

Fostering Japan Sexuality Studies Through Love and Labour

[Laura Miller](#)

Professors who spend their academic lives pursuing research topics and threads that will not necessarily reap rewards or merit, especially when this research might actually be detrimental to their careers, are indeed engaged in a labour of love. The concept of 'labour of love' easily characterises the prolific research contributions from Mark McLelland. Yet we should never forget that serious hard work was involved in his prolific publication output and his many important service and teaching activities.

By any yardstick it is clear that Mark's writing had an immense impact on Japan sexuality studies and gender studies. Let me provide one minor example that illustrates his wide-ranging and original thinking. One of my research topics had been on male beauty work and the appreciation of the *bishōnen*, the beautiful young man.^[1] The *bishōnen* typically appeared in boys love or BL manga, the popular media about male–male romance primarily consumed by girls and women. It was frustrating to read scholarly analyses of BL media that psychologised this trend. Some scholars suggested that BL media served as vehicles for girls and women to fantasise themselves as these characters and to therefore escape gender role restrictions, a type of displacement necessitated by a sexist culture. Others saw interest in BL as avoidance of adult womanhood, or perhaps as a covert opportunity for girls to aspire to masculine ideals. Because these explanations were never very convincing, it was refreshing to find that Mark was one of the few scholars who thought we should not treat straight women's interest in male–male romance as problematic or in need of explanation. In his writing he pointed out that doing so negates the possibility of uncomplicated erotic interest, that such explanations can be reductionist, that these ideas pathologise manga readers and deny the complexities of both desire and identification. Mark wrote, 'Underlying these arguments is the assumption that in a non-sexist world women would “naturally” choose heterosexual fantasy.'^[2] He was very perceptive about this domain just as he was with so many others related to gender and sexuality, even when they may not have been directly related to his own gay male identity.

Mark was never one to shy away from controversial or unconventional subjects, although he always approached them with the upmost diplomacy, often paired with sociological bewilderment that anything as utterly human as sex and sexuality could possibly be off limits as a topic of research. As his friend Alan McKee wrote, 'And this will be, for me, Mark's biggest impact on porn studies—modelling how to be unabashed in exploring controversial culture in a way that does not put people offside.'^[3] Mark had been working on aspects of legal challenges facing scholars and consumers of manga, such as the criminalisation and arrest of Canadian and Australian fans who possessed black-and-white images of fictional characters that could have been interpreted as minors. As part of this research trajectory, he organised one of the most rewarding conferences I have ever been invited to participate in: Manga Futures: Institutional and Fan Approaches in Japan and Beyond, held in 2014 at the University of Wollongong (with co-sponsorship from the International Manga Research Center at Kyoto Seika University).

For the Manga Futures conference he brought together the involvement of diverse researchers, manga artists and manga fans who could forward the discussion of many thorny issues. From Alisa Freedman, I learned about the unintentional pirating of Japanese media by American student-fans through their scanlation and fansubbing practices, and from Patrick Galbraith the soul-crushing and obstructionist behaviours a manga scholar may encounter from Anglophone publishers. At no other conference could I have learned from an attorney such as Yamaguchi Takashi, who defends manga artists accused of violating obscenity laws, or have met a genuine manga celebrity like Takemiya Keiko (also the then President of Kyoto Seika University). I returned home from Australia with memories of great beers, new friendships formed, inspired presentations and, most of all, the model Mark provided of a gracious, energetic and intelligent host. Many of us rarely attend conferences that are simultaneously rich in pleasure and intellectually rewarding. The treasured edited volume stemming from the conference sits proudly on my bookshelf.^[4]



Figure 1. Photograph of James Welker, Laura Miller, Alisa Freedman, Mark McLelland and Patrick Galbraith at the Five Islands Brewery in Wollongong after the Manga Futures Conference, 2014, photograph by Vera Mackie.

Leading up to the Manga Futures conference and the edited volume, Mark had organised a series of related workshops and conference roundtables. As he collected feedback from participants his project expanded beyond his ongoing efforts to advocate for more culturally literate legislation about Japanese media exports to include issues he had not previously considered. For example, there is the problem of student sensibilities and teaching students with deeply held religious views who complain to administrators about university course content. There is the issue of cultural gatekeeper interference and criticism, which may result in attempts to have Japan-focused events or talks sponsored by university academics and scholars censured or cancelled. And perhaps most commonly, non-scholarly criticism of our use of specific research materials in research and teaching. In 2014, Mark organised a session at the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) Annual Meeting in Philadelphia on 'The end of cool Japan? Ethical and legal issues in teaching Japanese popular culture to undergraduate students.' A group of us spoke about some of the problems and concerns we encounter in our teaching. In my presentation I recounted a common experience:

After mentioning or sharing images from BL manga in a public lecture, a Japanese person in the audience would invariably protest that, as a native Japanese who had never heard of BL manga, non-Japanese people had no right to bring up something they, a Japanese person, themselves considered uncommon. The astonishing thing was that the identical script happened at that very AAS session as well. This was described in my contribution to Mark's edited volume:

At the conclusion, a scholar from Japan in the audience accused us of being 'colonial orientalists' who were telling undergraduate students 'weird' things about Japan, thus reinforcing what we had expressed as one of the many problems we face. She questioned our interest in 'trivial' aspects of Japanese culture which, she claimed, are unfamiliar to most Japanese. She later complained that it is wrong for us to present such 'misleading visuals' to innocent students and to conference audiences. It's not often that our presentations are matched with unscripted criticisms that unintentionally yet perfectly substantiate our arguments.^[5]

In the months following the conference we often joked about this unexpected confirmation of how cultural gatekeepers operate. Knowing my interest in Himiko, the third-century shaman ruler of an ancient confederation of chiefdoms in Yamatai described by Chinese ethnohistorians, Mark sent me an email containing a Himiko information nugget. It turns out that in 1987 'Himiko' was the name for a monthly lesbian club event that was held at New Sazae, a Tokyo gay bar and disco.^[6] Among his many riffs on the AAS gatekeeper's attempted sanction were tongue-in-check warnings that I should be careful when writing about the Himiko bar event because 'talking about lesbians might make some straight Japanese women feel uncomfortable,' and 'you shouldn't talk about things that Jesus wouldn't like. Except guns.' Such was the hidden labour of Mark's kindness: He always scanned the world with his friends' interests at the back of his mind and made efforts to share interesting or useful tidbits with them.

Mark was a kind and loving person, although that did not mean he lacked a sharp wit. He often issued, with a completely deadpan expression, hilarious zingers and cutting assessments. He knew how to cast shade. At the same time, he deeply appreciated cats, gardens and friends. He wanted all his people to get along with each other and felt unhappy when they were squabbling. He went out of his way to arrange social events and meetings to get people talking to each other. Judging from my own experience and from observations he was very successful at this. I feel grateful to have known such an incredible scholar, facilitator of people around the globe and generous good soul.

Notes

[1] See for example Laura Miller, 'Male beauty work in Japan,' in *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary Japan: Dislocating the Salaryman Doxa*, edited by James Roberson and Nobue Suzuki, 37–58, New York: Routledge, 2003; and Laura Miller, 'Extreme makeover for a Heian-era Wizard,' *Mechademia* 3 (2008): 30–45, *Project MUSE*, doi: [10.1353/mec.0.0034](https://doi.org/10.1353/mec.0.0034).

[2] Mark McLelland, 'Why are Japanese girls' comics full of boys bonking?,' in *Intensities: The Journal of Cult Media*, 1(1) (2001): 1–9, p. 1, URL: <https://intensitiescultmedia.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/mclelland.pdf>, accessed 10 Dec. 2021.

[3] Alan McKee, 'Remembering Mark McLelland,' *Porn Studies* 8(1) (2021): 132–33, doi: [10.1080/23268743.2021.1875643](https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2021.1875643).

[4] Mark McLelland (ed.), *The End of Cool Japan: Ethical, Legal, and Cultural Challenges to Japanese Popular Culture*, New York: Routledge, 2016, doi: [10.4324/9781315637884](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315637884).

[5] Laura Miller, 'Scholar girl meets manga maniac, media specialist, and cultural gatekeeper,' in *The End of Cool Japan*, edited by Mark McLelland, 51–69, New York: Routledge, 2016.

[6] The Himiko lesbian club event was also noted in Mark McLelland, Katsuhiko Suganuma and James Welker, 'Timeline of Queer Japan,' in their edited *Queer Voices from Japan: First-Person Narratives from Japan's Sexual Minorities*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007, 317–28, p. 322.

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