The LGBTQ+ culture and Japanese society
Abstract

This thesis discusses the LGBTQ+ people of Japan, how the LGBTQ+ community fits into culture and society, and why the cultural view of this community has changed over the centuries. The current situation for the LGBTQ+ community will be examined, issues with rights such as marriage, adoption, and harassment. Family participation and expectations towards both family and work standard while being a part of the LGBTQ+ community can also be heavily affected by their status. At the same time, the thesis will explore how society views the LGBTQ+ community and how they are depicted on popular media in Japan, i.e., *Manga* and *Anime*, and show they are portrayed in those stories versus reality.
# Table of Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 4  
Family honor and taboo in heteronormative Japan .............................................................................. 6  
Being stuck in the mold of heteronormative Japan .............................................................................. 6  
Breaking away from the normal family set up in Japan ...................................................................... 8  
The history of LGBTQ+ in Japan ........................................................................................................ 11  
The tradition of homosexuality coming from their friends from the West ...................................... 11  
The monks in the monasteries and the way of the Samurai, alone without women ..................... 13  
The Tokugawa period, sexually open Japan ........................................................................................ 15  
The Meiji era, now heteronormative Japan ......................................................................................... 16  
The laws for LGBTQ+ people in Japan ............................................................................................... 19  
LGBTQ+ marriage laws: Why they cannot get married...................................................................... 19  
Parenthood in the LGBTQ+ in Japan, the stigma of the normal family ........................................ 21  
Harassment of the LGBTQ+ in Japan: Not feeling safe .................................................................. 23  
LGBTQ+ people in media and pop culture ....................................................................................... 26  
Media on gay life in Japan, giving perspective on the LGBTQ+ ....................................................... 26  
The comics about gay men for Japanese women .............................................................................. 28  
Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................... 31  
References ........................................................................................................................................... 33
Introduction

In various examples of pop culture arriving at us from Japan, for instance, comics and animation shows, we see a lot of gaybaiting and fanfare, where we observe characters in situations making them act out a gay stereotype despite being heteronormative. This pop culture might make the consumer assume that Japan is extremely LGBTQ+ friendly. It is, however, not as simple as that. Every month in Japan, about 150 manga and 30 magazines are published that cater to stories about gay love, also known as Boys love (BL) or Yaoi. My interest in the subject comes from multiple references to the relationship between the master and the pupil, an element of Japanese history that lead to more research of the LGBTQ+ people in Japan.

In further studying various elements of Japanese culture, the LGBTQ+ community in Japan do not seem to have quite the same rights as in countries like Iceland. This unequal status is, for instance, exemplified in the language. The Japanese language only has a word for husband and wife 夫婦 or fuufu means married couple, 夫 means husband and 妻 means wife, there is no word or characters for same-sex couples.

A well-known element of Japanese culture is the inherent honor system. The Japanese deem it a major principle to bring honor to their family and will avoid dishonor at all costs as it will reflect poorly on their whole family. Being known to be a part of the LGBTQ+ community might, however, bring shame to the family.

This shame might seem like a centuries-old form of prejudice that has been a part of the culture for millennia. However, this is not the case for Japan; in fact, Japanese history is full of tales of homosexual men and stories that present such social behavior as a regular and socially accepted phenomenon (McLelland, 2004, p. 20-21). A considerable amount of art and stories depict erotic tales of homosexual encounters and these seem to have been popular during the Tokugawa period (1603-1868). However, these attitudes changed with the
westernization of Japan in the Meiji period (1868-1912), which came with Christian customs and Victorian attitudes towards marriage and love (Ballhatchet, 2007). Currently, the Japanese LGBTQ+ community is hindered by both dismissive laws and social taboos and expectations. The international LGBTQ+ community is aware and is trying to come to the support of the Japanese LGBTQ+ community, with some help from the media.

In 2019 a series on Netflix called ’Queer eye: We’re in Japan’ came out, which is a spin-off from the popular show Queer Eye, a reality makeover show that is usually located in the US. The spin-off has 4 episodes set in Japan where the cast, the fab 5, help different people in each episode. In the second episode, the fab 5 give a young gay Japanese man, and in that episode, it is shown how it is hard to be open about their sexuality. They showed the LGBTQ+ community in a positive light and how members of the community live their life in the context of Japanese society (Queer eye: We’re in Japan, 2019).

Although the LGBTQ+ community seems to be trying to fight for changes in order to be accepted in Japanese society, the laws against LGBTQ+ people make their life more difficult. The fights for the rights of the LGBTQ+ community have slowly been helping these various communities stand together, making the LGBTQ+ voices heard over the general conformism of Japanese society. Since Japanese people often lean toward a group mentality where you have to think of others before yourself, it is hard for LGBTQ+ individuals to break away from that persistent and strong societal mold. Especially since Japan has a family unit system, it is hard for you to have the family that you want to have if you have a same-sex partner or of the LGBTQ+ community. This thesis will examine the culture and history of the LGBTQ+ in Japan, how they stand in society, and what they are trying to change.
Family honor and taboo in heteronormative Japan

It is quite common to hear in the media, such as movies and literature, about family honor in Japan, it is the basis on which the family system is set up. The family system is not thought of specifically in terms of family; it is thought of as the house or *Ie*. For you to do your duty for the house is like the duty of a Victorian knight to serve their kingdom. This practice is based on the 19th century *Samurai* families and Confucian ideology, i.e., loyalty and benevolence (Hendry, 2013, p. 24-26). This way of thinking means that the focus is not on the individual in Japanese society but always on the group, and this applies to family as well as work.

Along with this strong and all-encompassing family system in Japan, Japanese society also functions by a family registry called *Koseki*, where the whole family has to have the same last name, and there is only one head of the household, usually a male. This *Koseki* further functions to bind people into a socially acceptable mold and makes any kind of deviance from the norm difficult, for instance, divorce or marriage to foreign individuals (Tamagawa, 2017, p. 493). Getting stuck in the family honor mold is easy for the people of the LGBTQ+; the system is set up in a way that makes it easier to live a heterosexual lifestyle than trying to break away and open up about your sexual orientation.

Being stuck in the mold of heteronormative Japan

It is nigh impossible for same-sex couples in Japan to get married with the rights that come with such a union as the marriage law. Article 24 of the Japanese Constitution states that the persons that are getting married have to be of two different sexes (10 same-sex, 2018).

The family unit mentality in Japan, makes it harder to break away because of how rigid the system is. If a person succeeds in breaking away from this system, then they will
have to face the consequence that it will look reflect negatively on the rest of the family. A same-sex relationship might, in some families in Japan, be a thing to be judged on for everybody in the unit. Parents want their children “To lead heteronomies lives by marrying and having children, thus producing grandchildren for them. Being extremely cautious of the public eye (sekentei), these parents appear to care less about their children’s private sexual lives than heir public lives” (Tamagawa, 2016, p. 494). This might be one of the reasons why some of the LGBTQ find it hard to break away from the typical traditional root of the family.

Traditionally in Japan, there have been and continue to exist strong social pressures to establish an idealised familial relationship consisting of a hard-working husband, a ‘good wife and wise mother’ and at least one legitimate child. Many feminists and LGB people insist that rather than co-opting the heterosexual family system, it would be better to establish new kinds of intimate relationships. (Hiroyuki, 2006)

This pressure might make some of the LGBTQ+ people not want to come out and live their lives as openly gay because it could ruin their family name. Family is an essential part of living in Japan, with the family registry being relevant for the individual and family (Nobuyoshi & Searight, 1994, p. 77). Some LGBTQ+ may not want to disappoint their family, others feel that it is just the normal thing to do, because of the society and culture that they grew up in as children. Marriage to the opposite sex is the normal thing to do, so they find a way to fit into that standard regardless of their own interests. Furthermore, they do not want to make things difficult for the other people in their lives.

Marriage, in this regard, is not about falling in love or finding the right woman or man for non hetronormative people. On the contrary, it is more of a marriage project. The project is to find a mate with whom to have and raise a family but with little intention to having a sexual relationship. Both partners are satisfied with this state of affairs most of the time. The shame of being regarded as gay is too hard for some people, and they would rather get
married and start a family than come out as gay. Faking a marriage for some closeted individuals is better in their mind, with secretly seeking sex out, because of the fear of shame from their family and society (McLelland, 2000a, p. 464-465).

The marriage between gay men and heterosexual women is about more than sex, and instead, it might involve a connection that hetero relationships do not have, and that is more important to some women in Japan. This type of marriage has, over the years, been a coping mechanism to fit into society in Japan. The older generation of the LGBTQ+ used to hide under this facade of heteronormativity. For the people in question, this marriage project does not always feel like faking it. This Marriage project is more of a solution to fit into the standard mold. However, over the years, some do find a way to break away from this mold.

**Breaking away from the normal family set up in Japan**

The rules and set up of the family registry system *Koseki*, may make it seem impossible to break away from the standard mold and expectations of how society expects the Japanese people to live and conform. However, some of the LGBTQ+ have found freedom from this standard set up and broken away to live their life as their true self.

The younger generation in Japan seems to be a little more open about their sexual orientation and accepting of the people in the LGBTQ+ community. Nevertheless, when it comes to coming out, people tend to keep it to the closest people in their lives. They for instance, usually come out to their friends long before they come out to their family. Then when they come out to family members, they often start with telling their mothers before they tell their fathers. (Tamagawa, 2018, p. 498-499).

The presence and example of the activist groups from the 70s that broke away from the standard of the norm made it easier for the younger generation to live their lives more openly than the earlier generations who had had to hide their sexuality from everyone.
Nevertheless, some LGBTQ+ still do keep to themselves and are not openly out about their sexual orientation because of the norms and expectations of Japanese society (Dooley, 2019).

Gay activism has been actively going on in Japan since the 1970s, and one group, *Wakakusa No Kai*, Japan's first lesbian organization, was founded in December 1971 (McLelland et al., 2007, p. 167). Going to the meetings and events that the organization held was a way to have a safe place where you could be yourself (Welker, 2005, p. 124). Then the Japan Association for the Lesbian and Gay Movement, also known as OCURR, was founded in 1984 (Lunsing, 2005, p. 143). Both of these fought for LGBTQ+ rights, and this community came to a crossroad in the 1990s when the location that OCURR had used for years, Fuchū Youth House, became undisclosed with being an LGBTQ+ organization. They had been using it for years without disclosing the LGBTQ+ organization part. The government objected to an LGBTQ+ organization using the building, and there ensued a legal battle, where the Rainbow parade started to help the LBGTQ+ to fight for their rights (Kaku, 2019).

In 2019, the gay pride parade in Tokyo, called the Rainbow pride, celebrated that it had been 25 years since the first parade in 1994. The first years that the Rainbow parade was held, its focus was to protest the treatment of the LGBTQ+ in Japan. Over the years, it has been hard for LGBTQ+ in Japan to come out and participate in the pride parade and be out and proud. Consequently, it is common to take part in the parade with a mask and sunglasses in order not to be recognized. Many people in the LGBTQ+ in Japan wanted to take part openly in the parade without masks and glasses, although they felt they could not participate because of a fear of being outed and losing their job. Nevertheless, the situation has improved over the years, with more Japanese LGBTQ+ taking part in the Rainbow parade every year (Fahey, 2019).
The fight for the rights of LGBTQ+ people has also made it to parliament. The gay politician Taiga Ishikawa is one of the first two openly gay politicians in Japan. He is also the first gay politician to get a seat in the upper house of the Japanese Parliament House of Representatives. Ishikawa and his party fight for LGBTQ+ rights. (Gay politician wins, 2019). Ishikawa wants same-sex marriage to be recognized and says that Japan still has outdated views on the LGBTQ+ relationships” adding that there is a mistaken belief “that same-sex relationships are a ‘hobby’ or will add to the declining birthrate” (Dooley, 2019).

They hope that once same-sex marriage is legalized, that will help more LGBTQ+ to be more open about their sexual orientation and not to be afraid to be themselves.

This constant fighting for basic rights for the LGBTQ+ people of Japan has not always been the case, there was a time in the history of Japan when people did not have to hide their sexual orientation, similar to the ancient Greek people with homosexuality (Iwata & Watanbe, 1989, p. 11).
The history of LGBTQ+ in Japan

The Japanese written history goes back to the sixth century A.D. However, the tales of things that are considered of an LGBTQ+ nature did not show up until the late tenth century (Leupp, 1997, p. 22). These tales were mostly stories of male on male sexual encounters, and they were called Nanshoku or ‘Male colors’ in Japan (Leupp, 1997, p. 1). The meaning of Nanshoku in English or male colors is for acts of a homosexual nature with one partner often possessing seniority over the other. However, most of these stories have young men or boys and have a fascination for them.

People in the west are very little aware that there once existed in Japan a cultural tradition of homosexuality comparable to that of ancient Greece. Pederasty in its original sense, the love of an adult male for an adolescent boy, was not at all the object of prohibition until the period of modernization and industrialization in the 19th and 20th centuries (Iwata & Watanbe, 1989, p. 11).

The Japanese history features mostly male on male when it comes to the same sex in history. Very little is recorded about the female on female stories since history tends to focus more on the history of men in general (Welker, 2017, p. 148). Japan had a long LGBTQ+ history until the country became more westernized during the Meiji era (1868-1912), and consequently, this element of Japanese society became a taboo not to be mentioned. Developments in the Meiji period led to the state of affairs that people are still dealing with today in Japanese society.

The tradition of homosexuality coming from their friends from the West

Even though different sexual orientations have most likely always existed in Japanese society, the Japanese high court learned about the custom of homosexuality at the time, like most other matters, from the Chinese high court. When it came to high court culture from China, the Japanese tended to adapt their culture in the Chinese way. Japanese written history
starts in the sixth century A.D., although records of same-sex relationships did not surface until the late tenth century.

In China, by contrast, tales of courtly homosexuality date back to the sixth century B.C. Thus, it is not surprising that the Japanese who from the sixth century A.C. borrowed of their higher civilization form surly that must be from their continental neighbor should have adopted various elements of the Chinese homosexual tradition. Even the term nanshoku itself is simply the Japanese reading of the Chinese nanse, which bears the same meaning. (Leupp, 1997, p. 11-12)

During this time in Japan, homosexuality was not perceived as an identity, though possibly something that came with status, age, esteem, and the power of the one contrasted with the youth and inexperience of the other. It did not matter what the sexual orientation of the person was; it was more about the partner being younger (Hall, 2013, p. 21-22). This non-identity homosexuality did not gain approval by everyone who sailed to Japan at that time in history.

The Jesuits that came from Europe to Japan in the mid 15th century to bring the Christian faith to Japan, they liked the Japanese culture because they felt the Japanese acted in a similar matter to the Jesuits, with a military bearing and a strong sense of honor. They praised the Japanese to the point of calling them the whitest and the most civilized of the east Asian countries which was high praise, according to the Jesuits (Schirokauer et al., 2013, p. 122-123).

However, the practice of sodomy in Japan was something of a disgrace to the Jesuits, and the Jesuits did not approve of these perverted same-sex acts that the Japanese were carrying out at the time. Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582), lord of Owari, gained control of the capital of Japan in 1568 (Saito, 1912, p. 130) and later tried to conquer all of Japan. As a military strategist, Nobunaga was known for burning down Buddhist temples to lessen their power so he looked very favorably upon the Jesuits and felt that the boon of increased
learning and foreign firearms far exceeded the troublesomeness of their religious intolerances. The Jesuits however strongly objected to how Nobunaga enjoyed the pleasure of sharing his bed with men. There was, in particular, a young man named Mori Ranmaru, a page, who was in high favor with Nobunaga and ended up dying with his master (Iwata & Watanbe, 1989, p. 21-23).

As a warrior, Nobunaga was not the only man of the warrior caste that shared his bed with other men. Tales of both monks and Samurai in homosexual relationships had been around on for some time before it came to the elite and upper classes.

**The monks in the monasteries and the way of the Samurai, alone without women**

Before the elite in Japan took up Nanshoku, it had been the monasteries and the monks who had been enjoying male on male intercourse. After all, the monks did not have women around, as they were not allowed to be in the monasteries. The monks, however, had a lot of young boys who were under their care. They would not allow themselves the company of women, however, they justified having the boys instead (Leupp, 1997 p. 27-28).

Although these ‘relationships’ were prevalent, they were not always fair nor advantageous to both parties. The younger monks would sadly sometimes be forced to participate in sexual acts with the older Monks, whether they liked it or not as they were often a mere substitute for women. These relationships were built on the age gaps between the boys and the monks, and the power struggles that were going on in the monasteries. There were popular romance stories at the time that were written about these scenarios with the older wiser person in charge of the sexual act (Leupp, 1997, p. 43-46).

This practice was not just something that the monks used to practice. This relationship with a master and their pupil was also predominant among the warrior caste, the *Samurai*. Similarly, to the monks and their apprentices, the *Samurai* caste had boys studying under
them, and that relationship would quite often involve sexuality. For the boys, it was considered an honor to serve their master, and gaining the approval of their masters would prove very advantageous for the young warriors to be. Consequently, it is evident that such relationships were common at the time, both among the *Samurai* and the Monks (Leupp, 1997, p. 49-53).

It might have been the fact that the Samurai were often isolated together during the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) that made the homosexual activity quite commonplace (Leupp, 1997, p. 47). What was also popular during the Tokugawa period was the *Kabuki* theater, a popular entertainment that survives to this day. However, it was not just the plays that the people of Japan were interested in, the young *Kabuki* theater actors were also favored with the Japanese people at the time.

Although modern *Kabuki* theater traditionally has an all older male cast, it began with women dancing and doing skits in Kyoto during the early seventeenth century. However, these were soon linked with prostitution, the girls selling themselves to the audience. In order to try and put an end to the prostitution element, the government banned *Kabuki* actresses from *Kabuki* acting in 1629. Their roles, instead, being taken over by young boys who dressed up for the female roles in the *Kabuki* plays and had a slender enough figure and a high enough voice so as to pass for a female character. These changes in Kabuki, however only served to change the culture of prostitution, from a female one to a young male one, as the boy actors ended up still selling themselves after the shows just as the girls had done before. To try to stem that problem, older actors specialized in and took over the feminine roles so that prostitution would not be a problem anymore (Schirokauer et al., 2013, p. 141). At the start of the Tokugawa period, literature about the monks, the Samurai, and the young *Kabuki* actors was prevalent in books like ‘*Nanshoku Okagami*’ or ‘The Great Mirror of Male Love’ (1687) by Ihara Saikaku (McLelland, 2004, p. 21). Showing it to have been a popular reading material.
The Tokugawa period, sexually open Japan

During the Tokugawa period (1603-1868), also known as the Edo period, there was a time where homosexuality was prevalent in elite society, with many partaking in homosexual relationships. Although the Tokugawa government did not approve of this homosexual activity, it was the fact that the elite was practicing it that normalized it, so the government turned a blind eye (Mclelland, 2004, p. 20-23).

Being with younger beautiful boys was seems to have been more about the thrill and availability than actually being homosexual. Even heterosexual males would sometimes have sex with other males because it was often more accessible and a common activity at parties, being socially acceptable and available they just joined in. These relationships were not just sexual, and there was also love and relationships (Leupp, 1997, p. 65-71). Even in literature, homoerotic stories became popular to read, and not just in the Tokugawa period. The literature that had become popular in prior periods also include homosexual intimacy. Even the renowned ‘Genji Monogatari’ or ‘The Tale of Genji’ that was thought to be written in the early 11th century, and to be the first novel written in Japan and possibly the world. ‘The Tale of Genji’, is a long convoluted tale that describes the lurid romances of the elite of the time, in considerable detail, includes a narrative about indulging in same-sex sexual activity (Leupp, 1997, p. 25).

It is not until the Edo period (1603–1868), however, that we see the development of a self-conscious literary tradition solely devoted to extolling the charm of youthful male beauty. This is associated particularly with famous novelist Ihara Saikaku, author of ‘The Great Mirror of Male Love’ (1687), which contains love stories featuring relationships between older and younger Samurai and rich townspeople and young kabuki actors (McLelland et al., 2015, p. 6).
Prostitution was commonly practiced, especially in the case of younger boys. From kabuki actors, brothels, and even exclusive teahouses that the younger boys would cater and service the older, richer men (McLelland, 2004, p. 23). This sexual freedom was socially accepted among the upper class at the time. Still, later in periods, it became a shameful behavior, something to be discouraged and frowned upon in society.

During the next period of Japan’s history, society was about to make various massive changes, and along with those changes emerged different ideas about what was considered socially acceptable and the idea that LGBTQ+ relationships could be a healthy part of life were rejected. Instead, western thinking or rather Victorian mores were pushed on the Japanese people, and it put former socially accepted behaviors in a new light.

The Meiji era, now heteronormative Japan

In this new period called the Meiji era (1868-1912), almost everything about society was about to change, and the taboo connected to homosexuality was one of them. A mix of western values from various sources were consciously adopted in order to speed up modernization, and along with these came the idea that homosexuality was a bad and dangerous thing to be involved in back then. This western view was a new way of approaching the ages old subject of sexuality, and it made homosexuality feel like a taboo, something to feel ashamed of and to hide from the public eye (Iwata & Watanbe, 1989, p. 121-5). It was not just because of all of the sodomy, there was a problem with the young boys sexually misbehaving in inappropriate arts of homosexual nature (Mclelland, 2004, p. 27). It was too inappropriate for the new time that was coming.

During the Meiji period, homosexuality disappeared somewhat from the public view and most likely went underground. It never disappeared entirely, but because of the shame involved, people were just hiding it from plain sight in their life in Japanese society.
Soldiers in wars would still have intimate bonds on the battlefields, but it was not talked about as lightly as before the Meiji era. It was not always about just the sex between the soldiers. It was also about the bond that would be forged by fighting for your country and your life, standing side by side and experiencing various traumatic experiences together. (McLelland, 2004, p. 15). There are few references to this however, we do know some of the facts.

Following the second world war (1939-1945), the LGBTQ+ Japanese soldiers who had had intimate relationships with their comrades felt different, and they wished for a safe space to be themselves to be able to express themselves freely. Some of these soldiers started to hang out in gay bars and known cruising spots near gay bars. It was a time when it was more about sex than about finding a partner or love. The feelings that these gay people were feeling often made people feel bad or even hate themselves; it was a pretty dark time in the history of LGBTQ+ in Japan (McLelland, 2004, p. 29). Living in the constant fear of being found out or outing all the time living with self-loathing. For if these gay men came out, they could face threats or even murder and be especially prone to suicide. Therefore, people were scared to come out for fear of their own lives and their families (McLelland, 2004, p. 31).

In the aftermath of the second world war (1947) some things changed for the better for some of the LGBTQ+ community. Women in general throughout Japanese history were often thought of as being too unintelligent to learn in schools as men did, and in the early Meiji era (1868-1912) came the schooling method of ‘Ryosai Kenbo’ or ‘Good wife’. Nevertheless, this schooling backfired with women trying to break away from these teaching and open the possibility for women getting a secondary education (Ying, 2020, p. 155-158). A part of that rebellious attitude was expressed during the next period, the Taisho era (1912-1926), when girls took up dressing and behaving in a more westernized manner. The birth of
the *Moga*, modern girl braking away from patriarchal expectations as well as breaking away from the Japanese culture.

Bearing that in mind, there was a group that in history had not been as prominent as the homosexual male group, and this group were the lesbians in Japan. Although the stories of them in history were not as popular as the homosexual stories, they had still been there. So, the topic of lesbians or *resubian* in Japan became as prominent as the gay men in the postwar discussion in magazines (Welker, 2017, p. 151).

This exposure was a big step for lesbians to start to be heard. They became more influential in the 1990s when the Japanese lesbian groups were actively trying to fight for a better life. This time period became to be called the ‘gay boom’ in Japan, a new time for the gay community of Japan. Considerably more knowledge was being shared and studies published about the LGBTQ+ community. With this came increased ore interest and fascination about the LGBTQ+ people (McLelland, 2004, p. 32), both in culture with movies and magazines, as well as in minority culture studies (Suganuma, 2006). It was time for the people of LGBTQ+ to be seen and heard again.

The history of the LGBTQ+ acceptance and community show us both the good and bad sides of the past. Currently the LGBTQ+ community in Japan is fighting for a reasonable place in society, which had been a natural part of daily life in the past, at least for specific groups. These groups were even praised and coveted by many with literature and art in the past. A big part of what they are fighting for is their basic rights, and that starts with changing some laws that prevent the LGBTQ+ in Japan from being able to have a normal life.
The laws for LGBTQ+ people in Japan

Various aspects of being an LGBTQ+ person changed from the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) to current times. Being a sexual minority was a bad thing that people needed to hide in order to fit into Japanese society (McLelland et al., 2005, p. 5-6). However, in modern times the community has expressed the wish to be able to live their life with the same rights as heteronormative people, rights that let them live together, get married, stop being harassed, and give them a chance to have a socially accepted family without any stigma. This fight for LGBTQ+ rights is extensive, and a slow one and the community has been fighting for the chance at having a better life. Currently, the laws in Japan are slowly changing and hopefully, for the better. However, there are still some areas in which the law in Japan makes life difficult for the people of the LGBTQ+ community of Japan.

LGBTQ+ marriage laws: Why they cannot get married

For many, the union of marriage is a big step in people’s relationships most people take as a serious matter when it comes to evolve their relationship to the next level and binding two people together and attain the theoretical ‘happily ever after’. Regardless not all couples in Japan are allowed to get married, and the LGBTQ+ minority of same-sex couples do not have the right to marry.

According to Article 24 of the Japanese Constitution, “marriage shall be based only on the mutual consent of both sexes.” And with that, the government says it implies that marriage is only meant for heterosexual people but not for same-sex couples (10 same-sex couples, 2018). The union of marriage needs to be an opposite-sex couple; there are not any laws banning them from getting married. Thus, they feel stuck in a loop. There is no word for same-sex couples, though there is for a man and a woman, the word for a married couple is a husband and wife, 夫婦 or fuufu, 夫 husband, 妻 wife, there is no word or characters for
same-sex couples. However, some prefectures in Japan have recognized same-sex couples as common-law partners and living together (Japan prefecture, 2019).

There have been cases of same-sex couples getting married in another country and then getting divorced in Japan with the Japanese court recognizing them as a couple. For example, there was a case in the Mooka branch of the Utsunomiya District Court in Tochigi Prefecture, where a woman got awarded damages after she and her same-sex partner split up because of the other woman’s infidelity. This case happened even though same-sex marriage in Japan is not yet legal, and the couple got married in the USA. The court, however, recognized their relationship as a common-law partnership (Woman awarded damages, 2019).

Even though the central government in Japan has not changed any laws regarding same-sex marriage or partnerships, some local governments have taken steps in the right direction. Ibaraki prefecture was the first prefecture to issues partnership certificates for same-sex couples in July 2019. “While the certificate is not legally binding, it will allow the couples the ability to rent at prefecture-run housing or giving consent for surgeries at the Ibaraki Prefectural Central Hospital, among other situations in which they have historically faced difficulties’’ (Japan prefecture, 2019).

Multiple couples have tried to sue the Japanese courts to try and make them change the law or at least change the wording so they can get married legally in Japan. The fight continues for that and other things like living together, inheriting each other and adopting children when you are a same sex-couple (Couples in first, 2019).

In a survey conducted in 2018, about 6000 married Japanese women were asked by a government institute that is affiliated with the Health, Labor, and Welfare Ministry of Japan whether the government should make same-sex marriage legal. When asked, over 70% of the married women answered yes. In the case of women in their 30s or younger, they were more
open to legalizing same-sex marriage or about 90% of them (70% of married, 2019).

Though this was a small group of people being asked, it does not paint a complete picture of what the people of Japan think of the same-sex issue of marriage. However, based on this group, it allows for more positivity and some optimism towards the future.

Another survey that came out in 2018 also showed a lot of positivity towards the LGBTQ+ right. This way of thinking will hopefully help with the ongoing fight for rights like marriage for the LGBTQ+ community that they are facing.

A nationwide survey conducted last October by Dentsu Inc. on 60,000 people aged from 20 to 59 years old found that at least one in 11 people were LGBTQ-plus. According to the survey, 78.4 percent were favorable to marriage equality, 82.7 percent agreed with a Tokyo metropolitan ordinance prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and 72.1 percent believe there should be pro-LGBT legislation nationwide. (LGBT community hopes, 2019)

Because people can still not get married if they are a same-sex couple in Japan, people found a loophole. This loophole is to adopt your partner, so you have some legal rights to your partner even though you are not married. “This adoption system is very well known among the Japanese LGB community, and some among the older generation have used the system as an alternate method to marriage” (Hiroyuki, 2006). Despite this adoption method working for couples adopting each other, it does not work when it comes to adopting the children of your partner (Mertus, 2011, p. 282).

**Parenthood in the LGBTQ+ in Japan, the stigma of the normal family**

Living together as a couple in Japan can be difficult, and even more so if it is an LGBTQ+ couple. Public housing law has a set of guidelines that discriminate against people who are not married or not legally a family. There have been loopholes, and then there have been landlords that allow unmarried or same-sex couples to rent. However, the landlord can deny them the opportunity to rent without giving a reason (Lunsing, 2001, p. 210-211). Still,
the situation seems to be changing, and it might get easier for LGBTQ+ people to live together.

In recent years, if a person lives in the right area and has the money, then the system will be more open for same-sex couples to live together in Japan. Not all LGBTQ+ people in Japan can afford that, so it is not a solution for everybody. However, this might be a step in the right direction (Welker, 2017, p. 162).

There remains an issue with marriage and the Koseki, the registry system. Japan does not have any official law against people of the LGBTQ+ adopting children (Mertus, 2011, p. 282). However, you need to be married to adopt your partner’s child, so the right to adoption depends on the right to marriage.

When it comes to the custody of children in a heterosexual marriage, the custody of the children is usually given to the mother with full custody. Although a small percentage of the time, it is given to the father (Alexy, 2010, p. 431). When and if the parent gets remarried, the children get a stepparent that has the status of first-degree relatives by affinity. The stepparent can legally adopt the children (Koga, 2017, p. 32). Since same-sex couples cannot get married in Japan, they cannot adopt their partner’s children even though they live together (Sasaki & Wilson, 1997, p. 130). However, rules about adoption might change in the future with small steps like what is happening in the foster care system in Japan.

A same-sex male couple in Osaka was granted a foster parent status over a teenaged boy. The couple became foster parents in 2017, and they are the first same-sex couple to have this status, not as an individual in Japan. The male couple had to go through a course on being foster parents before they could officially become foster parents of a child under the age of 18. Some same-sex couples have tried to become foster parents, although they were denied because of their sexuality. There is, however, an organization called Rainbow Foster Care that is fighting for the rights of same-sex people in Japan to become foster parents. The
head of Rainbow Foster Care is Megumi Fuji, who says. Fuji says that same-sex couples are often rejected in the system for not being a straight couple. “They are told, “Children will never be fostered” by same-sex couples or “couples of friends are not accepted” (Osaka the first, 2019).

If being in a same-sex relationship is the only reason why someone cannot foster a child that needs a home; however, if this case of fostering might pave the way for others. If the couple does well, then there might be other same-sex couples that could hopefully be foster parents in Japan in the future. Not letting same-sex couples be adoptive parents without checking if they are able to carry out that role is yet another case of prejudice against same-sex couples and the LGBTQ+ has been through a lot of discrimination and harassment.

**Harassment of the LGBTQ+ in Japan: Not feeling safe**

For a long time, there were no laws that protected the LGBTQ+ in Japan from harassment. It was not until 2018 that a law that prohibits the harassment of the LGBTQ+ went into effect (What should Japan's, 2019). Some Japanese people get beaten up and harassed for being part of the LGBTQ+ community. The people who are harassing them are not just strangers however, on occasion they’re family members (DiStefano, 2008, p. 278). It is not only the problem that the LGBTQ+ people of Japan are suffering from harassment from people that are not LGBTQ+ people, but, domestic abuse is actually a problem within the LGBTQ+ community itself. The threats come in different types, such as outing someone of their sexuality and up to extreme cases involving murder. “Abuse can be anything from intimidation and threats to “out” partners’ sexuality or HIV status to — in the most extreme cases — murder” (Ito, 2018). This harassment sometimes makes it more difficult for the Japanese minorities to feel safe to be themselves even in their own home, much less out in the open where everybody can judge them or, even worse, hurt them.
Japan also has flawed consent laws when it comes to underage boys with male partners. Japanese law does not regard the age of consent for male on male sex as different than for straight couples. A girl has to be thirteen to consent, but if a boy who is thirteen has sex with a boy who is twelve that is technically not illegal because there is no law that applies to this situation, there is only a law for sleeping with underage women (McLelland, 2004, p. 38). However, if there would be a case about abuse or something in that vein, then that could be taken into court in Japan as bodily harm but not rape. This age of consent problem does not help with the struggles that the LGBTQ+ community are facing. Harassment can come in different ways, and that includes being outed without your consent.

There was a male university student at Hitotsubashi University law school who got outed at school by his classmate. Being outed resulted in him committing suicide; he did not want to face the person who outed him in class. LGBTQ+ people in Japan still live in fear of being outed “Over the course of six years from March 2012, one private support center said it received 110 calls to its 24-hour hotline service from people aggrieved about being outed.” (Alarm bells, 2019), though the hotline claimed that the overall number was without a doubt much higher.

At present, in 2020, with the Covid-19 world pandemic going on, same-sex couples in Japan have new worries to deal with related to the pandemic. Some people live their lives as a part of the LGBTQ+ community however, they have yet not come out with their sexuality and have chosen to keep it private. That means that their workplace might not be informed of their sexuality; however, working from home could cause some difficulty if they live with their significant other. They don’t want to be outed while on online meetings or calls when they are working at home during this isolation period (LGBTQ parties, 2019).

This is not the only worry that the LGBTQ+ are worried about when it comes to the pandemic. For one, they also fear being outed when the authorities track an infection route
that may lead them and other LGBTQ+ persons on the way, like when they are asked who they have been in close contact with, and that might be their same-sex partner. Though it is not just about getting outed, that is a big fear for some LGBTQ+ people.

The ones who have been open about their sexual orientation and are in a relationship still have some concern when it comes to the virus. Even though some of the same-sex couples in Japan have a partnership certificate, they fear that if their partner gets hospitalized that they might not have any say in decisions that might have to be made or even just that they could not be told anything. These concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic were among the findings that came out in a survey by Marriage for all Japan, and the LGBTQ+ community knows that the government is trying to protect the lives of the Japanese nation. Nevertheless, LGBTQ+ people want their privacy honored and protected (LGBT people, 2019).
LGBTQ+ people in media and pop culture

The stories about male on male intimacy that became so popular during the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) with the Nanshoku, died down in the Meiji era (1868-1912) because of the taboos associated with non-heterosexual relationships. People of the LGBTQ+ persuasion were not out in the open with their sexual orientation, and it is not until the 1990s that LGBTQ+ writers started to write and publish about how their lives and experiences. Interestingly comic book stories (manga) about homosexual men have become immensely popular again, and this time aimed at female readers. These Manga began in the 1970s, and they are still very popular today (McLelland, 2000b, p. 275-276). Consequently, it would seem that popular depiction of LGBTQ+ has become very favorable in the past decades, nevertheless, the media often presents a very stereotypical view.

Media on gay life in Japan, giving perspective on the LGBTQ+

In the 1990s, during what was referred to as the gay boom in Japan, various literature that included parts of the LGBTQ+ community began being published. Then with that came increased cultural studies about the LGBTQ+ as well as a fascination on how they lived their life.

In 1991, Fushimi Noriaki published his book ‘Gay private life’. This book was a major achievement in heterosexual-driven Japan. When writing, he opted to use his real name rather than a pen name, not hiding his identity from the public, which was important because he could quite possibly have faced harassment. The book gives insight into how he saw his own gay identity in Japan. The book was not just read by the LGBTQ+ people of Japan, but also by a lot of heterosexual people, and it had a considerable impact on the people who are not LGBTQ+. Consequently, Fushimi Noriaki became an activist for sexual minorities and wrote a number of articles about minority issues.
A year later, in 1992, Kakefuda Hiroko published a book called ‘Being a lesbian’. Like Noriaki, this was a view on how she viewed her life as a lesbian. The topics of these books were important as both authors discussed candidly their normal life whilst being a person of the LGBTQ+ community in Japan. These days these books are used in minority studies in higher academics in Japan (Suganuma, 2006).

These books served an important function as it was essential to show the ordinary reality of everyday life as an LGBTQ+ person in Japan and because they were just describing their lives without trying to please the Japanese people or adhere to any preconceived notions and stigma. These books helped the LGBTQ+ movements as well as encouraged the writing of others to be open about their sexuality. “These groundbreaking works were followed by several ‘coming out’ publications by a wide variety of authors, including writers, activists, singers, teachers, politicians, and scholars, in which each disclosed their respective sexuality” (Tamagawa, 2018 p. 500-501). Although this helped a lot of people to come out about their sexual orientation, it was still a long road ahead for many of the LGBTQ+ individuals in Japan who were still scared about coming out, a number of which were still scared of getting harassed if they came out or that it would change their social position or the general view of them within society (Chalmers, 2002, p. 10).

The movies presented a different narrative around the same time during the gay boom in Japan. Interestingly enough, these movies were not primarily aimed at the LGBTQ+ community depicted in these movies, but rather another crowd of people in Japan that were not necessarily a part of the LGBTQ+ people.

Three films in particular that came out in early 1990 fit these parameters, these were Okoge (1992) by Murata Takehiro, Kira Kira Hikaru (1992) by Matsuoka George, and then Hatachi no Binetsu (1993) by Hashiguchi Ryousuke. The movies were most popular with the young female audience in Japan at the time. That was because these movies, though they
were about homosexual men, did not portray them like real homosexual men would act (McLelland, 2004, p. 32). These particular movies were set in the fantasies of what women perceived about gay men, and their life and romance. The movies were not the only thing that the young Japanese women had an interest in, there were also thematically similar Manga, and within these they have built up their own culture with all kinds of fantasies evolving around homosexual romance.

**The comics about gay men for Japanese women**

In the media such as in magazines and on tv in Japan over the years, it is repeatedly shown that it is bad for women to be sexually open as men can, as this behavior comes with a stigma. Women are expected to get married and become a housewife instead of having a career. The career woman is a selfish Japanese woman who is poorly looked upon. Most popular media is catered towards straight males, and that includes porn and Anime, in which the women are more than often mistreated and live only to please the man (McLelland, 2004, p. 63-65). Because of that, numerous women in Japan look to another type of popular media in which the focus is not on women when it comes to romance. These are comics or Manga that are made for women about homosexual relationships; these Manga are in the Yaoi genre have a large following in Japan (McLelland, 2004, p. 70-71). The women use these romantic love stories to escape from reality. These manga are also mostly written by women and not gay men. The reason for women reading these is that they find entertainment and romance without seeing the constant abuse of women in the Manga. The name Yaoi is what it means to the women reading the manga. “In Japanese, Yaoi is an acronym for “Yama nashi, Ochi nashi, Imi nashi.” It is often translated into English as “No Climax, No Resolution, No Meaning” (Ishikawa, 2010, p. 172). The term Yaoi started in the late 1970s to judge the lack of storytelling in these early Manga with that acronym and stuck to this genre ever since. The term Boys love or BL for is often also used for Yaoi.
These stories are not, however, proper representations of how Japanese gay men think of themselves, they are just a fantasy with plenty of drama and conflict. Most of these stories feature outstandingly beautiful boys, which might not be a good standard for gay men to feel like they have to live up to as gay men. Although not aimed at gay men, research found that some of them had read these books in their younger years to discover that they are indeed homosexuals themselves. Though the they find themselves struggling with the dynamic of *Yaoi* relationships being hard to live up to in reality, and find them not realistic (McLelland, 2004, p. 85)

Women reading these *Manga* stories about homosexual relationships tend to approach the material from a different perspective than the actual homosexuals. Neither are some of the Japanese men who do read these kinds of stories not necessarily gay. Even so, these men are called *fudanshi* (rotten men) by the culture, and that is not a positive label. Reading these *Manga* for the *fudanshi* men isn’t about the sexual nature of a gay romance, but rather to see a different type of masculinity that they might be struggling with as men.

As Nagaike concludes, what BL offers to some men is “a subversive space, in which *fudanshi* can re-view traditional Japanese images of masculinity and learn to acknowledge, accept, and ultimately love such elements of maleness as weakness, fragility, and passivity.” (McLelland, et al., 2015, p. 15)

This association with being ‘rotten’ is interesting from the perspective of reading a type of manga. Reading these novels might be more normalized for the women in Japanese society since it is mainly written for them, yet some of them may not want to be open about reading the material. However, the popularity of show’s demands the different kinds of *Yaoi* that are on the market in Japan.

Another genre in *manga* is the *Yuri* genre, which is like the counterpart to *Yaoi*, with a female same-sex intimacy interest. Like *Yaoi*, *Yuri* started in the 1970s. Although not as popular as *Yaoi*, though it still has a following, mostly by women although some men also
The name Yuri means lily and refers to a white lily. White lily often reflects the ideal woman meaning beauty and purity in Japanese culture (Maser, 2015, p. 1-4). The word Yuri was not always used for these manga. However, it emerged with the magazine Yuri Shimai or lily sisters that came out in 2003 (Wellington, 2015, p. 1).

Like in the case of the Yaoi manga, the Yuri storyline is a fantasy version of a same-sex female relationship, which results in the same criticism from lesbians about the representation as Yaoi does for gay males. As with Yaoi, Yuri has a mostly heterosexual female following and is technically aimed at that readership. Nevertheless, some lesbians do read Yuri manga, even though some might find the manga a lousy representation of the LGBTQ+ lifestyle (Wellington, 2015, p. 155-157). Although hugely popular and well visible in society, these manga do not represent the LGBTQ+ community or lifestyle in Japan, nor do they depict an actual representation of the perception of LGBTQ+ people in Japanese society.
Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, we have seen how Japan has a system that, in its core, benefits a heterosexual family, which makes life harder for people who differ from that norm. The Japanese family set up is essential in Japanese society, both for the individual and their families. Most people try their best to fit into society as best they can often by concealing their true lives; however, some do live their life openly as members of the LGBTQ+ community with some success. There are currently LGBTQ+ activists in Japan that are fighting to change the laws so that the LGBTQ+ people of Japan have a chance to fit better into society. It is of major interest that historically speaking, this negative view is a fairly modern one, and people’s sexual orientation was not always an issue in the past.

Before the Meiji period (1868-1912), the gender that people were attracted to did not matter. It was not thought of as an identity or a label like to be a homosexual or lesbianism, and it was more of a preference of who they wanted to bed. The elite and their people had even before the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) been engaging in same-sex acts, mostly between men. However, the court was not the only place where homosexual acts happened, and these stories are generously sprinkled throughout Japanese literature.

The monks and Samurai at the time had young boys under their guidance. Both these communities were without women, and for that reason, they had a unique relationship with the young boys under their care that often-involved intercourse. However, this changed during the Meiji period (1868-1912), with the fast-moving westernization of Japanese culture and society. One of the changes was that Japanese society became heteronormative and, it became a taboo to be a homosexual, which still stands today, exemplified, for instance, in the family registry the koseki.

Marriage for any couple is important in Japan because of how the law system is set up. You need to be married in order to get a family registry together. Although there are not
any laws that ban the LGBTQ+ couples from getting married or adopting children, the laws that are in place make it so that only a man and a woman are allowed to get married.

In some parts of Japan, the court system allows same-sex couples to get a partnership certificate. This certificate gives them more rights, for instance, being able to see their partner in the hospital as family and living together. However, they still cannot receive an inheritance if their partner dies nor adopt their spouse’s child from a previous relationship.

Though some of the people of the LGBTQ+ are open about their sexual orientation, some do still want to keep their private life hidden and do not want everybody to know. In the yearly Tokyo Rainbow Parade, it is common for people who have not fully come out to wear masks and sunglasses, although this has become less common over the years.

The LGBTQ+ individuals suffer from what they perceive as wrongful stereotypical representation both on tv and in manga. In the manga, they become a women’s fantasy. However, the genre is popular in Japan with both straight women and some of the LGBTQ+ community. The Yaoi and Yuri manga do show the LGBTQ+ people in a positive light, plus with the popularity of the auto biographies of gay Japanese, these will hopefully assist in changing cultural attitudes when it comes to the LGBTQ+ community. There is still an element of shame and harassment that needs to be fixed in order to make the LGBTQ+ people feel safe and like they belong in the Japanese society. However, things have been changing slowly towards equal rights with for instance the partnership certifications and the growing group of Japanese LGBTQ+ who are more open with their sexuality in all facets of their lives.
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