

## **The Foreign Gaze? A critical look at claims about same-sex sexuality in Japan in the English language literature**

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There is a cluster of studies in the English language on same-sex sexuality in Japan, much of which seems to suggest that Japan is quite different from “the West.” In some way, this is a limited literature, but apparently a well-read one that is also dominated by a few scholars whose work might be becoming institutionalized as the standard knowledge about sexuality in Japan. In this literature, the Japanese tolerance of transgressive sexuality and the lack of a coherent identity in Japanese culture are emphasized, which render futile or meaningless mobilizations invoking “Western-style” coherent gay and lesbian identities.<sup>1</sup> When the literature was suggested to a research collaborator and me to theoretically and empirically contextualize our analysis of lesbian lives in Japan, it quickly became clear to us that we could not just summarize the literature and add our analysis to it. There was something about the literature that bothered us—the claims that are made *and* the apparent uncritical acceptance of such claims in the English-speaking research community. This provided the motivation for writing this research note, which I consider as “research in progress,” as it is meant to provide a theoretical foundation for ongoing projects on lesbian lives and experiences in Japan. It is also hoped that this note will provide a reference point for other studies of same-sex sexuality or of sexuality in Japan in general, and more importantly, encourage multiple voices in the English language literature.

### **The tolerance of homosexuality**

Scholars who suggest that, in contrast to “the West,”<sup>2</sup> there has been a high level of tolerance of homosexuality in Japan usually point to the absence of laws against homosexuality or a “clearcut moral system based on religion”, which makes it “relatively easy to adapt smoothly to the needs of people with alternative lifestyles” (Lunsing, 2001, p. 345). In addition, in various publications, McLelland and his associates point to the perverse (*hentai*) press in the postwar period, which was positive towards not only homosexuality but also a wide range of sexually transgressive practices, and which made no stable distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality, or between

homosexuality and other forms of sexual transgression (McLelland, 2005a; Ishida, McLelland & Murakami, 2005; see also McLelland, 2005b; Welker, 2008). In addition, while sexology had its influences in Japan and there existed a tendency to pathologize homosexuality, these scholars claim that such influences were limited by the incorporation of readers' voices that at times challenged the experts' voices in the *hentai* press (McLelland, 2005a; Ishida, McLelland & Murakami, 2005). Indeed, citing Fushimi (2002), a Japanese gay activist, who translated *hentai* as "queer," the same researchers claim that the *hentai* press was the first Queer Studies in Japan, way ahead of its Western counterparts but showing many parallels with the current Queer Studies "in which a wide range of individuals whose sexual and gender identities are not sanctioned by the mainstream culture, come together in a variety of forums to consider the dynamics at play in the construction of some desires as normal and others as perverse" (Ishida, McLelland & Murakami, 2005, p. 40).

Consistent with McLelland and associates' claim of the tolerance of multiple transgressive sexualities and the lack of one clear distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality, Wieringa (2007), drawing particularly on Buddhism in Japan, claims that despite the strength of patriarchy and heteronormativity, "the historical presence of female-to-male cross-dressing and of transgender practices in Japan points to the possibility of the acceptance of multiple gender constructs and nonnormative sexualities" (p. 241). Robertson (2007) makes a similar argument that in Japan, gender was originally dissociated from sex, which allowed for complex sexual practices. Unlike the opposition of homosexuality and heterosexuality introduced in the 19th century, the Japanese terms same-sex love (*doseiai*) and different-sex love (*iseiai*) were not used consistently. Specifically, same-sex love (*doseiai*) "was used to describe either a relationship that involved a same-gender, same-sex couple (for example, two feminine females or two masculine males) or a same-sex, different gender couple (for example, a "butch-femme" -type female couple, or a "butch-nellie" -type male couple" (Robertson, 2007, p. 221).

There is no dispute concerning the absence of laws prohibiting homosexuality or of strong political or religious coalitions condemning it. Similarly, the *hentai* press and cross-gender practices have been amply documented. The questions to pursue are the following: Does the absence of laws or organized opposition indicate tolerance? Was a

diversity of sexual practices indeed tolerated? How significant were the *hentai* press and cross-gender practices? How to interpret these cultural practices? Could the arguments thus made be applied equally to men and to women?

First, while even today the law does not directly condemn homosexuality, relevant laws also unambiguously support heterosexuality. The system of family registration (*koseki*) and the new law allowing people diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder (GID) to change their registered sex on the family registration both support heteronormativity as it is predicated on the assumption of the normality of heterosexuality, marriage and parent-child ties. Further, while both homosexuals and transsexuals are considered as "sexual minorities" , a law supporting the rights of the latter could ignore those of the former, hence showing that not all sexual transgressions are equal (Horie, 2006).

Furthermore, rather than indicating tolerance, the absence of laws or organized opposition could indicate the silencing of homosexuality or any form of sexual or gender transgression. Such silencing could deflect any threat sexual and gender transgressions have on the institution of heterosexuality not only by erasing their existence but also by precluding the imagination of an alternative (Kamano & Khor, 1996; see also Vincent, Kazama & Kawaguchi, 1997; Horie, 2006). In addition, it is difficult to assess the popularity or the reception of the *hentai* press, as Ishida, McLelland and Murakami (2005) themselves have also noted. First, they assert that "Japan had developed a significant publications industry devoted to the discussion of "perverse" sexuality" by early Showa, and second, citing Pflugfelder (2000), they claim that "the readership was clearly more attracted than repelled by the "perverse" nature of their contents" . It should be apparent that neither statement amounts to convincing support for the popularity or importance of the *hentai* press.

Besides silencing, another way to minimize the threat posed by gender and sexual transgressions is to confine such transgressions in the category of the "strange" or "perverse." Labeled as "abnormal" , even if they flourish, the transgressions would not affect the larger gender and sexual order. Instead of being the harbinger of Queer Studies in Japan, the *hentai* press could be seen as a way the mainstream society contained the transgressions. The mechanism of creating a *hentai* world could actually keep the "perverted" out of sight of the normal, larger society; "normal individuals" could venture into the world of the perverted, as an aberration that not only did not

disturb the normal functioning of society, including heteronormativity, but which could help maintain the status quo.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, when homosexuality becomes “dangerous”, it is controlled directly. Homophobia was explicitly expressed in the backlash against “gender-free education” and sex education, in which some perceive an evil association among liberation, homosexuality, erasure of gender roles, and what not (see, for example, Nishio & Yagi, 2005; for rebuttals, see Asai et al., 2003; Okuyama, 2005; Nihon Josei Gakkai Jendaa Kenkyuu Kai, 2006).

Continuing along the same line of argument, it is necessary to bring in a critical gender perspective when considering sexuality in Japan. It has been pointed out that the argument for the tolerance for sexual transgressions in Japan was based primarily on observations of male homosexuality (Horie, 2006; see also Kakefuda, 1992). Considering female same-sex relationships in Japan, one could find ample evidence of a history of intolerance or dismissal. First of all, McLelland’s and his associates’ analyses have focused on men, and the *hentai* press also primarily covered men. They display ambiguity about the “lesbian section” in the press, going back and forth between claiming that perhaps it was men who made the section for men’s consumption and asserting that it showed at least some representation of lesbians. Beyond some sparse references to it, the analyses have failed to examine the consequences and reality of gender inequality.

Pflugfelder’s (2005) nuanced analysis of schoolgirls’ intimate relationships in the 1920s and 30s, two decades or so before the *hentai* press flourished, offers a different picture of sexual transgression. While agreeing that female same-sex love was not condemned explicitly in religion, ethics, medicine or the law at the turn of the century, Pflugfelder (2005) notes that “sexologists [were] responsible for creating same-sex love as a “forbidden act” “ in emphasizing “the dire consequences” of a type of relationship condemned as “sexual perversion” (p. 146). In the late 19th century, the focus shifted from men to women and affected all categories of women. Even those sexologists who saw same-sex relationship between women as more harmless than other aberrations frequently discussed it in connection with sexual perversion, which included sadism, masochism, fetishism, and zoophilia. In a sense, this seems to prefigure the alleged lack of a distinct and consistent opposition between homosexuality and heterosexuality McLelland and other researchers have emphasized; at the same time, however, the

stigmatization of these transgressions was evident. Pflugfelder (2005) argues further that “sexological and journalistic vilification of “S,” the common term for intimate relationship among schoolgirls, and of “same-sex love” among females more generally, may be seen as an effort to assert male control over female behavior and emotions in an age when women and girls were enjoying new forms of autonomy” (p. 176). It is also important to note that the support for same-sex love among progressive women, in *Seitō Society*, for example, did not necessarily consist in condemning heteronormativity: sympathetic ones expressed pity for the schoolgirls’ lack of courage to pursue “healthy heterosexual relationships” while others in intimate same-sex relationships became defensive (Pflugfelder, 2005; see also Wu, 2007).

Similar claims about tolerance have also been made with respect to today’s Japan. For example, Lunsing (2005) notes that he detects a strong element of internalized homophobia, indicated by much anxiety about discrimination at work, for example, that is not materialized in most cases. However, the anecdotal nature of the evidence he cites makes it hard to adjudicate his claim. Actually, in another analysis, he shows how heteronormativity at work can silence gay men and thwart their careers (Lunsing, 2001). This is a point that is best resolved by empirical research, to which I shall return towards the end of this paper.

### **The lack of a coherent self**

The foregoing section has examined the claims of a diversity of sexualities and the lack of a clear divide between homosexuals and heterosexuals, which could be taken to suggest that there is no clear identity based on a homosexual (or gay or lesbian) identity. More directly, drawing on Kondo (1990, 1992) and Lebra (1992), Lunsing (2001) claims that Japanese have been taught to switch “role performances” from one context to another, and further, while accepting their feelings seems to be less an issue for Japanese than their counterparts in “many Western countries,” they have to handle the problem of whether and how to express the feelings, or in other words, how to construct their interactional selves and what to keep in their “inner self” . Drawing on such cultural “organizing principles” of Japanese society as *giri-ninjō* and *honne-tatema* (Lebra & Lebra, 1986; Garon, 1997), Wieringa (2007) claims that “Japanese society is not so much identity-based as Western societies tend to be, but rather behavior-based”

(p. 25). Similarly, Stone (2007) claims that in many East Asian countries, individuals are not independent but are identified by their location in webs of relationships, giving rise to a sense of self that is relational and without coherency. In an empirical study of Japanese lesbians who have had overseas experiences, she argues against the so-called “globalization” of lesbian identity, claiming that the marker “lesbian” does not necessarily carry the same meaning as that defined in and claimed by their counterparts in the West. Rather, “what is often perceived as a full assimilation of a lesbian identity is complex negotiation with both the assumed coherent identity and the “identity structures” while abroad” (p. 45). Rather than “integrating” or absorbing a coherent “Western sexual identity”, the women Stone interviewed expressed contradictions in their identities and allegiances. In an analysis of readers’ ads in the magazines *June* and *Allan*, which cover “issues related to female same-sex desires,” Welker (2008) highlights the “diversity” and “instability” of the terms used. The examples he gives suggest that the meaning of a term, for example, “bi” or “lesbian,” is not fixed or agreed upon by the readers, and further, the meanings of common terms are “unsettled”; for example, a reader could state her preference for a “younger sister” who is older, or an “older brother” who is female. Like other researchers mentioned above, he also connects such instability to “the larger tradition of performing gender in Japan,” which includes Kabuki, for example (p. 48).

The claims made above concerning Japanese uniqueness will be taken up later, after an examination of whether the examples and details cited do suggest “instability” of meanings and identities. Stone’s findings concerning Japanese “lesbians” with overseas experience, while interesting, are hardly surprising. Multicultural exposure or background has been shown to elicit responses that are contextual (see Lee, 2007, for example). Welker’s findings do seem to suggest a multiplicity of meanings attached to particular terms, for example, “lesbians”; however, it remains inconclusive as to whether such multiplicity translates to instabilities in identities or how significant or core such instability of meanings in the ads is as he presents only examples that support his claim. Indeed, a common problem in the analysis of magazines, or more generally the printed press, by the researchers reviewed here is that they present only examples that support their claims about instability or the “queerness” of Japanese sexual and gender transgressions. That there are examples of instability in identities and meanings

does not mean that sexual and gender transgressions in Japan are *characterized* by such instability.

An alternative way to think about these assertions of unstable identities and meanings is to consider instead “the West,” as arguments of instability and queerness are made with reference to a coherent “Western sexual identity.” In other words, rather than disputing that identity is fragmented and unstable in Japan, I’d contend that in these studies the coherence and stability of identity in the West are exaggerated and ahistorical. In an analysis of the influence of the larger socio-historical contexts on lesbian identities, Stein (1997) notes that by the 1980s and 1990s, there emerged different ways of being lesbians and different conceptions of sexuality. Importantly, Stein notes that the younger women were less likely to see lesbianism as a “totalizing, “master” identity that overshadows other group affiliations,” …[and there was] more attention to “the multiplicity of identities” (p. 16). Furthermore, “the salience of particular identity or identities depends on circumstances and contexts” (p. 16).

Perhaps, what is at issue is not an individual’s “embodying” a coherent identity, but whether there are constructed coherent identities on the ideological, aggregate level as a basis for political mobilization. In other words, it is necessary to differentiate between individuals’ identities and the collective political identities. The claim of the lack of stable identities in Japan in contrast to the coherent identity in the gay and lesbian movement in “the West” indicates a comparison across levels of analysis—the individual level in Japan and the aggregate level in “the West.” Further, the assertions about the lack of coherent identity have drawn on supporting evidence on different levels of analysis—Stone focuses on individuals with cross-cultural experiences, while McLelland’s claim of diversity and lack of a stable heterosexual/homosexual divide in the *hentai* press is a claim about a community. Arguably, the latter is consistent with stable gay and lesbian individual identities: the community defined by the reading and making of the *hentai* press could consist of individuals each of whom has a rather fixed identity but which differs from one another, which, on the aggregate level, translates to diversity. The extrapolation, even if it is implicit, from an analysis of the subcultural press to individuals’ identities conflates levels of analysis. Similarly, Welker’s claim of the “unsettling of both the meanings of the terms and the roles they represent” (2008, p. 53) in a reader’s showing preference for a younger sister who is older, for example,

is consistent with a widely accepted claim that “social roles” are emphasized in Japan, even when a particular role is dislodged from the usual demographic characteristics associated with it.

The idea of a “coherent identity” in the West may describe more appropriately the aggregate level of the gay and lesbian movement, especially before the era of queer politics that resists organizing around a stable identity. Dismissing the claim of unstable identities, as I did above, means that one cannot convincingly argue, as Lunsing and McLelland and his associates have, that Japanese activists have shunned their “queer roots” in the long history of sexual transgression in Japan and opted for the problematic stable gay and lesbian identity of the West. Instead, it is more fruitful to explore the implications of adhering to a stable identity as a political strategy in Japan. One may plausibly argue that organizing around a stable, coherent identity poses a more powerful challenge to a society built on the basis of a stable institution of heterosexuality, backed by strong norms of marriage and family *and* supported by a thriving industry of “abnormal” sexual practices. It is highly possible that a stable lesbian and gay identity is less easily absorbed into the “perverse world” , unlike other forms of sexual transgressions, such as transsexuals and transgenders, that have acquired almost celebrity status but are kept distinct from the “normal” world, exerting little, if any, influence on it.

All these arguments and counter-arguments have yet to be tested against appropriate empirical evidence. However, the potential of political mileage to be gained from organizing around a coherent identity in sexual politics in Japan renders puzzling the harsh criticism by the researchers whose work was reviewed here that Japanese political activists have organized on imported, stable gay and lesbian identities (McLelland, 2005a; Lunsing, 2001). According to these researchers, the mobilization of activists on the basis of a gay or lesbian identity is unfortunate, as they fail to recognize the indigenous roots of a non-identity based transgressive sexual politics and takes on instead the fixed and imported identities of mobilization in the West. For example, Lunsing (2001) argues strongly against Itô Satoru’ s alleged employment of the binary oppositions of victim/society and minority/majority, and opts instead for the “soft stream” that affirms a broad variety in people’ s sexualities instead of a “correct” definition of “*tôjisha*.” In another analysis, Lunsing (2005) characterizes the support

for equality in relationship in OCCUR (*Ugoku gei to rezubian no kai*), a gay and lesbian organization, as bound by “preconceived ideas about equality and the like” rather than being “open to experimenting with a variety of role patterns, lifestyles and relationships” (p. 186). Similarly, McLelland (2005a) has characterized the activism of groups like ILGA (International Lesbian and Gay Organization), Japan, OCCUR and activists like Itô Satoru as taking a “hard-line approach towards “gay identity” “ that is not widely supported by Japan’ s queer community (p. 189), despite clear evidence that there is support for such activism as well as for Fushimi Noriaki, whose work and ideas these researchers have cited with approval. It is difficult not to sense underneath all these criticisms a rebuke against “imitating the West,” which is consistent with their lament over the lack of knowledge of the Japanese participants in their research about Japan’ s own queer history.

Juxtaposing this harsh criticism of gay activists and their politics against the emphasis on the tolerance of homosexuality and celebration of diverse and unstable identities, in addition to their insistence of the long history of “queer” practice in Japan, a version of Orientalism begins to emerge. Japan seems to be constructed as the (male) (homo)sexual paradise,<sup>4</sup> the precursor of Queer Studies, and a land free from legal constraints and religious condemnation, all of which could be attributed to the very “culture” of Japan. Further, this “culture” is represented largely through transliterated concepts, from McLelland’ s (2005a) “*kono seka*” (rendered in *kanji* on the inside cover of his book) to Lunsing’ s (2001) “*nayami*” , “*gomakasu*” , “ | *awaseru*” , “*usotsuku*” , and “*ippan jyôshiki*” , and so on.<sup>5</sup> These ordinary terms, used more by some researchers than by others, when transliterated, take on an exotic quality that emphasizes the difference between Japan and the “Anglophone culture,” “the West,” or “many countries in the West” that these researchers have used as a basis for reference. Curran and Welker (2005) have analyzed the processes of translation and implications of the choices made by Japanese lesbian-identified translators. A similar analysis of how Japanese words remain untranslated and are transliterated in the analysis of sexuality and gender in Japan would be most illuminating.

## Conclusion

The conclusion I have reached at this point is a very simple one. The literature in the English language on sexualities in Japan has yet to provide convincing evidence supporting the claims of tolerance of homosexuality or of “fragmented identities” of lesbians, gay men and other sexual minorities in Japan. Sorely needed are empirical studies on sexual minorities about their identities, affiliations, politics, and so on. Analyses of texts and representations are valuable, but they do not substitute for studies of people who are not living the life of the majority. Further, trite as it might sound, in a globalized world, there is no avoiding participating in a research community dominated by the English language. The field of sexuality is of course very much alive in Japan, and the founding of the Japan Association for Queer Studies in 2007 further testifies to the vibrancy of the field. While researchers in the field in Japan do participate actively in international conferences, their voices are less prominent in the published literature in English. The international research community can definitely benefit from diverse contributions of the growing number of researchers in the fields of sexuality and gender in Japan.

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**Footnotes**

- <sup>1</sup>Obviously, I am not making a blanket criticism against all the research conducted by non-Japanese researchers. My focus is more specific and intention more humble.
- <sup>2</sup>The “West” remains largely a homogenized cultural category in the arguments of these scholars.
- <sup>3</sup>For an analogous argument about “carnivals” and inequality, see Langman & Halnon, 2005.
- <sup>4</sup>Lee (1999) observes that the 1956 film, *Sayonara*, presented Japan “as a sexual wonderland,” (p. 164) with its all-male Kabuki theater and all-female dance troupe. He also argues that in the 19th century, “Oriental sexuality was constructed as ambiguous, inscrutable, and hermaphroditic” (p. 89).
- <sup>5</sup>Others have used institutionalized cultural terms. Chalmers (2002) builds her analysis of lesbians on the binary opposition of “*uchi/soto*” and, as noted above, Wieringa (2007), in her analysis of female same-sex practices in Japan, has drawn on the oppositions of “*giri-ninjo*” and “*honne-tatemae*” in making the claims about the relative insignificance of “identity.” For a criticism of how the use of such cultural concepts could make the analysis ahistorical and essentialize the cultural differences in way that they become a proxy for race, see Ben-Ari, 1997.

**「海外」の視線？日本の同性間セクシュアリティに関する英語文献の批判的考察**

ダイアナ・コー

筆者は日本におけるレズビアン経験・生活を分析するにあたって、その背景となる理論を確立する過程で、英文で書かれた日本の同性間セクシュアリティに関する研究が、数人の研究者によるものによって占められている状況に直面した。それらの英語文献における主張は、日本における同性愛に対する寛容さ、セクシュアリティの多様さ、さらにアイデンティティの一貫性のなさを想起させるものである。本稿ではそれらの主張および、日本の同性間セクシュアリティの一般化に対して意義を唱える。第一に、日本の同性愛に対する寛容さが誇張されることで、ジェンダーによる不平等やレズビアンに与えられるスティグマの問題をいかに無視しているかを示す。第二に、日本におけるアイデンティティの一貫性のなさという主張は、「西洋における一貫したアイデンティティ」を誇張することで可能となっており、アイデンティティに関する論考の対象が個人なのか集団なのかを混合したまま比較している、という分析レベルに問題があることを指摘する。これらの問題含みの主張や、日本のゲイ・レズビアン運動や活動家らは柔軟性がなく、西洋の真似に過ぎないという彼らの批判は、ある種のオリエンタリズムを反映しているとも考えられる。英語話者による日本のジェンダー・セクシュアリティ研究のコミュニティにおいては、見解の多様化を奨励し、日本におけるクィアな人々の経験や生活についての実証研究を推進して行くことが急務である。

**Keywords:**

レズビアン、ゲイ、セクシュアリティ、クィア、日本