strong female character, Natsuki, whose husband, *Fûma*, is battling with his homosexual desires. These desires propel him first into the arms of his best friend, Atari, with whom he has been infatuated since his high-school days and later into an affair with Arashi, a seventeen-year-old bisexual hustler. Since *Fûma* has been unable to consummate the marriage, Natsuki is aware that something is wrong and soon comes to realise that her husband has homosexual desires. There is a remarkable scene where *Fûma* and Atari go away together to spend the weekend at a country cottage since Atari has agreed, out of his deep love and sympathy for *Fûma*, to make love to him for one weekend but one weekend only. The episode in which *Fûma* finally consummates his love for Atari is prefaced by a scene that shows Natsuki addressing *Fûma*'s empty bed. She says that she loves *Fûma* and that so long as he is happy, then he is free to do anything he likes. The immediate juxtaposition of this scene with the dream-like sequence in which *Fûma* and Atari make love suggests that she is actually picturing the scenario in her imagination as she speaks. In this scene, as in similar scenes in *Okoge* and *Kira Kira Hikaru*, a straight woman facilitates then imagines and endorses the love between men. Remarkably, the revelation of *Fûma*'s homosexuality does not alienate him from his wife but brings the couple closer together. The gender roles in the marriage are reversed as *Fûma* is represented as the vulnerable, powerless partner in need of his wife's public and private support.¹⁰ In the final scene of the series, after the murder of *Fûma*'s lover Arashi, Natsuki is shown trying to matchmake on her husband's behalf by inviting a construction worker, who is the splitting image of Arashi, back home to dinner. In Japanese society the home is constructed as an asexual space and so by inviting a male lover to return and share it with her husband, Natsuki offers a direct slap in the face to conventional moral values.

Neither of these movies nor the TV drama are really about 'gay men' but are best understood as rhetorical devices for the expression of women's discontent. They are about Japanese women's alienation from traditional family role-play as much as they are about the difficulties of being gay in modern Japan. In these dramas, like in other gay boom representations, gay men are not shown as separate from women's lives and concerns (as might be expected), but, instead, are constructed as women's best friends, ideal partners and allies in the battle to win increased space for female subjectivity (McLelland 1999). Ironically these strong-willed, independent women are represented as just as marginalised by mainstream notions of family life as are the gay men.

Unlike the yellow cab controversy that was supplanted in the mid-90s by a new panic concerning women's sexuality: the so-called 'compensated dating' (*enjô kôsai*) supposedly on the increase among high-school girls (Kawai 1997)¹¹, the media have continued to report on women's infatuation with gay men. For instance, sparked by the scandal surrounding the Olympic athlete Arimori Yûko and her gay American husband, the popular weekly magazine, *SPA!* (18 March 1998), known for its sensationalist coverage, published an article with the title 'The reason why gays choose to marry women and women choose to marry gays' in which some interesting issues are raised with regard to the nature of homosexuality, marriage and inter-sex relationships.

Although the article problematises marriages between women and gays (*gei*), terming them 'counterfeit' (*gisô*), it goes on to acknowledge that some women consciously marry gay men. A subheading suggests that some women consider marriage to gay men to be 'more convenient' than to 'ordinary men' (*futsû no otoko*) and an inset displays the 'marriage corner' personal ads from *Barazoku*, a gay magazine, and states that 'there are a large number of ads addressed to gays from women.' One twenty-nine-year-old 'straight woman' (*sutorêto no josei*) writes in the *Barazoku* marriage column, 'I'm thinking of marrying a gay man. I am healthy and financially independent. I would like to live together and have children if possible. I'm waiting for replies from sincere people who live in the city.'

What, the article asks, does a straight woman expect from gay men? There seems to be a variety of expectations. One woman thinks that gay men are more 'calm' (*yasuragi*) and 'comforting' (*iyashi*) than straight men (*nonke*). Other women mention wanting to marry men who will share the housework: 'the gay men I know are all domestic. I don't expect my husband to do all the housework but men who can do housework are attractive. If you need sex, then I don't mind if you get a lover just for that.' The article suggests that 'the fact that straight men are considered to lack these qualities is a point for reflection'. However, just as intriguing is the question not discussed in the article of why gay men in particular are considered to have them?

Discussions of the marriage relationship in Japan frequently point out how 'affective' issues are down played in favour of economics (Iwao 1993: 69). Refsing argues that in Japan 'marriage has been perceived as a practical arrangement in which two *outwardly compatible* persons with unambiguous role definitions enter into the socially well defined project of establishing a family' (1995: 345; my emphasis). The construct of marriage as a 'project' is clear in some gay men's discussions of the 'marriage problem'. Fushimi Noriaki, whose book *Private Gay Life* (1991) was an important contribution to Japan's 'gay boom,' argues that 'even if a man is gay, I think it is fine for him to live with a woman as part of a mutual reproduction project (*saiseisan purojekuto*)' (1991: 17). He defines this 'project' as 'a partnership based

on the possibility of working together to give birth to and bring up a child' (1991: 17), arguing that for many people 'love and sex life are different' (1991: 17). In his book, which is targeted as much at straight women as it is at gay men, Fushimi gives a bleak analysis of the current state of marriage and women's rights in Japan. His advice to 'smart women' is to 'become feminist' (1991: 94). Fushimi, like many women who participated in the yellow cab debate, echoes the idea that Japanese men are hopelessly backward. As he says in *Super Love*, a book addressed to straight Japanese women, 'Men are slow to change and should hurry up...gay men and women who are being themselves should join hands: let's make a paradise' (1998: 5).

Common themes in the 'yellow cab' and 'gay boom' debates

Although at first the yellow cab controversy and the gay boom may seem unrelated, it is significant that they both took off at approximately the same time and both are concerned with Japanese women's definitions of 'ideal men'. The images of the ideal man that arise from both discourses have many things in common. For instance, the kind, chivalrous, foreign man is considered to be more handsome and more charming than a Japanese man could ever be. What's more, he is not only thought to be able to look after himself, but is also thought capable of sharing household chores with his female partner. The Japanese gay man, too, is not only more handsome and better dressed than his straight counterpart but is more 'comforting' and sensitive to women's problems. Unlike straight men, gay men are inherently meticulous and love to do housework. Like foreign men, Japanese gay men are understood to be women's 'best partners' (*besuto pâtonâ*).

Gay men, like the *gaijin* in the yellow cab debate, are also positioned as commodities available for consumption by Japanese women. Women seek out gay men through the 'marriage corners' of gay magazines or, as *okoge*¹², in gay bars, much as they do *gaijin* through dating agencies, conversation clubs and international nightspots. When not sought out for the purpose of marriage, gay men, like *gaijin*, can be kept around as pets. Gay men, like *gaijin* (so long as they remain in Japan), are also largely dependent on their female partners. In the case of gay men, women help them to pass as straight thus relieving pressure from families and workmates and ensuring their social advancement. For *gaijin*, Japanese women provide the means for greater integration into Japanese society, offer valuable translation services and are often a source of financial as well as emotional support.

However, the greatest similarity between the *gaijin* and the gay is (to borrow Karen Kelsky's terminology) the 'rhetorical effect' of Japanese women's exaggerated praise of these otherwise liminal figures. Kelsky argues that the discourse of internationalism in women's media, of which the idolisation of foreign men is part,

Allow[s] women to challenge hierarchies of the native over the foreign, of male over female, of the nation over the world, and construct an alternative reality under which all that had been maligned is now revered, all that had been revered, now rejected (1999: 298).

In the yellow cab debates, women rejected Japanese men in favour of the foreigner onto whom were projected all the hopes a new generation of women had for more equitable and open relationships. Japanese men were ridiculed as hopelessly backward, entirely incapable of forming loving relationships with women based on equality. Women's interest in the gay boom narratives and idolisation of gay men represents a similar inversion, this time of the hetero/homo binary. Whereas previously the homosexual had been a despised or at best redundant figure in terms

of the patriarchal family, he is now 'revered,' held up as a mirror, reflecting back all those qualities that women most desire but that straight Japanese men are considered unable to deliver. In relation to gay men, Japanese straight men are also represented as 'slow', as falling behind, of being unable to keep up with women's heightened expectations and horizons.

Kelsky points out that in the yellow cab debates 'the West becomes gendered, for it is the Western male who is made to embody Western modernity and to stand in contrast to the "backwardness" of Japanese males' (1999: 238). I would suggest that in domestic terms the same symbolisation takes place with the gay Japanese man being held up as a signifier of modernity and progress and the straight Japanese man being dismissed for his inability to adapt to a changing world. As Kelsky argues 'it is clear...that the [straight] Japanese male is the invisible but central point of reference in this female discussion' (1996: 182). The yellow cab debates were not really about foreign men, just as the gay boom representations are not really about gay men; rather Japanese women attribute these positive traits to *gaijin* men (and Japanese gay men) 'for exclusively rhetorical purposes' (Kelsky 1996: 184). Both the foreign man and the Japanese gay man become 'a reflexive symbol in an indirect discourse of complaint; a mirror against which the Japanese woman can reflect back the deficiencies of [straight] Japanese men as lovers, husbands and friends (Kelsky 1996: 184)'.

Conclusion

Were the debates about 'yellow cabs' and the 'gay boom' simply media discourses, just fantasies with no relation to actual people or real lives? Kelsky's interpretation of the yellow cab phenomenon would suggest not. She argues that the 'persistent critique of Japanese *ikikata* [lifestyle] and gender roles...are an integral part of a larger challenge to long-standing assumptions in Japan governing women's (and men's) life courses as well as the institutions that impose them' (2001: 225). Feminist activism in Japan has not gained the same kind of mainstream attention that it has in some Western countries (Kurihara 1993) and *feminisuto* is not a label that many Japanese women would identify with. Japanese women seem not to be interested in organising on a mass scale around issues that disadvantage them or in confronting male-dominated institutions head-on (Kelsky 2001: 218-9)¹³.

This does not mean, however, that Japanese women remain silent, but find roundabout ways of criticising the men in their lives. As McKinstry and McKinstry point out in their analysis of 'complaints against husbands' in a popular newspaper advice column 'wives in Japan are currently re-evaluating their spousal relations, and a large number of them find their husbands to be a source of irritation' (1991: 198). This 'indirect discourse of complaint' is apparent throughout women's media in which women voice their discontent with a range of male attitudes and behaviours, using previously liminal figures such as foreign and gay men to strike at the heart of Japanese society: the patriarchal family. Whereas extremely few Japanese women actually marry foreign men or consciously marry gay Japanese men, the media interest surrounding 'women who marry *gaijin*' and 'women who marry gays' has provided Japanese women with a forum for making startling and hard-hitting criticisms of traditional Japanese masculinity. Had these criticisms been voiced in a more conventionally 'feminist' language or context, they would certainly not have received the same amount of media attention or have been taken so seriously. These two debates therefore provided a vehicle for rhetoric that involved the participation of far more women than were personally interested in either foreign men or

Japanese gay men and are an example of how popular culture can inadvertently be deployed for feminist ends.

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Endnotes

¹ The title of this paper is a play on *Tsuma kagami* (A Mirror for Women), a popular religious tract written in 1300 by Mujû Ichien, a Zen monk, which points out women's deficiencies as followers of the Buddha's Way.

² *Gaijin* is a contraction of the term *gaikokujin* meaning 'person from an outside country' and is faintly derogatory. When used without modification it usually signifies a white North American or European.

³ For a discussion of the connection between Kelsky's work and my own see Karen Kelsky's 'Japanese women's diaspora: an interview' in *Intersections*, issue 4: <http://www.she.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/issue4/karen.html>

⁴ Ishii-Kuntz (1993: 57) points out that 'masculinity' in Japan is 'equated with men's ability to provide financially;' the husband's role is one of provider not lover. This is exemplified in the common phrase *Teishu wa genki de rusu ga yoi* (A good husband is healthy and away from home).

⁵ Relationships in which men are younger and economically less powerful than women trouble Japan's sex/gender system as is clear in the term *otoko pettogata* (man-as-pet type) applied to women who marry such partners.

⁶ Japanese gay men who like foreigners are known as *gaisen* or 'outsider specialists.' For a discussion of sexual 'types' in Japan, see McLelland 2000a: 124-7).

⁷ Although the media debate over the yellow cab issue gave women an opportunity to voice their discontent with Japanese men and establishment values, there was never any unitary standpoint on the issue reflected in women's media. As McKinstry and McKinstry have pointed out, Japanese media are characterised by both deep frustration and frantic conservatism. They state that 'Women's magazines lash out at the male establishment, but at the same time almost as much space in the popular media is given to the argument that women should give up the idea of working in serious career-type jobs and stay at home and take care of their children' (1991: 7).

⁸ Nomura Sachiyo, who is an important television personality and advice guru, offers a particularly stereotypical description of gay men. She suggests that you can 'check out' if a man is gay by his handsome, refined appearance, meticulous dress sense, preference for perfume, tidy, well-decorated apartment and superior cooking ability (1995: 138; see also McLelland 1999: 84).

⁹ Lesbians were seldom mentioned.

¹⁰ The elevation of Natsuki's status is also signified by the change in her mother-in-law's attitude towards her. Her previously distant and slightly contemptuous attitude is completely

transformed when she hears rumours of her son's homosexuality. Natsuki suddenly becomes the guarantor of her son's heterosexual credentials and enables the family to maintain their face. Natsuki thereby becomes empowered in relations with her in-laws with whom they reside.

¹¹ Both the Japanese and the foreign press united in condemning these 'schoolgirl prostitutes,' *Newsweek* going so far as to run a front cover with the headline 'Japan's Dirty Secret: Schoolgirls Selling Sex' (23/12/96). Whereas the *Newsweek* article blamed the 'spiritual wasteland' of contemporary Japanese society for the problem, the Japanese media blamed the schoolgirls themselves. Kawai Hayao (1997: 47), writing in the popular journal *Sekai* (Society) was outraged that 'the attitude of these girls is casual and devoid of any sense of guilt' and that the girls involved were from 'good families' and not 'dysfunctional or economically deprived families.' Predictably the role played by the girls' middle-aged male clients went unmentioned.

¹² *Okoge* is the burnt residue that sticks to the bottom of the *okama* (literally a 'rice pot' but also a common slang term for gay men) and can be translated as 'fag hag'. It was popularised by the 1992 movie of the same name described above. During the gay boom several gay bars in Tokyo's gay town of Shinjuku ni-chome advertised '*okoge* nights' (usually on Tuesdays or Wednesdays which are slow nights) for straight women to come and experience the atmosphere of a gay bar; this no longer seems to be the case.

¹³ One possible reason for this is the strong cultural assumption that the disadvantageous situations that women find themselves in are, in some sense, their own fault. For instance, McKinstry and McKinstry's analysis of the advice offered in the *Jinsei annai* column of the *Daily Yomiuri* concerning 'complaints against husbands' shows that time and again the advisers asked the women to reflect upon how they might be responsible for causing the negative behaviour they complained of in their husbands: they discovered that 'quite often distraught wives [were] blamed by respondents for the very complaint they have made against their husbands' (1991: 50) and that 'some advice is excessively severe with complaining wives' (1991: 57). Divorce was never suggested as a possibility unless the writer had already mentioned it herself (1991: 65); in fact as McKinstry and McKinstry point out 'throughout this project we did not encounter any replies giving the slightest encouragement to any kind of unconventional behaviour' (1991: 28).

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