

Mark McLelland and Queer Careers in Japan Studies

[James Welker](#)

Mark McLelland may not be responsible for my academic career, but my early encounters with Mark the person as well as McLelland's scholarship certainly played a formative role. For that I will forever be grateful. I know I am not alone in this. Mark and I first connected through his important contributions to Japanese queer studies in English, and I would like to offer reflections here on that body of work with reference to the personal connections it engendered and their far-reaching consequences. While queer or LGBT studies represent just a portion of McLelland's scholarship, in my narrow focus here I hope to point to both his significance as a scholar and the ways that he helped other scholars—even while he was still struggling to establish himself.

His first monograph, *Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan*, based on his PhD work at the University of Hong Kong, was what first seems to have made many scholars in Japanese studies, Asian studies, sexuality studies, and queer studies aware of the then-emerging scholar Mark McLelland some twenty years ago.^[1] This groundbreaking book was the first full-length academic study in English focused on contemporary gay life in Japan and its cultural representation. That it was published in 2000—when there was still a real taboo against such scholarship in Japanese Studies and in Asian Studies more broadly—makes his first book still more significant—and, at the time, a rather risky career move. This widely cited monograph covers history, identity and representation, issues that one might expect for such a groundbreaking book. It also contains a chapter on the boys love (BL) genre of *shōjo* manga (girls' comics), some of the earliest work in English on this genre.^[2] He would continue to write on this topic and eventually co-edited the volume *Boys Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan* with other contributors to this issue of *Intersections*, Kazumi Nagaike, Katsuhiko Suganuma, and me. BL would also spur his later work on censorship in- and outside Japan and on the possible 'end of cool Japan' itself.^[3]

Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan was what led me to get in touch with Mark about my own research while I was working on an MA thesis in the School of East Asian Studies at the University of Sheffield on the lesbian community in Japan. In keeping with what I would later learn was Mark's apparently limitless scholarly generosity, he quickly and helpfully replied to whatever I had asked him—a question long lost to the recesses of my memory, even as my first interaction with Mark continues to reverberate with me some two decades later. Not long thereafter, Mark invited me, still an MA student, to present a paper at the third AsiaPacifiQueer conference, held in Melbourne in December 2002. It was at that conference that I began to forge personal connections with scholars working on Queer Asian Studies. Thanks to that first interaction and to both the kindness Mark continued to show me as well as his interest in my research, one opportunity led to another for me—opportunities which sometimes came from Mark directly and sometimes came about more tangentially.^[4] The early publications and presentations that I accomplished thanks to these opportunities played no small part in me being able to enter the PhD program in East Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of Illinois in 2005 with

generous funding and subsequently being offered several major grants to fund my dissertation research. As is so often the case, one opportunity beget another. While I, of course, had to make the most of these opportunities, it is no understatement to say that I owe my career, in part, to Mark.

McLelland's second monograph, *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age*, (Figure 1) published in 2005, reflected a historical turn in his research and his first deep dive into the mid-twentieth-century press, specifically *hentai zasshi*, which he referred to as the 'perverse press'.^[5] At the time, this media was only beginning to be explored by scholars working in Japan, and in the course of this research, Mark began to promote the work of some of these scholars, sometimes by providing opportunities to publish in translation.^[6] By giving us a window onto a small but significant aspect of early postwar queer culture, *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age* helped push against the popular idea that what was then called 'lesbian and gay' culture in Japan was largely copying or otherwise derivative of lesbian and gay culture imported from 'the West'.

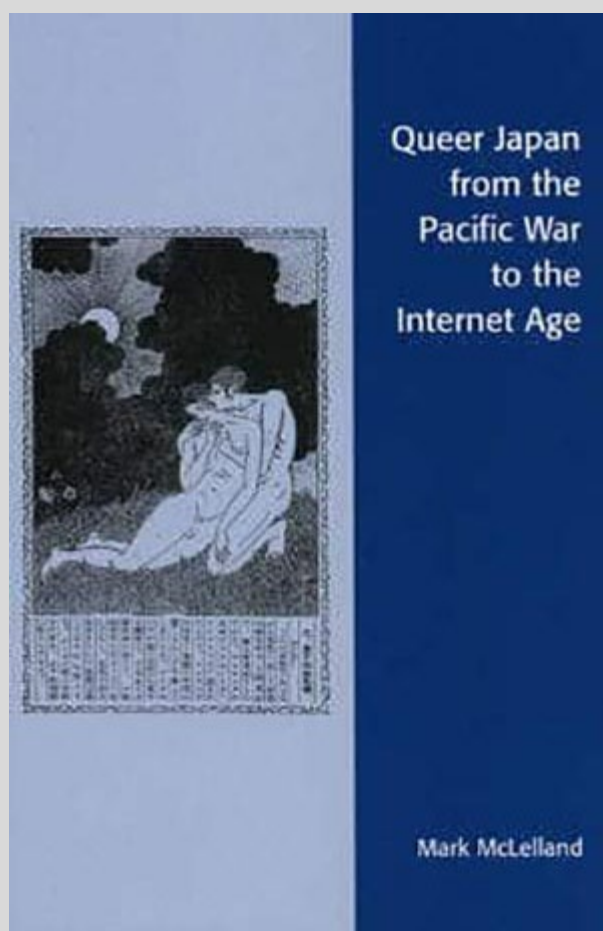


Figure 1. Cover of Mark McLelland, *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age*, London: Routledge, 2005.



Figure 2. Cover of Mark McLelland, *Love, Sex and Democracy in Japan during the American Occupation*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Building off that project McLelland decided to publish a collection of translations of writing by and about queer people in Japan, including articles from the perverse press. Mark asked me for help locating and, later, translating personal essays and other writing about the lesbian community, if possible written by '*tōjisha*'—a term meaning the individuals concerned or involved—in this case,

self-identified lesbians. In the end, Mark asked both me and Katsuhiko Suganuma—another graduate student whom Mark had also asked to help with translations for the project—to serve as coeditors. It was to be called *Queer Voices from Japan: First-Person Narratives from Japan's Sexual Minorities*.^[7] Inviting two graduate students, Katsu and me, to co-edit the collection boosted our then nascent careers—careers that have entailed our own research and publishing on LGBT issues in Japan and involvement in the broad field of Queer Asian Studies. As [Vera Mackie](#) discusses in her contribution to this issue, Katsu and I are far from alone in being assisted early in our careers by Mark's kindness and generosity. To the extent that we have been inspired by Mark to help other emerging scholars, Mark's contributions to queer Japanese studies—and, of course, to other fields—continue to ripple outward.

Published in 2007, *Queer Voices from Japan* served as a sort of companion to *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age*. By making first-person accounts and other writing from Japan available in English, the collection served as a means to let queer people from Japan speak for themselves about their own experiences across much of the twentieth and very early twenty-first centuries. As Taniguchi Hiroyuki's contribution to this issue illustrates, the 'Queer Japan' special issue of *Intersections*, published the year before, played a similar role for Japanese scholars.^[8]

While such translation projects count for very little in terms of one's career trajectory, they represent what I believe to be Mark's genuine commitment to the LGBT community in Japan, and examples of how he tried to use his research, not just for the sake of his career or to sate his own intellectual curiosity but to have positive effects on the world around him.

Over these same years—not quite the first decade of his career—McLelland edited other books and journal issues and organised symposia related to Japanese and Asian LGBT studies—projects discussed by other contributors to this issue. While he would continue to occasionally publish chapters and essays on Japanese LGBT issues, shortly after *Queer Voices from Japan* was published, McLelland's research took off in different directions, reflecting his broader interests in the cultural history of Japanese sexualities (Figure 2) and in popular culture and media, including the internet and social media. Nevertheless, due to the significance of the work I have discussed here, to many the name Mark McLelland remains strongly associated with queer studies in the context of Japan. And, given the enduring impact of his scholarship, mentorship and collegiality, I think that is just grand.



Figure 3. Mark McLelland's garden, photograph by James Welker.

Notes

[1] Mark J. McLelland, *Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan: Cultural Myths and Social Realities*, London: Curzon, 2000.

[2] The earliest academic publication in English on the BL genre is by another contributor to this issue. See Tomoko Aoyama, 'Male homosexuality as treated by Japanese women writers,' in *The Japanese Trajectory: Modernization and Beyond*, edited by Gavan McCormack and Yoshio Sugimoto, 186–204, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, doi: [10.1017/CBO9780511759666.011](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511759666.011).

[3] For representative work on censorship and the regulation of content, including BL, in Japan, see Mark McLelland, 'Regulation of manga content in Japan: What is the future for BL,' in *Boys Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan*, edited by Mark McLelland, Kazumi Nagaïke, Katsuhiko Suganuma and James Welker, 253–73, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015, doi: [10.14325/mississippi/9781628461190.003.0013](https://doi.org/10.14325/mississippi/9781628461190.003.0013); on regulation outside Japan, see Mark McLelland, 'The world of yaoi: The internet, censorship and the global "boys' love" fandom,' *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 23(1) (2005): 61–71, doi: [10.1080/13200968.2005.10854344](https://doi.org/10.1080/13200968.2005.10854344); on the end of cool Japan, see Mark McLelland (ed.), *The End of Cool Japan: Ethical, Legal, and Cultural Challenges to Japanese Popular Culture*, London: Routledge, 2017, doi: [10.4324/9781315637884](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315637884). See also contributions to this volume by [Tomoko Aoyama](#), [Laura Miller](#) and [Alisa Freedman](#).

[4] For instance, Aoyama would later invite me to publish that paper in a collection she coedited: James Welker, 'From *The Cherry Orchard* to *Sakura no sono*: Translation and the transfiguration of gender and sexuality in *shōjo* manga,' in *Girl Reading Girl in Japan*, edited by Tomoko Aoyama and Barbara Hartley, 160–73, London: Routledge, 2010.

[5] Mark McLelland, *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005.

[6] See, for example, Ishida Hitoshi and Murakami Takanori, 'The process of divergence between "men who love men" and "feminised men" in postwar Japanese media,' trans. Wim Lunsing, in 'Queer japan, special issue of *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* 12 (January 2006), URL: <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue12/ishida.html>, accessed 8 Dec. 2021. See also [Vera Mackie](#)'s contribution in this issue.

[7] Mark McLelland, Katsuhiko Suganuma and James Welker (eds), *Queer Voices from Japan: First-Person Narratives from Japan's Sexual Minorities*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007.

[8] Mark McLelland (ed.), 'Queer Japan,' special issue of *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* 12 (January 2006), URL: http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue12_contents.html, accessed 8 Dec. 2021.

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