10. The Beautiful Way
Homosexuality in Japan

There is a potter in Japan, now a Living National Treasure, called Shimaoka Tatsuzo who decorates his world-famous pots by impressing cords into the surface of the still wet clay. When he does this, he is using a method which began on the island of Honshu some time around 10,000 BC.

The first humans to enter Japan did so about 30,000 years ago, about the same time as the first humans entered Europe. By about 10,000 BC they had invented pottery, which was at least two thousand years before it was invented anywhere else in the world, and on top of that, they did so a couple of millennia before anyone else invented agriculture.

However, these Jomon peoples were not the ancestors of the modern Japanese. These days their descendants, called the Ainu, are on the verge of extinction and live only in the most northern parts of the country. The remote ancestors of the Japanese were people of Chinese origin who came to the Japanese archipelago from Korea about 300 BC.

The Yayoi

Yayoi jar 100-300 AD.

These people are named after their rather plain but wheel-thrown pots which they used for cooking. Their original homeland in Northern China which was once a temperate land covered with lush forests and enjoying plentiful rainfall. However, the climate changed, the region dried out and became what we know today as the Great Gobi Desert, one of the largest deserts in the world. As human beings have always done, the Yayoi migrated to escape the never-
ending drought, settling for a time in the Korean Peninsula only to be pushed out when a new wave of immigrants coming behind them drove them onto the west coast of Honshu.

The Yayoi brought with them a knowledge of agriculture and metallurgy, in particular the cultivation of rice and the working of bronze and iron. They also brought with them a new religion which is usually called “Shinto”. In this religion, almost everything that was wondrous had a spirit, a “kami”: people, natural events and places, even the dead had their own “kami”. These beliefs are what anthropologists call “animism”, a term taken from the Latin “anima” meaning the breath or soul.¹

The First State

Around about 300AD, a new émigré culture from Korea appeared on the Yamato peninsula in the south-western part of the island of Honshu, around present-day Nara and Osaka. This culture is known as the Kofun after the tomb mounds they built. Like the Yayoi, the Kofun were divided into clans which eventually were associated with each other in a kind of loose political “state”. This Yamato state was ruled over by a king who exercised power over surrounding lords who, in turn owed their titles and possessions to their readiness to go to war, a form of clan-based military aristocracy which became fundamental to the social and political structure of Japan until the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

Most significantly for our story, it was during this Kofun period that Confucian and Buddhist teachers first arrived in Japan (in 513 and 522 AD respectively), mostly again from Korea, and with them, the art of writing. So, although there was a form of political unity in Japan from the 4th century onwards, historical records don’t exist until the 7th century.

¹ The concept was first introduced by British anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor in his book “Primitive Culture” (published in 1871). The term was widely criticized in the Nineteenth Century but has since gained general acceptance. Animism is believed to be the oldest form of religion, coming to us from at least the Paleolithic and possibly well beyond.
Significantly, although the Yamato court adopted Chinese writing, the Chinese calendar and a Chinese form of government, a Constitution was imposed by Prince Shotoku in 604 AD which effectively made Buddhism the state religion. Japan thus became a nation with three religions, Confucian, Buddhism and their ancestral Shinto.

It was in the Buddhist monasteries during the latter part of the Classical age, the Heian period, 794-1192 AD that a form of institutionalised homosexuality emerged. This was known as nanshoku.

**Nanshoku and the Buddhist monks:**

The moral position of homosexuality in old Japan was well summed up in what appears to be a term paper for an English class written by an anonymous Japanese student:

> It would be important to note that religion is where most concerns about sexuality stem from, and where much hostility towards homosexuality originates. Shinto and Buddhism do not regard homosexuality as a sin. Shinto is a creed that teaches harmony, sanctity of human life and nature and respect for people and their individuality. It has no developed theology or sacred scriptures, and thus there are no clear-cut tenets on sexuality. They do not consider wrongdoings as “sin”, but as actions which dirty one’s purity, to be cleansed to preserve one’s inner peace. As far as Shinto was concerned, homosexual activity was acceptable as long as it did not disrupt the community, an aspect of human living which the religion also places in high regard.

> Mahayana Buddhism in the Japanese context also does not classify deeds as “good” or “evil” by themselves, but by their intention and outcome. This Japanese understanding of Buddhism considered an intention as either “skillful” or “unskillful” in lessening attachment to our world of suffering, which we are born

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2 http://www.tabulas.com/~syzygy/content/18124.html
Buddhism did not concern itself with procreation, as it reinforced the cycle of rebirths; however, in Mahayana Buddhism, sex was used as a religious symbol and Japanese Buddhism separated sex from procreation, seeing sex as a good in itself.

One of the most important figures to emerge in Japanese history — at least from our point of view — was a Buddhist monk called Kukai (774-835) who studied for a long time at monasteries in T’ang Dynasty China and from there, brought back to Japan a form of Buddhism called “True Words” or, in Japanese, Shingon. This became the most influential form of Buddhism in Japanese culture. In explaining this, Richard Hooker wrote:

Kukai believed that the True Words transcended speech, so he encouraged the cultivation of artistic skills: painting, music, and gesture. Anything that had beauty revealed the truth of the Buddha; as a result, the art of the Hiei monks made the religion profoundly popular at the Heian court and deeply influenced the development of Japanese culture that was being forged at that court. It is not unfair to say that Japanese poetic and visual art begin with the Buddhist monks of Mount Hiei and Mount Koya.

It is commonly believed that it was Kukai himself who introduced a form of homosexual activity which became institutionalised within the Mt Koya monastery he founded on his return from China. This was called nanshoku which literally means “male colours” but is generally used to...

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mean male-male love and specifically refers to the practice of monks forming sexual alliances with their younger acolytes or chigo.\(^4\) Whether it was true or not that Kukai himself was responsible is open to question: he himself never discussed it in any of his writings and he seems to have been an advocate for the Vinaya code whereby monks were forbidden any form of sexual activity.

Even so, the monastery at Mt Koya became a by-word for same-sex love, the monks rationalising their affairs with younger chigo on the grounds that the vow of chastity applied only to sex with women and not to sex with males because it was not procreative. A whole literature evolved of stories about love relations among monks and their young acolytes known as Chigo Monogatari. Although these began in the Ninth century, the practice of nanshoku persisted, becoming more idealised as time went by. So, for example, when the first Portuguese traders made contact with Japan in the 15th Century, the Jesuit priests who accompanied them reported home in horror that sodomy was plentiful in the Buddhist monasteries.

Although telling tales from the monasteries was popular, there were other references to homosexual relationships during the Heian period. Apart from some obscure diary entries, the earliest and best known references are in the 11th century Genji Monogatari or The Tale of Genji. In this men are often attracted by the beauty of youths and in one scene, when the hero is rejected by a lady, he turns instead to her brother:

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\text{Genji pulled the boy down beside him . .} \quad \text{Genji, for his part, or so one is informed, found the boy more attractive than his chilly sister.}
\]

This is not the place to try and tell the story of The Tale of Genji. It is a huge book, arguably written by several authors, written in a difficult form of Old Japanese and the characters are not named but referred to either by their social rank in the case of males, or the colour of their clothes in the case of women.

**The Love of Warriors — The Beautiful Way**

In the early days of battles between uji or clans, the war chiefs led the men of the clan into war, much as we might understand battles between the Scots clans. In the early “Classical” era, during the Nara period (710-794 AD), a system of local militias of mounted horsemen was

established. Although originally these men were the servants or samurai of the Emperor, gradually the militias evolved into private armies owing loyalty to the great aristocratic families.

These early samurai were not the noble and cultured professional soldiers who followed the code later called bushido or “the way of the warrior” but men drawn from the lower classes who spent most of their time earning a living as farmers and became soldiers only when their lords called upon them to fight opposing armies. The samurai who lived according to the bushido did not emerge until the Tokugawa shogunate which began in the 17th Century. By then the Samurai had become a class of highly trained, disciplined professional soldiers who hired themselves out to clan chiefs and great houses during the middle ages in Japan.

It was among these later, far more sophisticated and socially elevated samurai that the most famous Japanese homosexual institution was to emerge.

If, like me, you are a fan of the movies made by the Japanese director, Akira Kurosawa, you will be familiar with the ways of the Samurai but in none of Kurosawa’s movies will you see even a hint of one of their great driving institutions, the wakashudo (the way of youth) or bi-do (the beautiful way).

Writing in the 2004 Androphile Project, an unsigned author commented:  
From its pivotal position in the education, code of honor, and erotic life of the samurai class, the love of youths has sunk below the level of the untouchable to the level of the unmentionable, truly “the love that dare not speak its name”. But the indelible fact remains that one of the fundamental aspects of samurai life was the emotional and sexual bond cultivated between an older warrior and a younger apprentice, a love for which the Japanese have many names, as many perhaps as the Eskimo have for snow.

With the advantage of being in the right place at the right time, another writer, Ijiri Chusuke, argued in 1482 that:  
“In our empire of Japan this way flourished from the time of the great master Kobo. In the abbeys of Kyoto and Kamakura, and in

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the world of the nobles and the warriors, lovers would swear
perfect and eternal love relying on no more than their mutual good
will. Whether their partners were noble or common, rich or poor,
was absolutely of no importance... In all these case they were
greatly moved by the spirit of this way. This way must be truly
respected, and it must never be permitted to disappear.”

Fortunately, we can get a glimpse of the “beautiful way” at the movies
with the 1999 film, released in Australia under the title of “Taboo” but
originally called “Gohatto”, directed by Nagisa Oshima (Merry
Christmas Mr Lawrence, In the Realm of the Senses, etc). In this
sensual and dream-like movie set in 1865, three years before the fall of
the Tokugawa shogunate, we see the havoc a very beautiful if flirtatious
youth creates when he joins a group of samurai, several of whom then
compete with each other for his favours.

The same anonymous Androphile author also writes:
Known also as wakashudo, “the way of the youth”, it was a
practice engaged in by all members of the samurai class, from
lowliest warrior to highest lord. Indeed it has been said that it
would never have been asked of a daimyo, (or lord), why he took
boys as lovers, but why he didn’t. This last is not a question that
would have troubled, for example, the three great shoguns who
unified Japan, Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, or Tokugawa
Ieyasu, nor for that matter Miyamoto Musashi, the author of “The
Book of Five Rings.”

Although in many ways like pederasty in Ancient Greece, wakashudo —
usually abbreviated to shudo — differed in one major respect in that in
Japan it was the adolescent youth who sought out and wooed the older
man, and not the other way around as in Greece. However, as in Greece,
the sexual part of the relationship customarily ended when the youth
reached manhood, usually around age 19 or so. Of course that did not
mean the men ceased to know each other: most commonly a close
friendship lasted for the rest of their lives and, in some cases, the men
continued the erotic relationship long past the conventional time. As in
Greece, this shudo relationship did not rule out marriage because most

7 Gary P. Leupp, 1995, Male Colors, the Construction of Homosexuality in Tokugawa
according to Wikipedia, is “an enigmatic book of strategy, tactics, and philosophy
used as the personal mantras for businesspeople and martial artists alike” written by
Miyamoto Musashi who is regarded as the greatest swordsman ever in Japan.
Samurai married but generally, later in life than was common among other classes.

As in Greece and as we have seen in other parts of the world also, it was firmly believed that the relationship between man and youth was essentially a way of transmitting the manly virtues from one generation to the other and that this was done, not only by the older man serving as a good role model, but also through sexual intercourse of one form or another. Just as the monks on Mount Koya argued that sex was itself a means of exploring the spiritual world, so too the physical relationship between man and youth took on a spiritual meaning in the shudo. In 1653, in a book called, “A Dog’s Idle Hours” (Inu Tsurezure) an anonymous author wrote:

“It is natural for a samurai to make every effort to excel with pen and sword. Beyond that, what is important to us is not ever to forget, even to our last moment, the spirit of shudo. If we should forget it, it will not be possible for us to maintain the decencies, nor gentleness of speech, nor the refinements of polite behavior.”

Honoured and indeed, revered as it was, shudo was not to be entered into lightly. A boy was admonished to seek out and observe a man for at least five years before he approached him and requested the apprentice-like

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Male couple on a futon: Early 1680's; One of the very first examples of hand-colored ukiyo-e prints in the shunga (erotic) style. Moronobu Hishikawa (1618-1694); Ôban format, 10.25” x 15”; Sumi ink and color on paper; Private collection.

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relationship. This meant that boys, some time before they were of an age to enter shudo, would have had to be considering the available adult men because they generally underwent the coming-of-age ceremony when they were about 18-19 years old. It was at this time that the youth received the tonsure in which his hair was shaved back from his forehead to emulate a receding hairline and thus appear older (in Japan, age matters – people compare birthdays in order to know who should bow a little lower to the other).

Although shudo among the Samurai owed much to the nanshoku of the Buddhist monks of the Heian era, it reached its peak during the Tokugawa shogunate which began in 16039 but from that time on, the practice gradually declined as the country became increasingly unified and the need for a warrior class diminished.

Homosexuality among the Middle-Classes
The long period of peace during the Tokugawa shogunate saw the rise of a middle class along with the growth of trade. For a time, they even traded with Europe, the Japanese wanting firearms and shipbuilding skills, the Europeans after silks and ceramics.10 Japan originally opened its doors, first to the Portuguese in 1542 and later, to the Dutch, but it slammed them shut again and confined the Dutch to the one small trading entrepot at Nagasaki, principally because they disliked the activities of Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries and their intolerant attitudes to Shinto and Buddhism.

During this period, the traditions of both shudo and nanshoku infiltrated the high society which became known as the “Floating World”, the life in the pleasure quarters of the cities, but especially Edo from about the 17th until the end of the 19th centuries. This was the world depicted in many of the famous Japanese wood-block prints, the ukiyo-e. While we think of this as the time of geisha and the tea-ceremony, it is also the time when the kobuki and no theatres were at their peak of popularity.

Originally, women had performed in the theatres but eventually were banned because it was thought they would corrupt public morals. From then on, boys dressed and made up to look like women, played the female roles in much the same way that boy actors portrayed Shakespeare’s

9 which incidentally, was the year Elizabeth I died and James VI of Scotland succeeded her as James I.
heroines. Strange as it might seem to us, young male faces made up in the female manner were considered the ideal of female beauty!

Kabuki actors known as *kagema*, became the media stars of their day, able to charge fortunes for their sexual favours from the wealthy patrons who pursued them. This form of male prostitution gave rise to countless literary and artistic works with many of the greatest artists of the time documenting both the *kagema* and their activities. Although some of the better-known artists used false names to protect their reputation, few could avoid producing *ukiyo-e* (“pictures of the floating world”) or, where their pictures were more erotic, what were known as *shunga* (“pictures of spring”). Great artists whose names are house-hold words among Western collectors, such as Hokusai and Hiroshige, produced works of this kind.

*Spring Pastimes — A tryst between an older man and a youth —* by Miyagawa Isshô, ca. 1750. This is a Shunga hand-scroll (sumi, color and gofun on silk) a dalliance between an older man and a young kabuki actor (known as onnagata or kagema) who often doubled as rent-boys and were much sought after by the “stage door johnnies” of their day.

The Tokugawa shogunate also saw the emergence of a male cult known as *onnagirai*. These were the “women haters”, men who were exclusively homosexual in their behaviour. This stands out against the bisexuality which had always been traditional in Japanese culture. Of
course there had long been an attitude that women were “unclean” and that sex with women “polluted” a man’s spirit, the pollution having to be lifted by appropriate religious rituals. To some degree, this was the basis for both nanshoku among the monks and shudo among the samurai, but it had not before become an institutionalized form of exclusive homosexuality. Doubtless, onnagirai also took strength from the seclusion of the monks and from the increasing seclusion of the samurai when peace meant they had little work to do and were mostly confined to all-male barracks in the castles or within the cities.

The end of shudo and the floating world
In 1868 the decrepit Tokugawa shogunate was ended by the Meiji Restoration and Japan was prised open for business with the West by American gun-ships. This of course is the time of Madama Butterfly! Increasingly conscious of the outside world’s view of them, the Japanese began to hide and eventually abolish the old sexual traditions which had become embarrassing in the world of international relations. In comparison, the Meiji period was rather wowserish and “Victorian” in our terms, so much so that WS Gilbert in “The Mikado” sent it up by making beheading the punishment for flirting!

Homosexuality in modern Japan
There are no laws against homosexual behaviour in modern Japan. However, the old acceptance has gone, banished by the increasing influence of Western values on the matter. Through the various wars of the 20th Century, the militaristic values of the bushido, the samurai cult, regained some of their old vigour but generally speaking, the attitude was that homosexuality was best kept hidden from public gaze. The American occupation following the Second World War perhaps more than any other single influence introduced notions of criminality and illness, marginality and perversion which the Japanese had not associated with homosexual behaviour in the past.

Another big factor was the large numbers of young Japanese who went abroad to study as part of their government’s drive to modernize the country from a mostly agrarian to an industrialized nation.

However, of course homosexual behaviour still went on even if it was now something to be kept private and considered by the society at large to be rather shameful. “Gay” in our sense of the word is not really applicable to contemporary Japanese homosexuals even though there is a
homophile movement in the country. This, as Mark McLelland\textsuperscript{11} from Murdoch University suggests, is because the American (and more or less the Australian) gay identity is not one which sits comfortably on the Japanese. But, that caveat aside, McLelland stresses that:

\begin{quote}
...... representations of (primarily male) homosexual love and even sex permeate Japanese popular culture to an extent that would be unimaginable in the US or Europe and that 'homosexuality' in Japan is therefore very differently conceptualised.
\end{quote}

However, I must point out that the visibility of 'homosexuality' in Japanese media such as comic books, women's magazines, TV dramas and talk-shows, movies and popular fiction has not created the space for individuals expressing lesbian or gay 'identities' to come out in actual life. Yet, as recent research has shown\textsuperscript{12}, the notion of 'coming out' is seen as undesirable by many Japanese gay men and lesbians as it necessarily involves adopting a confrontational stance against mainstream lifestyles and values, which many still wish to endorse.

McLelland (from whom I am taking most of this) does point out that the famous Japanese novelist, Mishima Yukio who espoused the code of the samurai and was also famously homosexual, coined the term danshoku-ka to mean much the same as “homosexualist” and also used the word “gay” in his work, but this last was a foreign borrowing more specifically referring to cross-dressing male prostitutes.

It is difficult to assess exactly what is meant by “homosexuality” in Japan because the media seem to conflate same-sex desire with cross-dressing and trans-genderism and at times to portray it as a kind of “hobby” or a form of “play”. This rather confused and trivializing attitude can be best seen in two major institutions of Japanese contemporary life: in the comic books called manga and their animated form, called anime.

\textbf{Anime and Manga}

Many manga and anime contain male homosexual stories and bedroom scenes. Since the 1970s, a genre of manga and anime has developed

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\textsuperscript{11} Mark McLelland: \textit{Homosexuality and Popular Culture in Modern Japan}, http://www.sshe.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/issue3/mclelland2.html
\textsuperscript{12} McLelland refers to his own \textit{Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan: Cultural Myths and Social Realities}, Richmond: Curzon Press – then in press; and to Wim Lunsing, Beyond Common Sense, 1999a.
\end{flushright}
especially for women fascinated by the “boy-love” theme, a genre increasingly written and drawn by women themselves. 

However, I would describe the romantic and sexual relationships in these stories as 'homosexual' deploying the inverted commas to show that what is being described here is a very specific construction or, better, 'fantasy' of what male homosexual love means. 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 bishoonen or 'beautiful boys/youths.' They are drawn in such a way as to suggest an androgynous ideal: they have tall, slender bodies, high cheek bones and pointed chins, wide eyes and long flowing hair. Also, they behave in a rather 'feminine' manner, expressing the emotionality and vulnerability often associated with female characters in more mainstream fiction.

Various commentators have, then, argued that the bishoonen 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.13

Despite the plethora of images of homosexual men in the women’s media, men themselves seem to be relatively unaffected by them. Many regard these as figments of women’s imagination, ideals of beauty which would be unattainable in real life.

However, there is evidence that these notions are more than just day-dreams for many women. As McLelland reports, 

Starting with a series of articles in the women’s magazine CREA in February 1991, entitled 'Gay Renaissance,' Japanese women’s media began to interest themselves in Japan’s gay subculture which resulted in what has since been termed Japan's 'gay boom’.... One article in CREA under the headline of 'Women who plan on spending a pleasurable life with gays' explains that women’s interest in developing not just friendships with gay men, but cohabiting relationships, results from the negative image they have of traditional masculinity and masculine roles. In this article, and others like it, it is assumed that gay men are radically different from their straight counterparts and can even be 'best partners' [besuto paatonaa] for women. Mainstream magazines such as the tabloid-style SPA (18 March 1998) have also picked up on this

13 McLelland, ibid.
trend and begun to run articles on the 'boom' in 'friendship marriages' [yuujoo kekkon] which are supposed to be increasing between straight women and 'gays' [gei]. The women interviewed in the SPA article, entitled 'Women who choose gays and gays who choose women,' mention a number of attractive features supposedly possessed by gay men which their straight counterparts lack. These include their willingness to negotiate roles within the marriage and to help with housework. The writer mentions that it is a cause for concern that straight men are assumed not to have these qualities, but the assumption that these qualities are characteristic of gay men goes unchallenged.

The fantasy of the gay man as a woman's 'best partner' is most clearly developed in 'gay boom' movies directed at a female audience which focus on the relationships between straight women and gay men......[one of which is a movie called] Twinkle. In this movie, the couple agree to a 'camouflage marriage' [kamofuraaji kekkon] to escape the intense pressure from family and colleagues to get married. After a series of emotional traumas arising when the husband is 'outed' to his in-laws, it becomes clear that they have actually fallen in love and they decide to continue as a married couple, albeit making space in their relationship to accommodate the husband's boyfriend. In both the above relationships gay men are shown to be offering women the kind of love, appreciation and respect denied to them by straight men. However, there is no suggestion that the gay men have been converted to heterosexuality, for in these narratives it is heterosexual men and the sexist 'system' which produces them that is irretrievably 'other' to the female heroines.
Japanese feminist writer, Ueno Chizuko\textsuperscript{14} states that ‘neither men nor women are sleeping with the opposite sex, they are sleeping with a system’ which always works to the disadvantage of women. So women turn to images of sex between men which are, as one woman told Sarah Schulman\textsuperscript{15}, the only picture we have of men loving someone else as an equal. It is the kind of love we want to have.’

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\textsuperscript{14} Ueno Chizuko, Sukaato no shita no gekiba (The theater under the skirt), Tokyo: Kawade Bunko, 1992, p. 140., quoted in McLelland, ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{15} Sarah Schulman, My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life During the Reagan and Bush Years, London: Cassell, 1994, p. 245.
\end{flushleft}
Personally, I am inclined to think that if this is really a trend in modern Japanese society, that this gay man/straight woman marriage is not all that different from the arrangements of the past when men had both boy-lovers and wives at the same time.

However, it also seems that the images modern women have of an equal relationship between two men most certainly did not apply in the past and must be a relatively new idea in Japan, that of age-peer relationships. In neither the “nanshoku” nor in the “shudo” relationships were the youths and grown men on an equal footing, the youth in both cases always being subordinate to the older man. Indeed, probably the most important justifications for those institutions was that they were pedagogic relationships in which the youths started out socially inferior, much like women, but who were helped to achieve full manly status and power through their relationships with their mentors. It is perhaps our own cultural values which cause us to focus almost exclusively on the sexual relationship between youth and his mentor, and not first and foremost on the much wider social functions that the relationship served.