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# Japan's Queer Cultures

Mark J. McLelland

*University of Wollongong*, [markmc@uow.edu.au](mailto:markmc@uow.edu.au)

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## Japan's Queer Cultures

Mark McLelland

### The Pre-Modern Background to Japan's Queer Cultures

When reflecting on the history of “queer” or non-normative, non-heterosexual sexual relations in the Japanese context, it is important to consider that same-sex sexuality, particularly as practiced between men, has only comparatively recently come to be considered unusual and been consigned to the pathological side of a “normal”/“abnormal” divide. During the Edo period (1603-1867) there was no normative connection made between gender and sexual preference because all men, whether samurai, priest or commoner were able to engage in both same- and opposite-sex affairs. At the time, men's same-sex relationships were governed by a code of ethics described as *nanshoku* (male eroticism) or *shudō* (the way of youths) in the context of which elite men were able to pursue boys and young men who had not yet undergone their coming-of-age ceremonies, as well transgender males of all ages from the lower classes who worked as actors associated with the kabuki theater. As well as being a conspicuous social reality, these relationships were widely represented in the culture of the period in art, literature and on the stage.

Significantly, while *nanshoku*, made up of the characters for “man” and “eroticism,” was a general term covering a variety of forms of love practiced between men, the parallel term *joshoku*, made up of the characters for “woman” and “eroticism,” actually referred to love relationships between *men* and women. It was the case that no concept existed at this time which referred in a general sense to women's same-sex love and consequently, there was no way of cognitively linking both male and female “homosexuality.” Although there are some literary and artistic references to sexual acts taking place between women during pre-modern times, women's same-sex love was not accorded the same level of moral seriousness as that between men. This does not mean that such relationships were not widespread at a time when women, like men, were limited in their interactions with

the other sex, simply that the cultural mechanisms to ensure their memory were not in place.

### **The Development of Sexological Perspectives**

The new field of sexology which added “scientific” opprobrium to legal and religious disapproval of same-sex sexual relationships was being developed in European medical circles at precisely the time that Japan was opened up to Western influence during the Meiji period (1857-1912). During this time, numerous Japanese intellectuals traveled to and borrowed extensively from the West. One of the most important intellectuals who facilitated the spread of foreign ideas about sexuality was the novelist Mori Ōgai (1862-1922), a military doctor who had spent four years as a medical student in Berlin. He published a wide range of articles on sexual issues which became one of the main conduits through which the categories devised by German sexologists such as Krafft-Ebing were disseminated into Japanese. Ōgai was writing at a time when *seiyoku* (sexual appetite or desire) was beginning to be elucidated as a factor behind character development in Japanese fiction and his novel, *Vita Sexualis*, published in 1909, is one of the first instances to take the “sexuality” of its protagonist as its central theme. The elaboration of a space of sexual interiority in literature fed into popular discussion concerning normal (*seijō*) and perverse (*ijō*) forms of sexuality and, accordingly, people.

Although Meiji-period sexology was largely the province of an intellectual elite, growing literacy led to a more proletarian readership the Taisho period (1912-25) which saw what has been described as a “*hentai* boom,” the first of several explosions of interest in “queer sexuality” (*hentai seiyoku*) that were to sweep the Japanese media over the next half century. This widespread interest is best understood in relation to a cultural fad known as *ero-guro nansensu* or “erotic grotesque nonsense” which was prominent in the popular culture of the late 1920s. It was during this period that *dōseiai* (same-sex love) emerged as the most popular of a handful of terms approximating a translation of the European concept of “homosexuality.” For the first time in Japanese a category became available within which a variety of female-female same-sex romantic and physical relationships

could be grouped, and through which it became possible to speak of both male and female same-sex desire as dimensions of the same phenomenon.

Needless to say, both male-male and female-female same-sex practices were considered *hentai* or “perverse”, but unlike during the Edo period, when love between women was largely overlooked, Taisho writers displayed a great deal of interest in the female homosexual relationships that were supposedly springing up in Japan’s newly established girls’ schools and in the single-sex dormitories set up for unmarried female factory workers. Another forum in which female same-sex love was thought to be rife was the all-female performance troupe, the Takarazuka Review, in which women actors played both female and male roles. The *otokoyaku* or “male-role” players were particularly admired by the Review’s largely female fans. Spoken of as “S” relationships in which the “S” stood for *shōjo* (girl), sister, or even sex, women’s crushes on other women, albeit considered pathological, were not taken too seriously since they were widely regarded as asexual and temporary aberrations, something that the girls would outgrow. Throughout the period negative media attention was drawn to women’s relationships via several prominently reported love suicides of female couples that occasioned widespread discussion about the dangers of female-female relationships. This concern over women’s secret “S” relationships can be seen as yet another example of social unease about women’s changing status as illustrated in media discussions about the so-called “modern girl” and “new woman.” Yet, despite the pathologizing tenor of these discussions, in comparison with love between men, same-sex love between women was still considered to be more psychological, emotional and spiritual, whereas men’s desires were considered more carnal. As a consequence, *dōseiai* tended to be discussed more in relation to female same-sex love. In part, this was an accident of the translation of “homosexual” as *dōseiai*, since *ai*, the character chosen to represent love, was more emotional in tone than *koi*, an alternative character which had a stronger erotic charge.

Although accounts of most same-sex relationships between women at this time were limited to scandalous newspaper reports, several prominent women writers wrote publicly about their relationships with other women. Among these, translator from the

Russian, Yuasa Yoshiko, was one of a number of women who at one time or another had romantic relationships with other members of the “Blue Stocking” feminist society. Although the word “*rezubian*” was not a part of the general lexicon in the prewar period, in an interview late in her life, Yuasa agreed that she was indeed a *rezubian* thus indicating that educated elite women, at least, had some agency in resisting official narratives of perversion.

### **Queer Cultures during the Pacific War**

In contrast to the relatively open discussion of sexual matters in the 1920s, Japan’s descent into militarism in the early 1930s saw the government tighten its hold on sexual discourse and practice. Despite the fact that the ideology of the period was relentlessly heterosexual and pronatal, as Japan’s regional conflicts progressed, actual social organization became increasingly homosocial. Throughout the 1930s, greater numbers of men were drafted into the military, thus delaying the marriage of bachelors and separating married men from their wives, thereby encouraging the development of greater intimacy between men. At the same time unmarried women moved to take the place of these men in the factories. One of the results of this separation between the sexes was what has, in relation to the cinema of the period, been referred to as “the death of romance”—since romantic love between a man and a woman was seen as incompatible with the heroic masculinity demanded by the war effort. Accordingly, in popular culture at least, men’s romantic love for women tended to be displaced by images of homosocial brotherhood. There were, for instance, many media accounts of “love between comrades” (*sen’yūai*) where male homosocial bonding was shown to have encouraged feats of great chivalry, self-sacrifice and valor on the battlefield. Of course, these official narratives contained no mention of more physical relationships since, due to the severe censorship exercised, among other ways, via the government’s control over paper rations, there were few opportunities to discuss sexuality outside of the reproductive paradigms endorsed by the state.

However, accounts published in the early postwar years do suggest that relationships between senior soldiers and young recruits sometimes had a sexual element. One text dating from 1952 and entitled “Homosexuality on the battlefield,” points out that “veteran officers choose for their orderlies soldiers who are beautiful youths (*bishōnen*)” and that these boys were used as a “substitute for women” and an “outlet for sexual desire” (*seiyoku no hakeguchi*) on the front line. Ōgiya Afu, a prolific postwar commentator on male homosexuality, went so far as to draw a parallel between the apparent “need” for prostitutes, known euphemistically as “comfort women” and the “unavoidable attraction” that older soldiers felt for the increasingly young “beautiful male youths” who were being drafted at the war’s end. He speaks of these relationships being accorded a certain degree of sanction.

During the Pacific War the category “the homosexual” was not imagined or invoked as a threat to the Japanese war effort in the way it was within the Allied forces (who regularly purged “sexual deviants” – male and female – from their ranks). To an extent, in Japan homosexual behavior was still seen as a potential shared by men in general and an understandable consequence of sex-segregation. Thus, while Japan’s militarism did not in itself contribute toward the development of fixed homosexual identities (as is arguable in the context of the Allied war effort), there is considerable circumstantial evidence suggesting that homoeroticism and in certain contexts, explicit homosexual interaction, was encouraged by the process of sex-segregation that accelerated as Japan’s position in the war gradually deteriorated.

### **The Rapid Development of Postwar Queer Cultures**

After the repression of the war years, a new sexual culture arose very quickly after Japan’s defeat and occupation by Allied forces. The immediate postwar period witnessed a loosening of traditional sex and gender ideologies, resulting in an endorsement of “curiosity seeking” (*ryōki*) in sexual matters and a less judgmental attitude taken toward homosexuality and other non-procreative acts in the popular press. For instance, a great detail of information about sexual practices framed as “sex education” for married

couples was disseminated via magazines such as *Modern Couple* and *Romance* which significantly extended the repertoire of sexual acts beyond the procreative paradigms recommended in pre-war sex advice. Practices such as kissing, necking and petting were given detailed coverage and pamphlets describing these terms newly transliterated into the *katakana* script were often included as free inserts in these magazines.

From the early 1950s, a range of magazines that had much in common with the 1920s fad for publications specializing in “erotic, grotesque nonsense” appeared. Sporting titles such as *Sexual Morals Science* and *Sexual Morals Storybook*, these magazines courted a readership of “intellectuals” and “cultured persons” who were interested in analyzing and accounting for the apparently sudden proliferation of “queer” or perverse desires (*hentai seiyoku*) after the war. The “experts” consulted by these magazines were as likely to be professors of French literature (since French authors such as de Sade, Gide and Proust were considered to deal with perversion) as they were to be doctors or psychologists. Furthermore, the fact that readers often wrote letters and contributed longer descriptive pieces about their own “perverse desires” meant that pathologizing medical and psychoanalytic theories did not establish such a firm hold on popular discourse about queer desires in Japan as was the case in American popular writings, at this time. Indeed, many of the experts consulted seemed to have had more than a professional interest in the topics they were analyzing and given that the magazines relied on contributions from readers for a substantial percentage of their copy, there were many rather upbeat accounts of non-heterosexual interests and practices. These upbeat accounts are most evident in a number of roundtable discussions staged for the magazines in which queer individuals such as cross-dressing male prostitutes (*danshō*), homosexual (*homo*) bar goers and female homosexuals (*josei no homo*) discussed their lives, often contradicting or qualifying the opinions of the “experts.”

These early “queer” magazines offer invaluable insights into the social organization of a range of non-heterosexual communities and identities in the first postwar decade. For instance, we learn from accounts in these magazines that immediately after the war, the first homosexual drinking places had been referred to as *danshoku kissaten*, that is “male

eroticism coffee shops” and those meeting there had been referred to by a wide range of terms, both modern and more traditional, including *sodomia* (from sodomite), *homo* (from homosexual) and *danshokuka* (conjoining the nominalizing suffix “ka” or –ist to the Edo-period term for male-male eroticism). However, by the mid 1950s, the newly imported term *gei*, which had been introduced during the US Occupation, was being deployed as a trendy term to refer to homosexual nightspots and the professional young men who worked there (but not to the customers). Since many of the “boys” working in these establishments exhibited transgender characteristics, *gei* came to represent a group of professional bar workers who engaged in transgender and other performances to entertain a clientele of more gender-normative customers referred to as *homo*—an important distinction within the subculture that was to remain in place until the early 1980s.

However, where homosexual men were concerned, the bar world was not the only means of socialization. The early 1950s magazines contained personals columns that aided men, particularly those living outside the major cities, to network together, and a number of organizations were established, ostensibly for the “study” of male-male sexuality, including cross-dressing. The earliest and most long-lived of these groups was the Adonis Club which published a newsletter and held regular meetings between 1952 and 1962. The group’s newsletter was a mixture of high-brow essays (often concerning homosexuality among historical figures), personal ads and erotic fiction and illustrations. Although it had a small circulation confined to club members, it was an important prototype for the commercial “*homo*” magazines that developed in the 1970s.

While in the early 1950s the main focus of sexual “curiosity seeking” was on male desire, with a large number of articles dedicated to male homosexuality and crossdressing, women’s same-sex sexuality was not entirely overlooked. As mentioned, “female same-sex love” (*joshi dōseiai*) had been regularly discussed in the “*ero-guro*” press of the 1920s and, although the term “lesbian” was not itself used, there was some discussion of “Lesbos love” (*resubosu ai*) in the early postwar press. Yet, just as there was less written about female homosexuality, there were far fewer descriptors referring to female



homosexuals, and they were in some texts simply referred to as *josei no homo* or “female homos.” Indeed, in the early 1950s, discussion of female homosexuality seems to have been included very much as an afterthought.

However, a roundtable discussion between “female homos” published in *Sexual Morals Science* in 1955 shows that a small bar world already existed for women interested in liaisons with other women but it is not until the 1960s that we find more widespread media interest in this subculture. For instance, numerous media reports have come to light concerning the bar Yume no Shiro (Castle of dreams) which had been founded in 1961 to take advantage of the popularity of the all-female Shōchiku Kagekidan, an acting troupe similar to the Takarazuka Review, that featured many beautiful actresses in male “trouser roles.” Other similar bars developed throughout the 1960s and it became possible for some women with the money and the leisure (who were themselves often employed in the entertainment trade) to socialize in a world organized according to butch (*tachi*) and femme (*neko*) gender roles—a paradigm that owes more to traditional transgender performance in the Japanese theater than to parallel developments in US lesbian culture of the time.

So far no evidence has come to light of the existence of “Lesbos” publications or organizations for women similar to those that developed for *homo* men in the 1950s and 60s. However, all this was to change in response to the impact of second-wave feminism that hit Japan at the end of the 1960s. During this period, there developed a broader consciousness of *rezubian* (lesbian) issues as part of women’s liberation discourse and the early 1970s saw the rise of a range of women’s groups and publications around *rezubian* identity and desire.

### **The Development of Queer Activism**

Significantly, in the early 1970s it was the term *rezubian*, not *gei* that first began to be deployed with political connotations and it was Japanese lesbians, not gay men, who were the first to build community ties based on politics and not just sexual attraction. On

the whole lesbian and gay activism in Japan has developed independently. Homosexual men and women socialized in different environments, there was never any organized police persecution and, given the absence of sodomy and unequal age-of-consent laws, there were no issues of common concern that might have brought gay men and lesbians together. Hence there have never been any commercial publications in Japan that have sought, in a sustained manner, to elaborate a wider queer perspective that might act as a bridge between men's and women's communities.

The 1971 founding of the lesbian group *Wakakusa no Kai* (Young grass club) in Tokyo is often spoken of as a turning point in terms of lesbian community building in Japan. While some women who went to its meetings were looking for partners rather than a community, other participants wanted to engage with other women in a more political manner.

Despite the fact that mainstream Japanese feminism has long been criticized for overlooking lesbian issues, all-women feminist spaces did create fertile environments for the experience and expression of female same-sex intimacy. Homosexual men, however, who were not discriminated against *as men*, did not have the same motivation to agitate for political change and there were no attempts to develop a broader coalition with lesbian women as was the case in the early years of Gay Liberation in the US.

The most enduring of Japanese lesbian organizations has been *Regumi*, a group founded in the late 1980s consisting of a loose alliance of lesbians, some from the bar world and others involved in feminist activities. The group's name was made up of *re* which stood for *rezubian* and the character *gumi* or group. *Regumi tsūshin* (Regumi news) is a newsletter published from 1985, and includes information about lesbian literature, various support and discussion groups and a telephone information line. However, it was not until May 1995 that *Phryne*, the first commercial magazine aimed at lesbian and bisexual women was released. Despite initial optimism that the magazine would reach a cross-over audience of heterosexual feminist women, *Phryne* folded after only its second issue. The next year saw another attempt at publishing a commercial magazine for lesbian and bisexual women – *Anise*. Seven issues were published between 1996 and 1997 before lack of funds led to the temporary suspension of publication. However, gradual sales of

back numbers enabled the magazine to recommence publication in 2001 and it is now the longest running commercial lesbian publication in Japan.

Contrary to the difficult experience of sustaining politically oriented lesbian feminist publications, erotic publications aimed at homosexual men have had a more successful history. Commencing with *Barazoku* (rose tribe) in 1971, there has been a constant stream of commercially successful men's magazines, some of which lasted for several decades, with circulations of up to 40,000. However, since the late 1990s, when the easy availability of pornographic material and networking spaces via the Internet cut into their sales, these magazines have begun to go under, with *Barazoku* ceasing publication in 2004 after over 30 years.

However, despite the prevalence of more erotic media directed at homosexual men, it would be mistaken to assume that the politics of sexuality has not been of interest to some. Indeed, an explicit connection between Japan's heteronormative (as opposed to patriarchal) social system and the oppression of sexual minorities was made by Tōgō Ken as early as 1971. Tōgō founded the political party *Zatsumin no Kai* (miscellaneous people's party) which brought together a wide range of individuals who were socially disenfranchised on account of their "failure" to live in accordance with received notions about family life and relationships. Commencing in the early 70s, Tōgō ran many times for a seat in Japan's parliament, the National Diet, and although unsuccessful he continued his campaigning over the next 20 years.

It is problematic, however, to identify Tōgō as Japan's first "gay" activist since he deliberately used the indigenous term *okama* to describe himself. Technically a term for a large pot for cooking rice, *okama* has been used since at least the Edo era as a slang term for the buttocks and by association for effeminate homosexual men (who are assumed to engage in passive anal sex). It is hence a troubling term for many homosexuals who dislike the associations of effeminacy and passivity that it carries. Tōgō, however, insisted on recuperating the term, much as the lesbian and gay movement in the US was to do with "queer" two decades later, and insisted that to counter homophobia in the

Japanese context it was necessary to engage with local Japanese terms for sexual difference. Tōgō was, however, a controversial figure, and was unable to galvanize widespread support among homosexual men (or among the other communities he canvassed). During the late 1970s other figures had more impact, such as Ōtsuka Takashi, who was the first activist to begin to use the loanword *gei* (gay) in a more political manner in his weekly segment on popular underground radio program *The Snake Man Show*.

Although by the late 1970s, pioneers such as Ōtsuka Takashi had begun to utilize *gei* as an identity category, Japanese activists still had few connections with gay and lesbian movements outside Japan. This is not surprising since, unlike the more politicized term *rezubian*, *gei* was only just beginning to be articulated as a subject position. In the minds of many, *gei* was still a term associated with professional bar workers and the entertainment trade. This situation began to change, however, in 1983 when a foreign journalist researching an article on homosexuality in Japan published an interview with Minami Teishirō, editor of the gay magazine *Adon* (not to be confused with the earlier *homo* newsletter *Adonis*). This brought Minami to the attention of the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) which, as well as offering support to developing lesbian and gay organizations around the world, also lobbied national governments and international organizations such as the UN to ensure protection of lesbian and gay people's rights. Minami agreed to be the representative of ILGA in Japan and also traveled to overseas ILGA conferences and workshops as a representative of Japanese homosexuals.

One of ILGA Japan's most conspicuous successes was the organization of the first Tokyo Lesbian and Gay Parade in August 1994 which attracted over one-thousand participants. This success was repeated the next year when participation more than doubled. However, participation in the 1996 parade fell back to just over one-thousand since many people were unhappy with the parade's organizers who were accused of being too controlling. These disagreements were not easily resolved and as a consequence, attendance at the 1997 event was even worse, participation plummeting to less than a hundred. Lesbians,

who had felt they had been excluded from the decision-making process in earlier parades, refused to participate at all, preferring to stage their own *daiku* (dyke) march. These disagreements drew attention to the particular difficulty in Japan of establishing a shared agenda between homosexual men and lesbian women.

Frequent disputes over the parades are evidence that ILGA Japan had never been able to establish itself as a broad and representative group for sexual minorities in Japan. Minami found that gaining any kind of consensus among queer communities on issues such as coming out, HIV prevention measures and the need for public activism was extremely difficult. As an older man and erring perhaps on the side of conservatism, Minami found that younger members were impatient of his leadership and in 1986 an inevitable split took place with younger members of the group leaving to found OCCUR, also known in Japanese as Ugoku Gei to Rezubian no Kai (Organization for Moving Gays and Lesbians). OCCUR has consistently taken a more proactive stance toward the media and professional and government organizations than earlier groups. One of its key strategies has been to deploy the notion of the *tōjisha*, originally a legal term referring to the “parties concerned” in litigation; it is now widely used among minority and civil-rights groups to insist on their right to self-representation and self-determination. The association of the term *tōjisha* with homosexual and particularly transgender individuals helped the public at large to conceive of people expressing a range of queer identities and desires as “sexual minorities” (*seiteki mainoriti*) and as thus having “rights” akin to other disadvantaged groups in society.

As part of its insistence on *tōjisha* agency, OCCUR has been involved in lobbying the Japan Society of Psychology and Neurology to have homosexuality declassified as a mental illness and has lobbied the publishers of Japan's major dictionaries and encyclopedias to have definitions of homosexuality rewritten in line with modern understandings of homosexuals as a sexual minority. OCCUR has also worked with the Tokyo Metropolitan Government to have homosexuals included under the city's human rights charter. The group was also involved in a long litigation with the Tokyo Municipal Government concerning equal access for sexual minority groups to public conference and

recreational facilities. These initiatives resulted in the translation and promulgation of a range of new vocabulary for discussing queer identities and desires, such as *seiteki shikō* or “sexual orientation” which have brought discussions of minority sexualities in Japan in line with Western paradigms. This paradigm shift has not, however, been welcomed by all queer individuals in Japan, particularly transgenders working within the entertainment industry, some of whom have argued that the shift to “normalize” queer desire detracts from the potential of queer perspectives to interrogate and hold to account some of the negative effects of Japan’s overtly patriarchal and heteronormative social system.

The 1990s was also an important decade for the development of what might be termed local or indigenous takes on queer theory. During the decade two theorists in particular, Fushimi Noriaki and Kakefuda Hiroko, rose to prominence, although the latter found the strain of public scrutiny too enervating and has since retired from public life. Fushimi initially gained attention during Japan’s “gay boom,” a period in the early 1990s when mainstream media suddenly became interested in gay lifestyles and issues. His 1991 book *Private Gay Life* opened with a “queer” (*hentai*) declaration in which he disavowed any interest in being “normal” since he felt that this term was always already discriminatory (in that “normal” needs to discover and position itself against the “abnormal” in order to be intelligible). Hence, Fushimi’s approach was very different from the minoritizing perspective adopted by OCCUR. Fushimi was not interested in normalizing queer desire but in critiquing and ultimately dismantling what he termed the “hetero-system.” Fushimi has gone on to write numerous books, including a novel which won the prestigious Bungei prize. He remains Japan’s most articulate and influential gay intellectual.

Another key intellectual figure who contributed to the formulation of queer studies in Japan was Kakefuda Hiroko whose 1992 book *On Being “Lesbian”* impacted on lesbian and feminist debates throughout the 1990s. Like Fushimi, she avoids a minoritizing approach to lesbian identity that posits a clearly defined group of “lesbians” as separate and distinct from “heterosexual women,” rather arguing that “lesbians” are produced via the othering effects of the dominant hetero-homo binary embedded in the patriarchal family system. As a construct, a product of social othering, Kakefuda argued that it was

impossible to constitute oneself as a lesbian subject in Japan, hence the scare quotes surrounding the term in the title of her book. Kakefuda goes on to argue that in Japan's patriarchal order, women in general are denied agency and the means of self-representation, irrespective of the object of their desires. For a period of about two years after the publication of the book, Kakefuda was a prominent voice in both lesbian and mainstream media but by 1995 the strain of being asked to speak as a lesbian (despite the fact that her book disavowed this possibility) took its toll and she retired from public life.

In the decade since Kakefuda's ground-breaking publication much has changed for lesbian women in Japan. As detailed above, there have been a series of commercial lesbian publications, including ten issues of the erotic magazine *Carmilla*, which did much to help women visualize and take control of their same-sex desires. Perhaps a key indicator of these changes has been the election to public office of a woman claiming a lesbian identity (albeit she came out after she took office). In 2003 Otsuji Kanako was elected to the Osaka Prefectural Assembly and in 2005 published her autobiography in which she came out as a lesbian, making her the first (successful) openly gay politician in Japan. She subsequently campaigned for a number of pro-gay policies, including the right for same-sex couples to access Osaka's public housing. She did not stand for reelection to her seat in 2007 but became instead a Democratic Party candidate for a seat in the national House of Councilors in elections in July 2007. Yet, despite largely positive media coverage both at home and abroad, Otsuji's attempt to enter national politics was unsuccessful.

Although Otsuji had not publicly declared her orientation at the time of her being elected, another campaigner, MtF transgender activist Kamikawa Aya, who ran for office in the Tokyo Municipal Council, did go public about her transgender status during her 2003 campaign. Needless to say she attracted a lot of media attention and it is encouraging that she polled very well and was elected, despite the fact that on official election papers she was still listed as male. It was not until 2004 that, under strict conditions, some transgender individuals were granted the right to change their birth sex on identity documents.

## Transgender Culture in Japan

As outlined earlier, transgenderism has long been conspicuous in the Japanese theater and also in the “floating world” of clubs and bars in the postwar period. The *gei* subculture of the bar world which rapidly took off in the 1950s remained strongly associated in the public mind with effeminacy and cross-dressing. Masculine women, too, often associated with the “trouser role” players in all-women theater troupes, were able to mix at certain bars in Tokyo, although the number of bars was never as extensive as those for men (and unlike the situation in the US, queer men and women did not socialize in the same venues).

FtM transgenders seem not to have developed as extensive a subculture as have men. As early as 1955 there were already small organizations set up for the “study” of cross-dressing, which attracted a membership of MtF cross-dressers and produced newsletters for circulation among members. It was not until 1980, however, that the first commercial magazine aimed at MtF cross-dressers, entitled *Queen*, was published. *Queen* was closely aligned with the Elizabeth Club, a relatively large on-venue MtF cross-dressing club founded in 1979 which subsequently opened branches in several suburbs of Tokyo as well as in other cities. *Queen* pitched itself as an amateur “hobby” magazine for recreational cross-dressing and was in no sense a vehicle for transgender activism and thus continued to frame transgenderism as an aspect of the entertainment world.

Despite the Japanese media’s longstanding interest transgenderism as expressed in the confines of the entertainment world, it was not until the coming out of Torai Masae as an FtM transsexual in the mid 1990s, that public awareness was focused on the hardships faced by those whose gender identity and sexed bodies do not coincide. It is significant in this context that it was an FtM transgender person who sought to make this connection, thus underlying the fact that it has often been sexually non-conformist women (or in this case a biological woman transitioning to male) who have pioneered in bringing attention to the political dimensions of the sex and gender system.



Following on from Torai there were a range of other figures who publicly came out about their transgender status and the newly designated condition of *sei dōitsusei shōgai* (gender identity disorder) was a frequent point of discussion in the popular media at the turn of the century. Indeed, in the 2001-2002 season of the Tokyo Broadcasting System series *3-nen B-gumi Kinpachi-sensei* (Kinpachi-sensei of class 3-B), the identity struggles of a transgender FtM middle school student was one of the major storylines, which the network used to teach their viewers about transgender—even suggesting on their website that readers read books on transgender including several by Torai. In one particularly episode the health teacher taught class 3-B—and thus the viewers—about the causes of transgender and why Nao wanted to be treated as a boy. Most students were in tears by the end of the scene. The news that Nao would not be able to have children after having sex reassignment surgery, which he planned to have upon reaching the age of majority, provoked a powerful reaction of sympathy, demonstrating how the desire to dispel misunderstandings about transgender in this case was not accompanied by a similar desire to unsettle the centrality of the heterosexual family model, which would not be open to Nao—a point not lost on many transgender commentators.

Since 1997, changes to legislation in Japan now allow the performance of gender reassignment surgery for those diagnosed by the medical community as suffering from “gender identity disorder”. Since 2004, those having completed the surgery, under certain strict circumstances, are also permitted to change their registered sex on official documents. However, the conditions that must be met have been criticized by many in Japan’s transgender community for being overly normative. Firstly, many feel that the choice of the term *shōgai* which in Japanese connotes a sense of “disability” and harm is overly pathologizing and that the problem lies not so much with the individual “patient” but rather with a rigid binary gender system that does not acknowledge that gender expression can be multiple and varied and is not reducible to simple categories of “male” or “female.” Also, many complain that the legislation which allows only unmarried individuals without children to change their registered birth sex is too narrow and is discriminatory against many in the transgender community. So far, these complex

identity issues are barely acknowledged by the medical profession and are seldom given voice to in the media.

In conclusion, the various debates surrounding queer cultures in Japan resemble in large part similar discussions going on in the context of Western societies. To an extent, the recent designation of certain groups as “sexual minorities” has proven enabling in terms of legislation and has aided in gaining access to public facilities, public housing and health care. However, this “minoritizing” view has been criticized by some as being assimilationist, as offering a few privileged individuals the opportunity to normalize their status and fit into an already existing sex and gender system requiring only slight modification. Others, professing more constructivist understandings of identity and desire, feel that the “hetero-system” is itself the problem and that true equality for all cannot be achieved so long as the manner in which Japanese society continues to create and sustain categories of the “other” remains unexamined.

### **Suggested Further Reading**

Chalmers, Sharon (2002) *Emerging Lesbian Voices from Japan*, London:

RoutledgeCurzon

McLelland, Mark (2005) *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age*, Lanham,

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*from Japan: First-Person Narratives from Japan’s Sexual Minorities*, Lanham,

MD: Lexington

Pflugfelder, Gregory (1999) *Cartographies of Desire: Male-Male Sexuality in Japanese*

*Discourse 1600-1950*, Berkeley: University of California Press

Robertson, Jennifer (1998) *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern*

*Japan*, Berkeley: University of California Press