

Reading a BL manga that is not BL: Approaching Yamashita Tomoko's *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru*

BL コミックではないBLを読む
—ヤマシタトモコ『さんかく窓の外側は夜』試論—

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Abstract: Recently, some manga creators who publish BL as well have created challenging manga texts that have avoided the net of gender categorization. Yamashita Tomoko (b.1981) is one such creator. This article examines palimpsestic features in the text, *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru* by Yamashita Tomoko so as to show its literariness. The analysis put forth suggests that the literariness of this manga text results in the condition that this manga text is both a genuine BL and, at the same time, a hybrid of BL. Although it sounds ironic and contradictory, this feature attracts not only female readers but also male readers to this manga.

Keywords: BL, Yamashita Tomoko, *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru*

<0>: Introduction

Unlike other art forms, mainstream Japanese manga are often categorized by publishers based on the gender of the target reader, with "*shōnen* (boys) manga" for males and "*shōjyo* (girls) manga" for females. Also, the gender of the protagonists of the manga are also likely to accord with the gender of the target readers, which functions to attract more readers of the same gender and encourages the readers to identify with and feel like a protagonist of the story.

However, recent years have seen a shift in this categorization framework, particularly due to the influence of manga creators who began their careers by publishing BL works, like Yoshinaga Fumi (b.1971), Ono Natsume (b.1977), Meiji Kanako (unknown), and Yamashita Tomoko (b.1981). Their works have been published in magazines aimed at both male and female audiences, demonstrating that their manga appeal to a diverse readership. This shift indicates an evolving gender system in the Japanese manga industry, which may have improved since the 20th century.

More importantly, it suggests that these creators produce works that encourage publishers to transcend traditional gender category boundaries, attracting readers of all genders. The key to this appeal lies in the "literariness" of their texts, a concept explored by scholars such as Takeuchi and Ishida through their investigations into *shōjyo* manga. It's important to clarify that referring to this quality as "literariness" does not imply that manga is merely a sub-genre of literature. Instead, manga stands as its own genre of art, possessing unique literary qualities. This paper aims to examine the literariness of manga by analyzing Yamashita Tomoko's *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru* ("Outside of a Triangle-shaped Window is

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Night"). The analysis will be approached from a literary perspective, focusing on the significance and features of the literary devices used in this work. By doing so, the paper seeks to understand why some texts by established BL manga creators successfully challenge the gender category limitations within the manga industry.

<1-1>Background of BL: The Literariness of *Shōjyo* Manga of the 1970s and 1980s

Before examining *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru* from a literary perspective, it is essential to consider *shōjyo* manga from the 1970s and 1980s, a period marked by significant improvements in the literariness of *shōjyo* manga. This enhancement is a crucial factor in the creation of BL (Boys' Love) manga. The development of literariness also facilitated readers' acquisition of critical reading skills, which are vital for BL. A key contributor to the refinement of *shōjyo* manga during this time was the emergence of talented and adventurous female creators, including Hagio Moto (b.1949) and Takemiya Keiko (b.1950), along with their successors like Mihara Jyun (1952~1995), Takano Fumiko (b.1957), and Okano Reiko (b.1960). Another significant factor was the launch of innovative new-wave magazines for girls, such as *Hana to Yume* (1974), *Princess* (1974), *LaLa* (1976), *Asuka* (1985), and *Grape Fruits* (1981).

These publications offered creators the opportunity to experiment and introduce novel concepts. Many manga featured protagonists and main characters whose genders did not align with the intended readership, and some openly depicted relationships between girls and boys, diverging from the industry norms of that era. This supportive artistic environment, characterized by talented creators, liberal publishing attitudes, and proficient readers, allowed *shōjyo* manga creators to seek intellectual stimulation and broaden their perspectives. For instance, creators like Mizuno Hideko and Yamagishi Ryoko adopted the style of Art Nouveau artist Alphonse Mucha (Satō 2019, 174-179), Mihara Jyun's inter-textualization, which used texts taken from literature for example, Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1960) in her texts, such as (*Warera*) *Hamidashikko* (We, Alienated Children in Society, 1975-1981) (Konishi 2015, 84-87), and the expression of reciprocal relationships between boys depicted by, for instance, Hagio Moto and Takemiya Keiko.

Manga that portrayed reciprocal relationships between boys, such as *Kaze to Ki no Uta* (The Song of the Wind and the Tree) by Takemiya and *Pō no Ichizoku* (The Poe Clan) and *Tōma no Shinzō* (Lost Heart for Thoma) by Hagio, are precursors to BL. The key point is that the purpose of expressing relationships between boys goes beyond simply showcasing those relationships, as Hagio herself explained. Hagio stated that she chose to portray boy-to-boy relationships rather than girl-to-boy ones to avoid societal gender disparities (Hagio 2018, 82). This decision highlights that her focus on male relationships was a literary strategy, enabling her to explore the essence of human connections and improve her representation skills. Also, these works, alongside others like *Kaihō no Saisho no Hi* by Kimura Minori, exemplify the literariness and self-representation achieved by *shōjyo* manga since the 1970s (Takeuchi 2006, 394).

Ishida summarized Takeuchi's insights, noting that *shōjyo* manga like *Kaze to Ki no Uta* and *Tōma no shinzō* elevated their literariness by addressing profound questions such as

“What is love?”, “What is death?”, and “What is humanity?” (Ishida 2008, 20). These themes later influenced BL creators, including those behind *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru*. The significance of these 1970s and 1980s *shōjyo* manga lies not only in their portrayal of idealized relationships between boys but also in their innovative approach to exploring fundamental human questions through the lens of reciprocal relationships. They operate as dynamic works that borrow from other artistic genres, posing inquiries about existence and identity while depicting connections among boys.

<1-2> Background of BL: Representations of something invisible / something visible--- part I

The literary devices of manga arise from its unique combination of visual storytelling and textual language. One prevalent device is the depiction of characters who can see invisible entities, such as spirits or ghosts. Successful examples include Yamagishi Ryōko's *Hi-Izuru-Tokoro no Tenshi* (1980-1984) and Ima Ichiko's *Hyakki Yakō Shō* (1995~). This device emphasizes the uniqueness and solitude of these characters, highlighting their alienation from others. For instance, in *Hi-Izuru-Tokoro no Tenshi*, Prince Umayado longs for affection but is rejected by his mother due to his visionary gift. This narrative strategy allows readers to empathize with the characters, as they can "see" the same invisible elements.

Similarly, Ōshima Yumiko's *Natsu no Yo no Baku* (1988) features Sōji, a primary school student portrayed as an adult, while his family and teacher appear as children. As the narrator, Sōji clarifies that the representation is not of the real world but a reflection of his maturity compared to others' immaturity. This subjectivity encourages readers to sympathize with Sōji and perceive the world through his eyes. Through Sōji's perspective, readers witness a portrayal of Japanese society as fundamentally immature. Sōji is an observer who allows society to function as it is. However, by the story's conclusion, he confronts his own solitude, realizing he has been pretending to understand his surroundings. Ultimately, he decides to embrace his childlike behavior. The closing scene depicts Sōji, portrayed as a child, walking through town, crying freely, and recognizing that his awkwardness is acceptable because he is a child. This conclusion invites readers to reflect on their own perceptions, acknowledging that they are not privy to the invisible truths the characters see. Instead, they are imperfect visionaries, shaped by the narrators and characters to experience a filtered reality.

<2> *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru* created by Yamashita Tomoko

Yamashita Tomoko (1981–) began her career as a creator within the *dōjinshi* world of Boys' Love (BL) before establishing herself as a professional manga artist. Her body of work includes not only BL manga but also general manga for both male and female audiences. One of her latest works is *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru*, which has been serialized in the BL magazine *MAGAZINE BE x BOY* since 2013¹. This manga weaves a narrative of exorcism interlaced with suspense, focusing on Mikado, a young adult with a heightened sensitivity to spirits, souls, and ghosts. Despite his extraordinary ability to perceive the invisible, Mikado is paralyzed by fear and unable to confront these entities. In contrast, Hiyakawa, the other main

character, is a skilled exorcist who recognizes Mikado's latent potential and recruits him as an assistant, proclaiming that Mikado is destined to be his one and only.

One of the intriguing aspects of *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru* is its resistance to strict gender categorization and genre classification. While it is published in a magazine typically associated with BL, the publisher does not explicitly categorize it as such on their website. Furthermore, BL usually attracts a predominantly female readership, yet this manga has garnered a significant following among male readers. A fan event exclusively for male readers was held in Tokyo in 2014, indicating that the manga transcends traditional boundaries of genre and gender. While the publisher's marketing strategies may play a role in this phenomenon, the manga itself possesses an inherent appeal that captivates readers across gender lines. Despite its placement in a BL magazine, *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru* challenges conventional genre expectations. It does not feature intimate relationships or sexual encounters between the main characters; however, it incorporates literary devices that evoke a sense of seduction akin to premier BL works. This allows for a nuanced categorization of the manga as a non-BL text that nonetheless carries an aura of BL.

The manga operates as a palimpsest in two key ways. First, it can be interpreted as a horror suspense narrative while simultaneously being read as a BL text by readers familiar with the genre's tropes. This interpretation aligns with a specific reading practice among BL fans known as *fujyoshi yomi* (a reading style among BL fans), which encourages readers to envision intimate relationships between characters, regardless of the intended narrative. Second, *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru* can be seen as a hypertext, drawing upon various *hypo textes* that range from contemporary BL narratives to *shōjyo* manga of the 1970s and 1980s. To date, eight volumes of this manga have been published, and they can be divided into two distinct visual styles. The covers of the first five volumes are black, featuring silhouettes of the main characters obscured by a mysterious hand, which conveys a horror mystery aesthetic. In contrast, the covers of the sixth volume onward are white and depict illustrations suggesting a closer relationship between Mikado and Hiyakawa. Interestingly, while the early volumes are rich with tropes from 1990s BL—often showcasing seductive scenes without explicit sexual acts—the later volumes shift away from overtly expressing these tropes. Instead, the latter installments emphasize elements reminiscent of *shōjyo* manga, particularly the works of the 1970s and 1980s. One of the most significant influences is *Kaze to Ki no Uta*, a seminal *shōjyo* manga frequently regarded as a precursor to BL.

In order to study how this manga is a palimpsestic text of BL, two tropes of BL in the 1990s to the present expressed in the manga text will first be discussed, one of which is fantastic encounters between the protagonists that depicts the situation wherein both the protagonists are destined to be in an intimate relationship with each other, and the other of which is representations of seductive acts. Secondly, this paper will explore how the manga text *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru* serves as a transposition of *shōjyo* manga from the 1970s and 1980s.

<2-1> You are my one and only, my destiny.

Encountering a destined partner holds significant weight in 1990s BL narratives. Mizoguchi identifies four key tropes prevalent in this genre, one being the notion of “one or both protagonists maintaining their straight identities despite homosexual involvement.” She questions why readers accept the contradiction of straight men engaging romantically with each other, suggesting it stems from the fantasy of “the myth of eternal love,” a central tenet of staple BL where each character is seen as the other's one true love (Mizoguchi, 2015, 54-60). Similar to 1990s BL, *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru* explores this “myth of the ultimate couple.” Hiyakawa believes Mikado is his destined partner, despite lacking genuine affection for him. The meeting between Mikado and Hiyakawa occurs suddenly; Hiyakawa intuitively senses Mikado’s irreplaceability within moments of their encounter, establishing it as a destined connection. However, unlike traditional BL, *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru* does not evoke a romantic atmosphere between the two at all. Instead, it presents their relationship within a humorous and suspenseful context, emphasizing the narrative's unique approach while hinting at the complexities of their bond.

<2-2> Representations of seductive acts

In *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru*, volumes 1 through 5 evoke a seductive tension without explicit sexual acts. This effect stems from the manga’s blend of horror/suspense elements with BL tropes, such as “rape as an expression of love,” which aligns with the “myth of eternal love—the myth of the ultimate couple” (Mizoguchi 2003, 56). In this story, this trope is recontextualized, not for expressing eternal love but for exorcism. Hiyakawa uses Mikado's spiritual power to exorcise spirits, often depicted visually by his touch on Mikado’s back or shoulder, sometimes without Mikado's consent. For readers familiar with *fujoshi yomi*, this imagery conveys a sexual undertone, though the scenes lack overtly sexual messages for general audiences. For example, dialogues like “U...mm, wait a moment... Ah...it’s hurting,” and “Today we do it uncovered...you are so sensitive,” (Yamashita 2014, vol. 1, 166) evoke an intimate atmosphere for those with a specific interpretive skill. This device leads the manga text to be multilayered, which encourages the readers to read the text diversely.

When Hiyakawa needs a deeper spiritual connection to exorcise, the characters’ physical postures appear sexually suggestive to those using *fujoshi yomi*, yet their genitalia are never shown, differing from mainstream 1990s BL. This nuanced representation parallels *Kaze to Ki no Uta*, where bodies convey an erotic atmosphere. (Figure 1) According to Lafcadio Hearn, Edward F. Strange once stated that Ukiyo-e focused on “the expression of a sensation or idea, the subordination of the particular to the general” (Hearn 1923, 76). Similarly, *Kaze to Ki no Uta* focuses not on the boys’ bodies in detail but on the idea of sexual intimacy. The way of the representation of sexual scenes in *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru* is somewhat similar to that of *Kaze to Ki no Uta*, but it is not exactly the same.

In *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru*, “sexual acts” during exorcisms compel readers, particularly *fujoshi yomi* practitioners, to imagine the placement of genitalia. (Figure 2) For instance, in the Figure no.2, Hiyakawa holds Mikado from behind as his “invisible” hand-shaped soul penetrates Mikado to grasp a spectral being. The visual and onomatopoeic cues, such as *zurun* (denoting a slippery withdrawal), evoke a vision of sexual intimacy,

somewhat akin to the suggestive symbolism in Caravaggio's *Narcissus* (1571–1610). (Figure 3) The knee of Narcissus that is thrust forward is an implication of an erect penis (Tanigawa 1994, 47). Certain readers interpret the spectral hand as a phallic extension of Hiyakawa. Moreover, Mikado's hand is illustrated suggestively, implying the unseen presence of his own sexual organ. Thus, *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru* creates layered meanings, subtly blending horror with suggestive BL imagery.

<2-3> Representing things invisible visually---part II

In *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru*, the juxtaposition of visual and textual elements uniquely portrays characters who can see invisible things, deepening their sense of alienation. (Figure 4) Mikado, who is tormented by his ability to perceive things unseen by others, struggles with an inner fear that something is wrong with him, and feels guilt for not sharing this pain, even with his beloved mother. This internal conflict leads him to view Hiyakawa, who shares his ability, as a necessary presence in his life, despite Hiyakawa's own unsettling qualities. While Mikado is warned to avoid Hiyakawa due to his distorted mentality, Mikado feels an undeniable attraction toward him.

However, the way each character sees these invisible entities is subjective, a concept borrowed from 1970s and 1980s *shōjyo* manga where vision doesn't always represent objective reality. When Hiyakawa combines his power with Mikado's to amplify his vision, Mikado is horrified by the distorted image Hiyakawa perceives, leading him to realize their shared ability does not mean they see identical things. This highlights the fragility of their connection, as Mikado's belief in their bond based on shared vision proves to be uncertain and subjective.

<2-4> The relationship between Black and White

In *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru*, the narrative shift after Volume 6 marks a move away from overtly seductive scenes toward deeper, more philosophical themes like love, death, and humanity—subjects central to 1970s *shōjyo* manga, as noted by Ishida (2008). The series draws heavily from elements of *Kaze to Ki no Uta*, exploring relationships marked by isolation, contrasting protector figures, and divergent attitudes toward society. This dynamic not only aligns the two manga but also enriches *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru* with complex layers that allow readers to interpret these themes from multiple perspectives.

There are three notable parallels between the two works. First, both *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru* and *Kaze to Ki no Uta* feature protagonists who experience alienation. Mikado and Hiyakawa's connection is born from their shared ability to perceive invisible entities, which isolates them socially. This bond is reminiscent of the relationship between Gilbert, an outcast due to his beauty and controversial behavior, and Serge, who faces discrimination due to his mixed-race heritage in *Kaze to Ki no Uta*. The alienation that Gilbert and Serge feel drives them into an exclusive, reciprocal relationship, just as it does for Mikado and Hiyakawa.

Second, both manga portray contrasting relationships between the protagonists and their protectors. In *Kaze to Ki no Uta*, Gilbert receives limited affection from his legal

guardians and endures an abusive relationship with his biological father, Auguste, who raises him with a warped philosophy, pushing Gilbert to reject societal norms, particularly regarding sexuality. Similarly, Hiyakawa is raised within a cult where he is revered as a spiritual leader, but the cult's strict dogma and his mother's detachment foster in him a sense of disdain for societal norms and personal desires. His experience aligns with Gilbert's upbringing under Auguste's influence, where both characters are shaped by environments that alienate them from conventional society and encourage them to disregard their own well-being. This portrayal of Hiyakawa's childhood also resembles Umayado's character in *Hi-Izuru-Tokoro no Tenshi*, by Yamagishi Ryōko. Like Umayado, who longs for maternal affection but remains emotionally distant due to his mother's fear of his visionary powers, Hiyakawa is abandoned by his mother, who views him as a spiritual entity rather than her son. In a climactic scene, when Hiyakawa kills the cult members—including his mother—to escape, he coldly denies his mother's claim of motherhood, saying, "I have no Mother" (Yamashita 2014, p.189, vol.6). This brutal disavowal underscores the deep psychological scars left by his upbringing, akin to Umayado's experience in *Hi-Izuru-Tokoro no Tenshi*.

The third point of comparison relates to the black-and-white dynamic often used in *shōjyo* manga and BL to distinguish contrasting characters. In these genres, dark-haired characters often embody realism and masculinity, while light-haired characters symbolize femininity and a disconnection from reality (Fujimoto 1999, as cited in Welker 2006). *Kaze to Ki no Uta* exemplifies this dynamic with the dark-haired Serge as the grounded, innocent figure, while the blond Gilbert embodies the corrupted, hyper-aware character who takes the lead in their relationship. In *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru*, this dynamic appears in Mikado's grounded and diligent approach to both visible and invisible realities, contrasting with Hiyakawa's aloof, impulsive nature. Hiyakawa's familiarity with the supernatural mirrors Gilbert's experience with social and sexual realities, granting him a leading role in his relationship with Mikado. Yet, Mikado's naivety occasionally destabilizes this power balance, echoing moments in *Kaze to Ki no Uta* where Serge's innocence disturbs Gilbert.

Despite these parallels, two main distinctions emerge between the relationships in *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru* and *Kaze to Ki no Uta*. First, the connection between Hiyakawa and Mikado does not involve physical intimacy, though it can be interpreted as a form of spiritual intercourse. Second, Mikado's uncertain relationship with his father—who may have a role in the cult that shaped Hiyakawa—adds an element of mystery to his background. This mystery surrounding Mikado's father could further complicate the bond between him and Hiyakawa, hinting that future revelations may deepen or redefine their relationship.

The layered connections between *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru* and *Kaze to Ki no Uta* foster intertextual readings that add depth to both narratives. For readers of *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru*, the thematic and character parallels with *Kaze to Ki no Uta* encourage a re-evaluation of the latter beyond its status as a BL genre precursor. *Kaze to Ki no Uta* can thus be appreciated as a broader exploration of identity and alienation. Furthermore, by borrowing elements from *Kaze to Ki no Uta* to explore self-

representation, *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru* situates itself as a spiritual successor to 1970s and 1980s *shōjyo* manga that sought to elevate manga's literary potential.

Notably, *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru* appeals to a diverse readership, attracting both female and male readers. Its appeal is partly due to its compelling horror-suspense narrative, which broadens its reach. Additionally, *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru* engages the *fujyoshi yomi* or “BL fan reading” style, appealing to fans who enjoy interpreting same-sex relationships within manga subtexts. However, this alone does not account for its popularity. Another contributing factor is its status as a palimpsestic text, blending BL tropes from the 1990s onward with elements of classic *shōjyo* manga from the 1970s and 1980s. This hybridity, a characteristic trait of BL as a genre, reflects the text's intricate nature and layered references. Originating as a blend of genres, BL is known for integrating elements from various manga traditions, such as *shōjyo* manga and even animation. By adopting features from 1970s and 1980s *shōjyo* manga, *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru* establishes itself as a legitimate descendant of *shōjyo* manga that celebrates the medium's unique blend of visual and textual expression. This homage to *shōjyo* manga reinforces its identity as “manga for females,” highlighting the genre's distinctive capacity to communicate complex narratives through an interplay of images and words. Ultimately, it is *Sankakumado*'s creative fusion of BL and *shōjyo* manga traditions that makes it such a fascinating work. Its ability to draw from diverse influences and present nuanced relationships and themes has led it to resonate with a broader audience. Ironically, this synthesis of “female manga” elements not only strengthens its appeal to a specific demographic but also enhances its cross-gender appeal, attracting a wide range of readers who appreciate its rich, multilayered storytelling. In this way, *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru* can be seen as a BL due to the fact that while this is not a thoroughbred of BL it is a hybrid of BL. *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru* embodies a new phase of BL—one that transcends traditional boundaries, revitalizes classic motifs, and appeals to a contemporary audience that values both innovation and homage within the manga genre.

3: Conclusion

BL emerged from strict gender categorization, but it quickly evolved into a hybrid genre by incorporating elements from *shōjyo* manga and other forms. Over time, creators like Yoshinaga Fumi, Ono Natsume, and Yamashita Tomoko have challenged these traditional gender frameworks, expanding BL's thematic range. Yamashita's *Sankakumado no Sotogawa wa Yoru* exemplifies this evolution, blending suspense and philosophical themes while drawing on the literariness of 1970s and 1980s *shōjyo* manga. This work signals a potential future for BL that transcends gender boundaries, marking a significant shift in gender portrayal within Japanese manga.



Figure 1. Takemiya Keiko.
Kaze to ki no uta. Shōgakkan.
 ©1977-1984. Takemiya Keiko / Shōgakkan.



Figure 2. Yamashita Tomoko.
Sankakumado no sotogawa wa yoru. Libre.
 © 2014 Yamashita Tomoko / Libre.

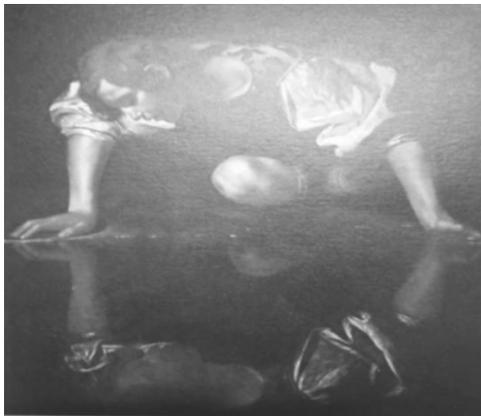


Figure 3. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio.
 《Narcissus》 1599 around
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narcissus_\(Caravaggio\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narcissus_(Caravaggio))
 (30th Oct. 2024. access)



Figure 4. Yamashita Tomoko.
Sankakumado no sotogawa wa yoru. Libre.
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¹ While I was waiting for this paper's publication, *Sankakumado no sotogawa wa yoru* has been completed. Yet, I would like to maintain the content of this paper as written.