

slender and sensitive, and by wearing women's clothes he is transformed into the most beautiful girl. All girls adore him, not last because he is also a non-threatening male, an ideal device for a (pre-) pubescent female readership not quite at ease with that thing called sexuality. He is the delicate eternal youth catching the fancy of both male and female, gay and straight. Often he is portrayed as being exceptionally talented and intelligent. In the drawings of Takabatake Kasho, Buruma has observed:

"A typical (picture) of a *bishounen* is one in a short kimono or sailor suit being instructed by an older boy in horse riding or fencing. Another popular motif is the *bishounen* in distress, bullied by older boys (...) or caught in a frightful storm at sea. He is invariably rescued by an older mentor who puts his protective arm around the boy's willowy waist. When the pretty youth is pictured alone, he is playing a flute like Adonis, or staring admirably at the moon, or taking a bath, or lying down in the grass, a book of poetry in his sensitive hands." (Buruma 84;125)

Love stories between two handsome boys are often represented in the idiom of high romance and the emphasis is put on the emotional side of the relationship between the two individuals. But because of the androgyny of the characters, it is yet not clearly defined whether the figures are really boys or if they possibly are girls in drag. In that case, the reading could be said to serve the purpose of exploring same-sex feelings or even auto-erotic feelings.

However, the stories are also made even more erotic and fascinating because of the slightly sinister aspects. The *shoujo* audience is offered generous amounts of rape, prostitution and sado-masochism between men depicted in their comics.

This obviously raises some questions. In an attempt to understand, we need to look at some social aspects concerning teenagers in Japan.

To become an adult in Japan is (unlike in the West) not associated with becoming independent and enjoying more freedom, but to be able to cooperate in society and to fulfill one's duties towards the employers and the family. The Japanese proverb, that says "a nail that sticks out must be hammered in" illustrates quite well how much tolerance there is about for individualists. This means that when a youngster reaches the age of puberty, he/she will realise that the age of being carefree is drawing to its close. For girls,

the primary task of co-operating in society is to get married and become a good mother. Even if more and more young women postpone the date of getting married, it is still regarded as odd, if a woman has past her twenties and is still not married. The traditional approach is to find the most suitable partner for a girl, if there is love, is a secondary issue.

This has triggered a movement of subtle rebellion among adolescent girls, a trend called "Cute". It first appeared in the mid seventies and lasted until the early nineties. Apart from it being triggered and led by girls, this trend was primarily characterised by the fact that it celebrated everything which was "childlike, sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak and inexperienced" (Kinsella 95:220) It manifested itself in various forms: girls and boys dressed as children, i.e. clothes were used to make the distinction between the genders disappear; a "cute" handwriting, big with round edges, a slang whereby some words were pronounced the way a toddler would pronounce his or her first words; and also a huge fancy goods industry ("Hello Kitty", "Pokemon") and even a "cute" food industry of sweet and soft foods.

The representation of cute characters is predominant in *shoujo manga*. But the cute movement, as well as the stories of *shoujo manga*, has been immensely criticized of being escapist. The creators of these magazines have never denied this. The retreat into a child world and the celebration of everything childlike might just be one form of escapism from the crushing adult reality. Fantasy creatures, monsters, homosexuals, transvestites, foreign settings (like Europe or America, but also outer space), visions of a world with a reversed social and biological order- everything that is treated in *shoujo manga*- are further sites where young girls (and increasingly young boys) can find a sort of refuge.

Escapist or not, these comics are unique in the world. They represent the strong presence of an all-girl subculture within a male-dominated society. Of the whole output of manga comics in Japan, *shoujo manga* still represents a minority, and not all deal with homosexuality and transgenderism. But still, it has become a kind of ground where the discourse about being a girl can take place but also where erotic reading is designed to suit the female taste only. Something that would most probably be much appreciated over here.

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