Wareware to wa Bessekai:
The evolution, inhibition, and cultural prohibition of public male-male sexual identities in contemporary Japan

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Introduction

In a society where conformity and group harmony are greatly valued, it seems unlikely that a subversive subculture could gain much visibility or popularity. Despite this, male-male homosexuality is not truly taboo in Japan.¹ A historical precedent for sexual acts among males and a relatively recent so-called “gay boom” in popular Japanese media have given rise to a degree of visibility for the “most mainstream” of the queer spectrum. However, this visibility has not necessarily translated to the creation of an adequately sized socio-political space in which to construct and display a distinct Japanese gay identity. Moreover, the history of sexuality in Japan is convoluted, tied up in politics, health, religion, and ultranationalism – and must be examined in order to understand the nuanced way in which sexuality in contemporary Japan is viewed.

Contemporary Japanese culture is based on an historical foundation which has generated a variety of negative attitudes towards male-male sexuality since the 19th century.² The history of Japan’s construction of sexuality will be explored in the first section of this thesis, beginning with a brief overview of the traditional perspective and covering the rapid modernization of the Meiji period as well as the ultranationalist and “anti-gay” Shōwa period before exploring the “gay boom” of the late 20th century. The second section of the thesis will provide a brief analysis of issues affecting the construction and public display of sexual identity in contemporary Japan. These are: 1) a strong emphasis on homogeneity and group uniformity; 2) the overall level of candor afforded to expressions of sexual and romantic relationships; 3) media treatment; 4) the historical and cultural importance of the family unit; and 5) an economic system that has made participation in a nuclear family a necessity for survival in Japanese society.

¹ (McLelland)
² (Roberts 2)
It should be noted here that this discussion is necessarily broad. Each of these topics is far deeper than could be adequately discussed in an essay, even one singularly devoted. I have attempted to give an overview and some analysis of each issue, concluding each section with its effect on the same-sex attracted male population in Japan, or Japanese society’s perception thereof. Finally, it must be acknowledged that any analysis of a contemporary issue that does not have much research (sociological or psychological) must draw upon a variety of sources and synthesize new theories from them. This being said, I hope that this effort will provide some understanding as to why a society that is ostensibly unconcerned with matters of sexual orientation has so few individuals willing to acknowledge their attractions publicly. Ideally, this could open up the field for new interest and research, both inside and out of Japan.

Before beginning any sort of analysis of contemporary sexuality, it is critical to acknowledge three facts: first, that the need to create and name a sexual attraction as an identity is a predominantly Western concept, and one that was developed fairly recently; second, that identity is becoming obsolete in contemporary queer studies; and third, that understanding sexual identity’s place in Japan is central to discourse exploring non-normative sexuality.

Outmoded and Irrelevant?

Sexual Identity and Its Relevance to Discourse on Sexuality in Japan

The contemporary notion of an individual’s sexual attractions and acts as indicative of a concrete identity is a concept that is both highly West-oriented and quite recent. The first use of the term “homosexual” came from Germany, coined by sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing in his work *Psychopathia Sexualis: eine Klinisch-Forensische Studie* (Sexual Psychopathy: A Clinical-Forensic
Study). Though he classified it as a sexual pathology\(^3\), it was eventually used as a means of identification, referring to those who experienced what he referred to as “antipathy” with the Greek-Latin term “homo-sexual.” This was not used as an identifier, however, until industrialization and urbanization was under way in the West.

Until Krafft-Ebing’s development in the 19\(^{th}\) century, most sexuality was considered not in terms of identity or even pathology, but rather in terms of acts and desires that were hidden from the public world.\(^4\) According to John D’Emilio, there was no social or economic space prior to the Industrial Revolution in which to develop an identity based on, or even incorporating sexuality. The creation of such a space was facilitated by the introduction of wage labor to a national economy with sufficient capital.\(^5\) This created a situation in which individuals could extricate themselves from what is described as a “family-based subsistence farming system”\(^6\) and therefore maintain autonomy and existence as a body that is not dependent on forming a nuclear family to provide income and nourishment. Wage workers found themselves newly autonomous and were more able to lead non-normative lives and engage in pursuits that, previously, had to be forgone in order to assure economic stability. Same-sex-attracted individuals found themselves to be more disposed to engage in primary homosexual relationships.\(^7\) This was also facilitated by urbanization, which allowed these individuals to form what Jackson refers to as “sex-cultural networks,”\(^8\) partly imagined communities of similarly attracted individuals. In order to bind these individuals together, collective sexual identities were formed: by the mid-20\(^{th}\) century females attracted to females came to be known as

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\(^3\)(Krafft-Ebing 285)
\(^4\)(Cameron and Kulick 76)
\(^5\)(D’Emilio)
\(^6\)(D’Emilio)
\(^7\)Here, a “primary” homosexual relationship refers to a homosexual relationship that an individual considers their only (or most important) one. This is contrasted with, say, an extramarital homosexual affair in the context of a heterosexual marriage.
\(^8\)(Jackson 368)
“lesbians,” same-sex attracted men were eventually called “gay,” and later on transfolk and bisexual individuals also acquired an identity which helped not only to pin them together, but also to make sense of non-normative feelings they experienced. This conceptualization is in contrast with that of Japan, which was much more act-oriented.

Calling further into question the value of this thesis’ approach, the analysis of sexuality through the lens of identity is being deconstructed and discarded by many contemporary queer theorists. Queer critiques of Gay Liberationists argue that sexual behaviors conform to existing identity vocabulary, and that this vocabulary does not accurately or adequately describe sexuality. Instead, an understanding of sexuality as identity effectively constrains an individual’s experience, rather than helping an individual describe it. This Foucauldian stance attempts to shift “from seeing identity as the source of particular forms of language to seeing identity as the effect of specific semiotic practices.” To explain: there is a perception that our names for various sexual identities – gay, straight, bisexual, transgender, etc. – are based on concrete realities: people’s experiences of being exclusively attracted to the same sex (gay/lesbian/homosexual), opposite sex (straight/heterosexual), both sexes (bisexual), and so forth. However, Cameron and Kulik’s argument suggests that people who experience these attractions conform their experiences to these labels and adopt these “identities” in order to contextualize themselves and their experiences within their cultural context; thus “identity as the effect of specific semiotic practices.”

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9 (D’Emilio)
10 (Roberts 3)
11 (Bucholtz and Hall 507)
12 A movement in the late 1960s and early 70s which sought to increase public acceptance of lesbians and gay men. Distinctive characteristics included encouraging people to “come out” as lesbian or gay publicly and fight for equal rights and recognition from governments, primarily in the USA, Europe, and the Commonwealth of Great Britain.
13 (Cameron and Kulik 78)
14 (78)
15 (78)
Why, then, should a thesis examining sexuality in contemporary Japan concern itself with such culturally “irrelevant” and outmoded constructions as sexual identity? International sexual politics are chiefly Western in the sense that the language used to discuss them is typically English due to English’s status as the *de facto* international language.\(^\text{16}\) An unintended effect of this, referred to by Erni as the “postcolonial predicament,”\(^\text{17}\) is that those cultural contexts in which English-language sexual politics arose are the ones whose vocabularies shape the vocabulary – and by extent, conceptualization – of international sexual politics. In this way, identity-centric sexual politics have been adopted and transposed by many cultures in South, Southeast, and East Asia as what is ostensibly the “true” mode of discussing sexual practices.\(^\text{18}\) Whether or not this postcolonial cultural colonialism is positive or negative is beyond the scope of this endeavor. Nevertheless, it has undeniably transformed Japan’s primary mode of engagement with issues of sexuality from the classification of actions to the classification and grouping of people. Regardless of the cultural origin or psycho-philosophical validity of sexuality as identity, it is the core of a contemporary Japanese understanding of human sexuality – and deserves treatment as such.

**An Issue of Pleasure: Japan’s History of Act-Oriented Sexuality**

As was the case with many aspects of Japanese society, attitudes towards and perceptions of sexuality changed dramatically over the course of just a few hundred years at the end of the last millennium. What started as a long standing tradition akin to that of ancient Greece was transformed, first, through legal and political means, into a tool to promote nationalism and racial

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\(^{16}\) (Altman 419)  
\(^{17}\) (Erni 382)  
\(^{18}\) (Altman 419-20)
purity; and second, through globalization and media interest, into a more Western-oriented, identity-based conceptualization.

For most of Japan’s classical history, sexuality was considered to have three primary actors: the *yarō*, or adult male; the *onna*, or female; and the *wakashu*, or young male.\(^{19}\) Traditionally, sexual acts occurred between the *yarō* and *onna* or the *yarō* and the *wakashu* (though undoubtedly there were affairs occurring outside of these traditional guidelines). While *yarō* and *onna* sexual relationships were more similar to heterosexual sexual relationships today, the relationship between the *yarō* and the *wakashu* was distinct in that the *wakashu* was to act as a pupil or protégé of the adult male, learning lessons of manhood in the three distinct fields in which *wakashudō* (male-male homosexual relationships, or literally “the way of youths”) took place.\(^{20}\) As Schalow states, this involved commitment to the partner and involved ceremonies, formal vows, and even “sacrificial self-mutilation.”\(^{21}\) Though homosexual relationships as they are understood today did exist in contemporary Japan, most individuals’ behavior would today be classified as that of a bisexual. Men who engaged solely in sexual acts with men were not discriminated against, though they “were considered mildly eccentric for limiting their pleasurable options.”\(^{22}\)

Traditional notions of sexuality saw their first shift in the 17th century. When a law governing the appearance of youths was passed, it had unintentional effects on the way that *yarō* and *wakashu* interacted. Sex between men also occurred frequently in the *kabuki* houses, where youths would serve both as actors and prostitutes for theatre owners and their patrons.\(^{23}\) The governments in

\(^{19}\) (Schalow 119-20)
\(^{20}\) These fields were, namely, the samurai class, the Buddhist priesthood, and the wealthy who could afford to pay for prostitution.
\(^{21}\) (123)
\(^{22}\) (120)
\(^{23}\) (127-8)
major cities across Japan shut down kabuki houses in an effort to loosen theatre owners’ grasps on the youths, and theatre owners agreed to cease using certain garbs and hairstyles which were indicators of wakashu youth. As a result of this, the line between real youths and older impostors seeking wealthy clientele was blurred; gradually the yarō-wakashu dynamic became less important to sexual relationships. Ultimately, sex in Japan was seen as an issue of pleasure rather than one of legal importance; its primary notable characteristics were not religiously based moral ones as they were throughout Europe. This attitude would become a casualty of the intense nationalism that would become an essential part of Japanese society towards the end of the 19th century.

A Treasonous Affair: Two Tracks to “Homophobia”

Japan’s Meiji era is fascinating for the rapidity and smoothness with which the nation modernized. At the beginning of the era in 1868, Japan did not resemble the industrialized, technologically-advanced economic power that it is today. It did not control its own trade, was militarily insignificant, technologically poor, and was fragmented by warlords. When the shōgun was ousted at the end of the Tokugawa period and the emperor was “restored” to power, the deciding governmental powers (namely the emperor’s advisors, who made all important decision in his name) set into motion a plan to adopt strategic aspects of Western politics, lawmaking, and economic and military policy. By doing so, Japan sought to establish itself as a legitimate international player – and it achieved and surpassed many of its goals. Such goals, however, often have unintended side effects and casualties. In its effort to emulate Europe, the Japanese government created a series of laws that established male-male sex as vaguely criminal; and in its effort to maintain the new nation’s

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24 Edo (Tokyo), Osaka, and Kyoto
25 (Roberts 4)
26 (Asia for Educators, Columbia University)
unity through the period of rapid change, cultural manipulation resulted in what I have referred to as the “villainization of homosexuality.”

The unique socio-political and economic climate of radical change in Meiji era Japan made it perfectly suited for such a dramatic cultural transformation. Installing homophobia into Japanese society took place over 60 some years, beginning in the Meiji era and reaching its peak in the late 1930s. During this time period, two separate tracks ensured this change. New laws established a precedent for maintaining silence about those in homosexual relationships; and some years later nationalist propaganda, government policies, and organizations both public and private created a deep-rooted distaste for male-male sexuality.

**Track One: Emulating Europe’s Legal System**

As already stated, Japan sought to impress their European business partners by creating a strong, centralized government and emulating their legal systems. By incorporating both Victorian and Confucian values, the Meiji government was able to create a legal system that upheld many Japanese values while distancing themselves from Europe’s image of them as uncivilized. One of Japan’s traditions that was cast aside in favor of a more European-friendly image was the tradition of *wakashudō*, or “way of the youth.” Wakashudō was essentially a system whereby men would take on youths as lovers and protégés, much like pederasty (not to be confused with paedophilia) in ancient Greece. In 1873, the *Kaitei Ritsuryō* was put into effect. Article 266 of the document stated that anal intercourse (known as *keikan*) was now illegal and that those found guilty would be subject to “90 days of penal servitude.”

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27 (Roberts 11)

28 (Pflugfelder 159)
and a ‘blessing for young boys.’”

But though this law was aimed at ending wakashūdō, the wording effectively marked all male-male sexual relationships as illegal and therefore, to a Japanese conformist sensibility, repugnant. Though the ban was done away with in 1882, those 9 years had made an impression of sex between men as somehow worthy of being criminalized.

By 1882, Article 266 was repealed or otherwise obsolete as the Keibō was established. The Keibō, or Penal Code, made anal sex effectively legal once more (as long as it remained consensual). Modeled on the French Code Pénal, the document made minimal efforts to exercise government control over sexual matters. However, there was no specific mention of anal sex throughout the entire Keibō. Instead, it was implied that anal sex fell under the catch-all category of sexual crimes known as “obscene acts.”

Obscene acts were still criminal, but typically went unreported or unprosecuted. Cases were unprosecuted unless they involved prepubescents (12 and under); more often, they went unreported as the families of those involved would have it noted on their family in the family register – a dishonor not only to those involved but to their ancestors and descendants as well. It is in this way that, though laws banning anal intercourse were targeted at ending sexual activity with children, they created an environment in which mere discussion could trigger a firestorm of gossip, leading to an individual or a family being ostracized from the group – a terrible fate in Japanese society.

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29 (153-63)
30 While the law also affected anal sex between opposite-sex individuals, it was much more difficult to prove that a heterosexual couple was engaging in anal sex when vaginal sex is a readily available alternative. It was not as far a leap to assume that men in a sexual relationship were actively engaging in anal sex.
31 (Pflugfelder 170)
32 (Killen and Sueyoshi PLACEHOLDER)
Track Two: Fragmentation Leads to “Hyperunity”

In the midst of radical change, schisms are bound to occur. For a brief period at the beginning of this period of radical modernization, this was true for Japan as well. However, the Meiji government created an imagined sense of unity that ensured Japan’s people would not fall back into their feudal states.

First, and most importantly, the Meiji government turned the new nation’s focus to the emperor. Traditionally, the Emperor of Japan was seen more as a cultural and religious figurehead. As the emperor is, according to Shintō traditions, descended from Amaterasu the Sun Goddess and was regarded as semidivine, he was already an important and established figure in the minds of the people living on the Japanese islands. Now that all attention was turned to him, a “civic ideology centered around the emperor” developed. A vague and highly localized system of folk beliefs abruptly became the state religion, with the emperor as both a political and religious figurehead. In this way, the state, the divine, the culture, and the people were suddenly synonymous, and the newly-centralized political power became suddenly unquestionable and incontrovertible.

The power held by the emperor, however, was mostly nominal until the Shōwa emperor Hirohito came to power in the late 1920s. After the relatively “fast and loose” years of the “Taishō democracy” (1912-26), during which the emperor became less central and visible, the Shōwa period began in earnest. The Shōwa government militarized and grew into a fascist state, overpowering the parliament and any semblance of democracy by utilizing loopholes found in the vague language of the Meiji constitution. According to Bix, this was primarily due to a passage stating that the parliament was required to answer to the emperor, and not the people. As his power grew, so too

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33 (Asia for Educators, Columbia University)
34 (Bix 128-151)
did his critical role as a divine figure, cementing a religious justification for his wielding of absolute power. The Japanese people were said to be children of the emperor, sharing the same divine lineage and yamato-damashii – the spirit of the Yamato, the Japanese people. The central government’s power, of course, only increased as it became a mouthpiece for the words of a “god.”

Understanding the level of control the Shōwa government had over the yamato people is critical for gaining insight into how influential the established anti-male-sex argument became during the early 20th century. Much like the laws ending wakashudo in 1873, anti-male sexual arguments evolved from concerns over children. Children in nationalist Japan were hugely important: they would grow up indoctrinated in nationalism, fight Japan’s wars and work in its factories, and spread the Yamato Empire far beyond Japan’s borders. Because of this, education had been a great concern for the government since the Meiji era. The question of sexual education was hotly debated, and by the Shōwa period, male-male sexual acts were thoroughly ousted as heterosexuality was taught in schools and became officially normative. Part of the reason for this institutionalization of heteronormativity was to increase manpower and reproduce, thereby strengthening the next generation of the Japanese people and, more importantly, soldiers.

However, the establishment of heteronormativity was not the end of Japan’s marginalization of homosexual acts. “Medical research” at the time had indicated that any sexual act by a male, other than vaginal penetration with the penis, would lead to “mental illnesses, venereal diseases, and tuberculosis.” Furthermore, the concept of the kokutai, or national body, and the popularity of Louis Pasteur’s germ theory led to an atmosphere of prevention-oriented health measures that had a social element. As tuberculosis was particularly virulent in modern Japan, this revelation colored the

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35 (Fruhstuck 62)
36 (Fruhstuck 3)
national perception of male sexuality even more darkly, with the added belief that male-male sexuality was a threat to the purity and inherent superiority\(^{37}\) of the \textit{yamato-damashii}. This meant that male-male sexual activity was now perceived as a health hazard as well as a hazard to the continuation of the Yamato people.\(^{38}\) Even hygienists fought to unite the nation against the spread of disease\(^{39}\) – a disease caused in part by, in the eyes of the medical, political, and even national community, male-male sexuality.

Still, overt laws banning male-male sexual activity were never passed in Japan. Depictions of male-male sexuality and erotic themes still found themselves woven into media in subtle, nearly invisible ways as emblems of the hegemonic male social structure. However, discussion of male-male sexuality remained strictly taboo, and effort was put into covering up anything that could be connected to it.\(^{40}\)

\textit{Wareware to wa besekai:}

Postwar Sexuality, the Emersion of Sexual Identity, and Japan’s “Gay Boom”

After the end of the War and the beginning of American Occupation, the new relative freedom the press experienced allowed the media to explore a wider variety of topics – for magazines like \textit{Bakuro} (Exposé) and other expository works, the underworld of male prostitution was a hot topic. Though there was great deal of media attention for these male sex workers, they

\(^{37}\) (Dower 204) \\
\(^{38}\) (Roberts 9) \\
\(^{39}\) (Bourdaghs 54) \\
\(^{40}\) (Pflugfelder 326-8)
were not socially accepted. Rather, they were treated as curiosities and remained at the margins of society as more of a sensational topic of conversation. Despite the attention they received, they remained on another, implicitly inferior plane of society – “wareware to wa besekai.”

Adopting the Western terminology established decades before by Krafft-Ebing, male prostitutes dressed effeminately or in female garb were labelled as suffering from a psychopathology and as “sexual inverts.” However, the presence of male prostitution (which had been going on in Japan for centuries) was deemed a result of the social and “symptomatic of a more general social malaise, a product of the ‘instability’ (fuantei), both ideological and economic, that the war had left in its wake. Still other authors began to consign male-male sexuality to the distant past, literally writing it off as an artefact of an uncivilized era. In the end, despite the increasing visibility afforded male-male sexuality, it was unambiguously being othered.

In the 1970s, the boundaries of the bessekai in which non-normative people existed became considerably less distinct as openly gay Tōgō Ken ran for a seat in the Diet. Unlike the first openly gay political candidates to emerge from the Gay Liberation movements in the US, Togo ken embraced the perjorative term "okama" and carried himself in what could be described only as camp, typically appearing in a women’s kimono and light makeup, and using an affected Osaka dialect – all of which served to subvert the “correct” way of living.

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41 (331-2)  This phrase translates literally as “a different world than [the one] we [live in].”
42 (332)
43 (Minami_Dansho_ni_kansuru)
44 (Pflugfelder 334)
45 Slang for the buttocks, and typically used to refer to anal sex – and therefore men who have sex with men. The term has come to carry a number of meanings, the most common being: gay man, drag queen, transgender, or transvestite. Because of this, there is sometimes confusion and stereotyping among those who do not reside in the “bessekai” of queer Japan.
46 (McLelland, Death of the “Legendary Okama” Togo Ken: challenging commonsense lifestyles in postwar Japan)
Though Tōgō ran for office more than 10 times from 1971 to 1995, he was never successful in his bid.\(^\text{47}\) However, the NHK’s broadcasting regulations required equal airtime for all candidates representing a political party. Because of this, Tōgō was able to expose any Japanese person with a television to his beliefs and overt challenging of *joshibi*, or "common sense which underpinned most people's taken-for-granted ideas about how people should live their lives."\(^\text{48}\) Tōgō’s platform was notably radical, engaging in an open critique not only of heterosexism and discrimination, but also of the very structures upon which Japanese culture was built – Emperor- and patriarch-centrism.

Though there is a notable lack of scholarship on Tōgō’s life, he played a major role in first bringing the *bessekai* closer to the “normal” world.

Most notably in the context of this thesis, though, is the massive role that Tōgō played in building a public gay identity in Japan. As one of the first high-profile “*okama,*” his public image both created a template same-sex attracted public identity for men and showed that living this identity publicly was feasible, if not easy or normal.

Not all same-sex attracted men in 1970s Japan wished to live out the flamboyant and gender-subverting identity exemplified by Tōgō’s camp and feminine gender presentation. As AIDS activist Hasegawa Hiroshi once said in an interview, “I remember thinking that although I liked men, I didn’t want to become like that and I didn’t want to be grouped together [with Tōgō].”\(^\text{49}\) Through the 70s and 80s, men like Hasegawa rejected the singular “*okama*” identity and the stereotype that all gay men were effeminate. These men sought to create a new type of “gay” identity in Japan, one which could embrace same-sex attraction and masculinity simultaneously.

\(^{47}\) (McLelland, Death of the "Legendary Okama" Togo Ken: challenging commonsense lifestyles in postwar Japan)
\(^{48}\) (McLelland, Death of the “Legendary Okama” Togo Ken: challenging commonsense lifestyles in postwar Japan)
\(^{49}\) (Fushimi)
As a (fairly limited) group of men began to adopt this new “gay” identity, the AIDS crisis exploded in the west, raising global interest in gay issues. Various media outlets approached gay men with both honest interest as well as sensationalist stereotypical perspectives. In Japan, however, a “gay boom” occurred that did not center on outbreaks of HIV.\(^{50}\)

Gay print media had existed in Japan since the early 1970s, but typically centered on erotica and sexuality itself.\(^{51}\) In the early 1990s the mainstream Japanese media took an investigative approach to the gay besekai. Print media (and to a lesser extent, film and television) approached the Japanese gay subculture with a relatively open mind, making public much information about meeting places for gay men. This sudden interest, known as the “gay boom,” gave same-sex attracted people (primarily men) more information facilitating congregation and community building, while simultaneously giving them an outlet to share their own experiences with mainstream Japan.\(^{52}\) However, some of the articles published made broad assumptions about the experiences of same-sex attracted men based on individuals’ beliefs.\(^{53}\) One article, published by magazine *Takarajima* in December of 1993, was entitled “Gay men themselves tell all there is to know about the meaning of love between men”. This article, along with others making similar sensationalistic statements, indicates a degree of superficiality with which the media approached the *besekai* of gay men in Japan. Effectively maintaining their position as people or even “things” on the fringes of acceptable society to be observed from a socially elevated, safe position. Before long, the novelty of gay men wore off and media attention died out, ending the so-called “gay boom” well before the turn of the century.

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\(^{50}\) HIV/AIDS cases in Japan have always been remarkably low, with a 2009 WHO report stating that the infection rate in Japan was approximately 0.01%, one of the lowest in the world. (World Health Organization)

\(^{51}\) (McLelland, *Out on the Global Stage: Authenticity, Interpretation and Orientalism in Japanese Coming Out Narratives*)

\(^{52}\) Ibid.

\(^{53}\) (McLelland, *Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan* 30)
Today’s Gei – The State of Japan’s Gay Men

The end of the “gay boom” signifies the beginning of the contemporary period, in terms of the Japanese conceptualization of “gay.” Despite beginning as a culture with a rich history of male eroticism, the rapid Westernization of the Meiji Restoration brought negative connotations to such modes of sexual expression. The ensuing period of ultranationalism intensified these negative attitudes and effectively villainized male homosexual expression. Through the mid-20th century, sexuality and sexual identity became more and more common as topics of discussion until the 1990s, when very public (if sensationalistic) discussions of lifestyles of same-sex attracted men (or, as the media might have put it, “the gay lifestyle”) became hugely popular for a time.

Despite all the public attention same-sex attracted men received, cultural perceptions of “gay men” remain largely distorted by extreme stereotypes. Furthermore, this media validation has not led to an increase of visibility for same-sex attracted men in daily life, nor has there been a significant change in the number of individuals “authenticating” their experiences by coming out and making their private identities into their public identities.54

Mark McLelland offers up an analysis of contemporary Japanese “gay” men’s self-conceptualizations towards the end of his book, Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan. Based on the statements of sixteen interviewees, McLelland attempts to draw out common threads in their life stories. From these common threads, he paints a general picture of what could feasibly be referred to as the average same-sex attracted Japanese man. (This is not intended to be conclusive or even truly definitive, but rather a general framework to use as a diving board into the second part of the thesis – inhibitors to the public display of sexual identity in contemporary Japan.)

54 (McLelland, Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan 33)
Identity is, by far, the topic to which the interviewees gave the most nebulous and varied responses. McLellan sums up the difficulty in pinning down a singular Japanese identity with a quote from Steven Epstein: “there is no ‘homosexuality’ but rather ‘homosexualities.’”\(^{55}\) This quote rings true for Japan. Though the coming-out story has become the primary indicator of living an “authentic” gay life and is a “dominant narrative\(^{56}\) in today’s culture, it is inherently problematic because homosexualities exist even outside of this limited/limiting contemporary conceptualization.\(^{57}\) In Japan, as there is a lack of a singular socially acceptable mode of “being gay,” individuals have such varied experiences that it is difficult to place one homosexuality as a hard and fast rule for all same-sex attracted men in Japan.\(^{58}\)

In terms of belonging to a gay community, the interviewees seemed split. For some, belonging to that community is essential – for others, work and family communities are more important and their sexuality does not bleed over into any sort of “lifestyle” beyond seeking out sexual encounters with other men.\(^{59}\)

As for the issue of *kamingu auto* (coming out), there is generally a higher degree of consensus – don’t. While that may be an overstatement, most of the interviewees did not plan on coming out to their friends, family, or coworkers. If they had already done so, then it was to a very limited group of people.\(^{60}\)

But why is it that “gay” men in Japan are still considered by many Japanese to be nonexistent when there has been so much media coverage? And why is it that, despite validation of some homosexualities, most same-sex attracted men feel compelled to remain “hidden” while many youth

\(^{55}\) (Epstein 146)  
\(^{56}\) (Plummer 81)  
\(^{57}\) (Robinson 393)  
\(^{58}\) Or, for that matter, anywhere in the world. This, however, is an argument for a far more queer-centric endeavor.  
\(^{59}\) (200-203)  
\(^{60}\) (McLelland, Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan 195-200)
have a limited understanding of their own sexual attractions? The remainder of the thesis will seek to answer these questions by examining: 1) a strong emphasis on homogeneity and group uniformity; 2) the overall level of candor afforded to expressions of sexual and romantic relationships; 3) media treatment; and 4) the historical and cultural importance of the family unit; and 5) an economic system that has made participation in a nuclear family a necessity for survival in Japanese society.

A final note before beginning analysis: it is not the case that a public identity is critical for Japanese men to identify as “gay,” “bisexual,” or otherwise. On the contrary, many men self-identify as gay or bisexual even while married to a woman and supporting a family. However, identity is the primary way in which sexuality is understood in contemporary Japan, and it is curious that the culture should adopt a Western conceptualization of sexuality as identity while not practicing the public expression of such an identity. This lack of public identification with a same-sex attracted sexual identity is, as I shall endeavor to show, due more to various socio-cultural and economic pressures that shape opinions about – and willingness to discuss or even acknowledge – non-heterosexuality and sexual identities.

**Contemporary Cultural Inhibitors of Public Expression of Sexual Identity**

Before delving into an examination of Japanese treatment of non-heterosexualities, it is important to understand sexuality’s place in the overall context of Japanese culture – just below the surface, and outside of the realm of everyday discussion. This is evidenced primarily by three things: first, that maintaining group harmony is of utmost importance; second, that the Japanese are, overall, conservative in their expression of sexual matters; and third, that homosexuality is generally regarded as subversive.
Wa and the Yamato-Damashii: The Importance of Homogeneity

Japanese culture is, generally speaking, much more restrained than (for example) American culture in the sense that maintaining harmony within the group is of utmost importance, and extreme or highly individualistic behavior is looked down upon. It is this adherence to harmony that originated the link between Japan and the phrase “the nail that sticks out gets hammered down.”

The culture emphasizes group conformity and group harmony, known as wa. More specifically, wa is thought of as the harmonization of two opposed forces. It is “an ethical concept whose ideal is to integrate individuals for the harmony and balance of the group at the expense of the individual.” The notion of wa has been part of Japanese culture for centuries, and its presence runs deep, visible even in grammar and polite modes of speech that have always been part of Japanese spoken language. In the 20th century, though, Japan’s nationalist government’s efforts to unify the nation introduced ideologies like the kokutai; such ideologies emphasized servitude to the nation and emperor. These changes made wa into a central aspect of Japanese civility, shifting cultural focus away from individuality and toward group identity. It also politicized wa, making it not only an issue of “what I want versus what you want” but also an issue of maintaining the “purity” of the yamato-damashii.

Though the yamato-damashii as a literal, biologically uniform race descended from the sun goddess Amaterasu is generally disregarded today, this racial construction exists in contemporary

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64 Most commonly found in passive requests as well as the tendency to talk oneself and one’s in-group down when speaking to an outsider.
Japan through a subtle but pervasive cultural narrative of Japanese racial-cultural supremacy. Michael Weiner writes in the introduction to his 1997 book that

“cultural determinants (religious values, language, patterns of social and economic organization), rather than genetic or physiological markers, have been deployed to signify the existence of an immutable and homogenous Japanese society.”

The continuing presence of the homogeneity enforced by a contemporary yamato-damashii is most obviously visible in Japan’s official lack of recognition of racial minorities living in Japan. In 1980, Japan submitted to the United Nations’ Human Rights Committee an official document which “denied the existence of minority populations.” Despite this denial, Japanese government population data from 2012 reveals that so-called “foreigners” compose 1.6% of the population, or 2,038,159 people. In addition to this number are Japanese citizens who were absorbed into Japanese citizenship (the native Ainu and the Ryukuan islanders) as well as others who have adopted Japanese citizenship. These hidden minorities include, but are not limited to:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>653,004</td>
<td>32.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North &amp; South Korea</td>
<td>530,421</td>
<td>26.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phillipines</td>
<td>203,027</td>
<td>10.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>193,571</td>
<td>9.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>52,385</td>
<td>2.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>49,483</td>
<td>2.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>48,371</td>
<td>2.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>40,146</td>
<td>2.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>25,543</td>
<td>1.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>24,073</td>
<td>1.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>22,779</td>
<td>1.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>195,356</td>
<td>9.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total as of 2012</td>
<td>2,038,159</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Chinese
- North & South Korean

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65 (Weiner xiii)
66 (Weiner xiii)
67 (Ministry of Justice)
Chinese and Koreans who are Japanese citizens face particularly strong discrimination manifested in an overall denunciation of their existence. Though they are legally recognized and there are schools which provide education specifically for Korean expatriates, discussion of the so-called *zainichi-kankokujin* is undeniably taboo – at least in polite company.

There is even a class of people who are discriminated against for no legitimate contemporary reason: the so-called *burakumin*. The *burakumin* are ethnically Japanese, but their ancestors were involved in lines of work that were regarded as “impure” by Buddhist standards, typically involving death and blood. Known as *eta*, or scum, they were an outcaste society. Though the Meiji government abolished the class system, social discrimination remained present and the *burakumin* lost even more status as their legal recognition disappeared. The *burakumin* “impurities” have little to no relevance in Japan today, though some people still discriminate against them and they are sometimes referred to using the politically correct *mikaibō-burakumin* or “people from unliberated communities.”

These points illustrate the huge cultural importance placed on homogeneity and the separation of those belonging to the *yamato-damashii* and those belonging in the implicitly inferior *bessekai*. It is a concept so important that the government has denied the existence of over two million legal residents in an effort to uphold it, and people go out of their way to avoid discussion of *zainichi-kankokujin*, Chinese, and the constructed *burakumin*. It is clear from this that there is an

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68 (Frédéric 93-4)
overall cultural precedent for concealing heterogeneous impurities in the Japanese narrative. This pattern, for the most part, extends to same-sex attracted men. While their existence is undeniable, they are rarely discussed, even among those who are close to men who publicly identify as “gay” or “bi.” When publicly discussed, there is an element of distal language used that relegates same-sex attracted men to the bessekai in a likely unconscious effort to maintain the clarity of the Japanese narrative – and the purity of the yamato-damashii.

*Let’s Talk About Sex (or not): Attitudes and candor regarding sex and romance*

Cultural conservatism extends to attitudes towards and expressions of sexuality as well. Though there is also a conception of Japan as a sexually progressive nation (a belief propagated primarily through the dissemination of niche internet pornography), both anthropological and psychological research finds that Japan is moderately conservative in regards to attitudes towards sex. A 1998 study by Eric Widmer et al. utilized a standardized questionnaire to poll 33,590 participants from 24 countries. National sample sizes ranged from 647 (Northern Ireland) to 2,494 (Spain). The Japanese sample consisted of 1306 individuals, of which 55% were female and 45% non-female (male, transgender, or otherwise unspecified). The mean age of participants was 41.3 years old. The questionnaire asked participants about their attitudes regarding nonmarital sex including issues regarding sex before marriage sex among under-16 year olds, extramarital sex, and homosexual sex, and was distributed in person.
The resulting data, found in Table 1, is revealing. Overall, Japanese respondents tended toward conservative responses without much display of strong or extreme opinions in the “not wrong at all” category – possibly indicative of an adherence to upholding the ideal of *wa*. All but one category of non-marital sex, pre-marital sex, was viewed as “always” or “almost always” wrong by between 87-91% of the sample group. Pre-marital sex was the only group that saw a significant number of “not wrong at all” responses. Most notably, Japan had the lowest number of responses stating that homosexual sex was “not wrong at all” with only 2% of respondents choosing that option. These data show the general conservatism of Japanese attitudes towards sex, but what about public discussions regarding sex, or even romance?

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Public discussion of romance appears to be a relatively new phenomenon in Japan. In the late 19th century, the frequency with which the term “love” appeared in English language literature caused difficulty for translators because of the lack of a word in Japanese with the appropriate connotations. The word *ai* (愛) could have been used, but the precise connotations were widely variable, ranging from passion directed from a superior downwards to simply an appreciation of beauty to familial love. *Koi* (恋) was considered too sexual to be used in the same contexts as the English “love.” Eventually a new term was coined: *ren'ai* (恋愛). By the 1890s, *ren'ai* was the primary way of expressing the Western concept of “love.”

Because of this, it was not until relatively recently that the originally Western notion of “love” now predominant in Japan could be experienced or expressed. Some of the elderly have never experienced so-called “PDA,” public display of affection – nor do they have any expectation that it should be delivered. In West’s 2011 book “Lovesick Japan,” a loveletter from a 62-year-old wife is presented. It reads:

“I've never heard you say ‘I like you’ or ‘I love you’ [sukida toka aishiteru toka]. But I still hold dear other words that you’ve told me. Before we were married, when you gave me my Christmas present, you said, ‘I've just learned for the first time how great it is to give a present.’ I wonder if you remember those words from forty years ago.”

According to West, the sentiment carried in this brief quotation is echoed by a fairly large number of the elderly Japanese population. He argues that the “unspoken nature of the feelings… is seen in japan as a romantic ideal: true love does not need to be spoken, it simply is.”

This unspoken ideal is not upheld as much by younger generations. A 1995 article in the New York Times describes a younger population much more comfortable with – and willing to

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70 (West 34)
71 (6 Otto kara Tsumahe, Tsuma kara otto he: 60 sai no Rabu Reta- 62)
72 (West 36)
engage in – public displays of affection. Miki Tanikawa describes the discomfort experienced by older generations with this development, who seem to characterize kissing and other forms of PDA as “associated . . . mostly with sexuality and the realm of things that belong in the bedroom.”\textsuperscript{73} She describes that the awkwardness sometimes caused by new expressions of PDA could be due to a lack of “romantic role models,” their parents never engaging in such activities.

Acting out romantic and sexual attraction may have seen a slight increase over the last few decades, but what of discussions concerning them? While the Japanese government takes detailed surveys of attitudes towards sex and marriage every year\textsuperscript{74}, day to day discussions of romance and sexuality continue to be rare. This could be for a number of reasons: first, that the primary social circle for many adult males is in the workplace, where such discussions would be not only frivolous but also wildly inappropriate (the world of business typically taking on the morals of the more conservative elders, who are also the heads of the companies); second, the belief that discussing sex and romance could be embarrassing to one’s self or others for any number of reasons; or third, that some lack the vocabulary required to converse on matters of romance or sexuality. While this third option is a stretch in regards to romance, it is far more likely in the realm of sex and sexuality.

Discussions of sexuality are rare outside of sex education, which frequently leaves students with more questions than answers. The JMA’s School Health Committee states that students should learn about male and female genitalia as well as secondary sexual characteristics from the ages 8-12, and about sex from 12 onwards.\textsuperscript{75} However, the Ministry of Culture, Sports, Science and Technology states in a Q&A on sexual education at the end of their curriculum that “sexual

\textsuperscript{73} (Tanikawa 41)
\textsuperscript{74} In an effort to understand why Japan has seen a decrease in interest in sexual activity and marriage over the past couple decades
\textsuperscript{75} (Ishiwata 157)
intercourse’ and ‘condoms’ will not be addressed in elementary school . . . the effectiveness is discussed, but [not] the correct method for wearing them . . . . Moreover, the word ‘sexual intercourse’ is not used . . . when discussing AIDS and STD prevention.”\textsuperscript{76} This lack of specificity leaves young people generally unaware of opposite-sex sexual activity and how it functions until they (inevitably) witness it in adult videos or stumble through a first sexual encounter.

A 2005 article from the English-language Herald Tribune/Asahi-Shimbun details difficulties teachers face in regards to appropriate sexual education. One teacher rented a room off of school property and taught sexual education classes to students on the weekends at the risk of losing their job.\textsuperscript{77} Another teacher hoped to give his students just enough information in class to allow them to figure it out for themselves, using an explanation of reproduction in marine life to plant the seed of understanding:

“Marine life lives in a watery environment. Sperm cannot dry out and die under such circumstances, therefore the sperm is ejaculated on the outside of the eggs. On land, where sperm cannot survive for long on its own, the mating of sperm and eggs takes place inside the body. [By explaining sex and reproduction in] this way, students can imagine human mating as an extension of how animals mate.”\textsuperscript{78}

Unfortunately, this is one of the most accurate lessons in sexual education that students are likely to receive before they are old enough to feel the consequences of potential uninformed decisions.

All of this information points to the fact that Japanese attitudes towards romance, sex, and their discussion are notably conservative. Traditional culture is unsuited for overt discussions of Western-style romance and affection currently prominent in Japan, and conceptualizations of sexuality are overall conservative, taking a generally sex-negative attitude. Additionally, sexual

\textsuperscript{76} (Ishiwata 158)
\textsuperscript{77} (Shigeko Segawa)
\textsuperscript{78} (Shigeko Segawa)
education leaves students in the dark and instills a belief that sex is not something that needs to be (or should be) discussed. Those who publicly engage in discussions on sexuality without shame (enryō naku), then, could come to be considered citizens of the bessekai.

It should go without saying, then, that these facts have a massive influence on Japan’s readiness to discuss non-normative sexualities in regards to romance and sex itself. Firstly, male-male sexuality is generally construed as negative, as evidenced by Eric Widmer’s survey of opinions regarding non-marital sex. Japan’s 2% acceptance rating for homosexual sex is indicative of an overall discomfort with same-sex sexual activity. Furthermore, the instances of PDA discussed in the New York Times article were exclusively heterosexual, and while willingness to display and discuss affection has increased somewhat from the mid-20th century, it is still exceedingly rare to witness a same-sex display of affection in Japan. Male-male romance has been written out of Japan’s official history following the nationalist institutionalization of the yamato-damashii’s “purity,” ignoring centuries of literature devoted to male romance. Finally, sex education regarding male-male sex (or indeed any type of sexual activity outside of male-female vaginal intercourse) is completely disregarded, leaving opposite-sex attracted students unaware of even the potential of same-sex intercourse. Same-sex attracted students, then, are left clueless as to how it might be possible beyond mutual masturbation (if at all). Fortunately for them, the concurrence of Japan’s “gay boom” and the sudden popularity of the internet has led to a massive number of Japanese language online resources for LGBTQ folk, from information about sex and relationships to forums where individuals can foster a sense of community among their peers. For Japan’s “futsui”79 population, though, it is clear that discussions regarding sexuality in general – and, more to the point, male-male sexuality – occur rarely.

79 Normal
Sexuality in Today’s Japanese Media

As in any industrialized culture, the media has a great deal of influence on the things to which a given population is exposed. The media in Japan is particularly influential because of Japan’s status as a geographically, culturally, and linguistically isolated nation. As an archipelago, there are no borders through which culturally diverse influences can readily pass; as a culture, it is relatively closed off due to subtle beliefs regarding racial purity; and because of the difficulty of learning another language with Japanese as the native tongue, fewer Japanese are exposed to international media that is not already translated.

After the “gay boom” of the 1990s subsided, Japanese media coverage for homosexual issues declined significantly. However, there continue to be portrayals of same-sex attractions throughout various forms of media. This section will focus on two of the most popular forms: manga and television.

Yaoi / Boys’ Love

A not-insignificant subset of Japanese comic books, or manga, are devoted to male-male romance and sexuality. Known as yaoi or BL (boizu rabu, “boys’ love”), this particular genre typically explores the lives, romances, and sexuality of what are called bishōnen, or “beautiful boys.” Typically on the verge of being sexually explicit, the plots involve characters dealing with misunderstandings, struggling with same-sex attractions, and ultimately having sex with the object of their desire and falling in love, living happily ever after. These stories are, obviously, fictional and fanciful in a number of ways, particularly the notable lack of outside influences adding complications to these relationships. In disregarding the impact that cultural forces have on the feasibility of a male-male relationship in Japan, these stories place themselves firmly in the realm of fantasy.
Some argue that the fact that *yaoi* sections can be found in most large *manga* shops shows that there must be a reasonable level of acceptance for public expression of same-sex affection. This argument, however, is deeply flawed. This is because *yaoi* is neither written nor for men. The vast majority of *BL* *manga* are written by women as a means of exploring feminine sexuality.\(^80\)

Though some stories feature prototypical masculine figures (*samurai*, ramen-shop owners, construction workers) as the object of desire for the main character, the overall tone of the stories is distinctly feminine. The idealized worlds in these stories are also formed according to a distinct sensibility of young Japanese femininity, with the opening of *Inu no Kimochi* (a *BL* novel) painting a picture of a “small shopping village” where flowers blossom and “there isn’t anything even resembling an arcade”\(^81\) – a bastion of boyhood in Japan.

Furthermore, the pretenses upon which many *BL* relationships are built are often difficult to compare to any real human relationships: Takashi of Yukimura’s “*Honto no tokoro*” believes his sexual and romantic relationship with high-school friend Kazuma to be a sort of “gay chicken,” propelling the relationship primarily through his desire to best Kazuma in what he believes to be a competition to sexually arouse the other.\(^82\) Is, then, *yaoi/BL* a display of male-male sexuality? No. The comics do indeed represent a resistance to and struggle with the hegemonic structures of gender and sexuality, but they do not represent male-male sexuality in a realistic way, nor do they attempt to. Furthermore, their existence does not indicate a cultural or political acceptance of non-heterosexual desire, nor does it promote such a sense in same-sex attracted men.\(^83\)

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\(^{80}\) (Isola)  
\(^{81}\) (Himekawa 8)  
\(^{82}\) (“Yukimura”)  
\(^{83}\) (Isola 84)
Bara

A more “authentic” form of gay manga is known as *bara*. Written by men for men, *bara* spins off in the opposite direction of *yaoi* and is typically hypersexualized, featuring ultra-masculine, burly, hairy protagonists, exaggerated bodies, and are almost always sexually explicit. These *manga* are not in most large bookstores and are usually disseminated via the internet or niche bookstores devoted to gay erotica. Though the plots are typically thinner (or at least less convoluted) than those in *yaoi*, they are more relevant to a discussion of same-sex attracted men in Japan simply because they are representative of their desires. It is, however, a much smaller niche than *yaoi* and has less public presence (as it is considered pornography), so has little impact on public expressions of sexual identity.

Television

Japanese television is the primary means by which the “average” Japanese person receives information concerning male-male sexuality. Though severely lacking in terms of variety of images, there are a number of portrayals of “gay” men on television, both misleading and not.

Perhaps the most popular portrayals of gay characters on television in Japan today are through imported television, particularly FOX’s musical comedy-drama “Glee.” Considered a relatively progressive program here in the United States, the show brings a fairly open-ended and well-rounded portrayal of same-sex attracted men to its audiences. These audiences, however, are not as large as they are for broadcasts produced in Japan.

The most common portrayal of gay men in Japanese television is as *tarento*. A transliteration of the English word “talent,” *tarento* are usually singers or comedians who perform on Japan’s many variety shows. Though there is a wide variety of *tarento*, I will examine two types, both of which play and rely on gay stereotypes for laughs: the infamous “Hard Gay” and the *onee-kei* performer.
The most infamous of *tarento* with gay themes is Masaki Sumitani, better known as “Razor Ramon Hard Gay.” Beginning as a professional wrestler dressed in outlandish S&M gear, Sumitani became a professional comedian after sustaining an injury to his foot in a match.84 As a comic character, he typically runs through public areas dressed in black PVC, thrusting his crotch at passers-by and harassing people in restaurants, bookstores, and at parks. “Hard Gay’s” homosexuality was, however, discovered to be an act when he was caught on a date with a bikini model. At this, LGBTQ activists criticized Sumitani for “stereotyping and reducing gays to goofy gags for plunder and profit.”85

Sumitani’s stint as the BDSM-loving gay stereotype was hugely popular while it lasted, coloring countless Japanese people’s understanding of the meaning of “gay” – overtly sexualized, one dimensional, far from the social norm, and well into the outlands of the *besseki*i. However, another common type of *tarento* has both a misleading and a positive influence on people’s perceptions of non-heterosexuality.

Another of the favorite gags of *tarento* is male-to-female cross dressing. Though it has a history in Japan dating back hundreds of years through the kabuki tradition of the *onnagata*, these crossdressing *tarento*, better known as *o-nee-kei* (“big sister type”) come in a few varieties. The first of these is the most detrimental, or at least the most deceptive, of the three types: the straight crossdresser. Typically, these *tarento* do not have any desire to be feminine themselves, but much like Hard Gay, are using stereotypes and pre-existing misconceptions to create a comedic persona based

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84 (Japan Zone)
85 (Ashcraft)
on exploiting and capitalizing upon these identities. The second type is composed of gay men who go in drag. This type is most like the drag queen of the West, and carries a somewhat higher level of authenticity, though their sexuality is rarely discussed as anything more than a gag or punchline. Finally, there are a number of tarento who identify as transgender (or nyuu-hafū) and even are allowed to publicly discuss this on air.

The negative aspect of the straight o-nee-kei performer is clear, but there is also a single negative aspect of the latter two types of performer. No matter which type of o-nee-kei is performing, they are all considered part of the bessekai, allowing viewers to treat them as a spectacle rather than a person with a real viewpoint and a member of society. Because of this, very little can be done through the sensationalist media to change the viewpoints of viewers in regards to same-sex attracted men.

Ie: The Importance of the Family and the Lifetime Employment Problem

Yatsuka Hozumi, a scholar of law at what is now the University of Tokyo, wrote in 1891 “Our nation is one of ancestral worship. We are the home of the ie system . . . the authority of the head of the household is inviolate.” Since the nationalization of Japan in the Meiji era, the family has played a significant role as not only a form of identity for individuals, but as a national identity. This family structure is critical not only in this historical and political sense, but also in a social and even economic sense – and this intense adherence to a traditional family structure inhibits public expressions of a same-sex attracted sexual identity in Japanese men by maintaining their place in the bessekai.

86 (Hozumi)
87 (Ochiai 104)
Historically speaking, Japan has long upheld the family as a significant social unit and an important center of everyday life. Though family practices and even the construction of the family unit were somewhat varied throughout much of Japan’s history, the drafting of the Meiji Civil Code made the family into “an institution paradigm.”88 The family was so central to Japanese nationalism that it was said of Japan that it is

“based on emperor-centered familism with the imperial house as the trunk, and the families of the citizens as its branch families. Thus is formed the relationship between master and subject in duty, and between father and child in emotion.”89

Scholars in the pre-war 20th century wrote extensively on the importance of the family unit and its role in social structure. Aruga Kizaemon, one such scholar, developed “ie theory,” described extensively in his 1943 work Japanese Family Systems and Tenant Farming Systems. Aruga argued that a farming village was constructed of ie, or houses (families), which would form bonds with each other and create the social, economic, and geographic network of a village. By extension, he theorized, cities and urban areas were also constructed of these ie networks. Through this theory, it was said that Japanese society was composed of – and therefore owed its very existence to – these traditional household models.90

Because of the intensity with which this family model was upheld, and because it became synonymous with religion and the Empire, it was nearly impossible to criticize effectively. Only after the Asia-Pacific war did the family unit change, unsurprisingly morphing to align with the American concept of the nuclear family.91 In the 1990s, conceptualizations of the family shifted again, allowing for more varied permutations; however, these are typically within the realm of the heterosexual.

Married couples living on their own with or without children, some single people, single middle-aged

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88 (Ochiai 105)
89 (Shinmi)
90 (Ochiai 107)
91 (Ochiai 112)
adults living with their parents, and the extremely rare single mother or father. Despite these family configurations being ostensibly accepted in contemporary Japan, they are a part of the bessekai, less desirable than a heteronormative nuclear family and implicitly inferior. Indeed, Japan continues to be “typical of countries that are ‘strongly committed to the preservation of traditional familyhood.’”92

This overall adherence to a heteronormative nuclear family, consisting of husband, wife, and children is fuelled by a number of aspects, but is most firmly installed in Japanese society by one critical socio-economic mechanism: the lifetime employment system.

**Lifetime Employment: Nailing the Closet Shut**

Lifetime employment is a system by which a Japanese man, upon graduating, is immediately employed by a firm as a blue-collar or white-collar worker. Provided he remains competitive with other peers, he will be employed by that company until he has reached retirement age (the baseline for which is decided by the government), at which point he will receive benefits. These benefits theoretically will sustain him and his wife in their old age, coupled with the care given him by his children.93 This system was considered to be the norm in Japan for most of the latter half of the 20th century, particularly during the years of Japan’s “economic miracle.”

The system developed in the post-war years as an evolution of traditional Japanese values, catalyzed by contemporary socio-economic issues. In terms of traditional values, the system was a natural evolution of two key values. The first of these values was respect towards elders and the importance of affording them privileges due to their seniority. As an individual aged while working at a company, his pay would increase and he might find himself in a more senior position until

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92 (Rebick and Takenaka 4)
93 (Koshiro 34)
shortly before his retirement, as his usefulness at the company waned. The second value that led to lifetime employment was the importance of maintaining one’s position in a group. These two values combined made the idea of staying with one company for life very attractive.

The socio-economic catalyst for the development of a Japanese system of lifetime employment was centered around mass layoffs that occurred in many industries in the late 1940s. As a result of these layoffs, workers’ unions fought (sometimes literally) to ensure higher levels of job security. Over the next few years, Japanese courts would build up legal protections for workers’ job security, effectively guaranteeing them lifetime employment. Since then, due to a “deep-rooted reluctance in Japanese society to submit differences arising from interpersonal relationships to the judiciary,” lifetime employment is what Koshiro describes as “a gentlemen’s agreement.”

Since its inception, this system has had massive influence on the structure of family life in Japan. Were the man to remain unmarried, it could harm his chances of being accepted at his company, as Japanese firms typically hire the “total man” and use the family as a point of leverage, the primary driving principle behind lifetime employment being that “the employer and employee are bound together . . . [as closely as] a husband to his wife. The employee becomes a member of the company ‘family.’” Evidence of the man’s ability to contribute his “total emotional participation” is crucial.

94 (Koshiro 35)
95 (Tanaka 24)
96 (Koshiro 34)
97 (Schregle 512)
98 (Schregle 508)
99 (Schregle 510)
100 (Koshiro 34)
101 (Tanaka 24)
102 (Tanaka 24)
The man, presumably having now married a woman, is obliged to provide for her and eventually his children. Because of the considerable income gap between men and women, it would be very difficult for a woman to provide for the whole family. He has no choice but to take on the role as sole provider while the woman takes on the role of the *kanai*, or housewife.\(^{103}\)

The lifetime employment system interfaces in complex ways with male-male sexuality, affording men some time for exploration of non-normative sexual attractions – but it is ultimately the proverbial “nail in the coffin” for public expression of a “gay” identity. In McLelland’s interviews with a number of same-sex attracted Japanese men, it was clear that some men use the “late hours” excuse to explore their same-sex attractions. Due to the legitimacy of this excuse\(^ {104}\) and their wives’ fixed status as housewives, they are free in spare time to set up sex dates at love hotels or pursue other relationships, both sexual and romantic. Furthermore, the social constraints of lifetime employment open up opportunities for men to discover their sexuality while maintaining socio-economic stability through the family unit.

This approach, however, necessitates two outcomes which are debatably undesirable. The first of these is the husband’s infidelity to his wife and family which, as Eric Widmer’s study indicated, is considered “almost always or always wrong” by 91% of those surveyed.\(^ {105}\) Secondly, and more significantly in terms of this endeavor, is the man’s resignation to enact same-sex desires exclusively from behind a façade of heteronormativity. If, as many scholars have noted, the “coming out story” has become the primary mode of authenticating same-sex attractions in society, there may be negative side-effects of this so-called “double life.”

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\(^{103}\) There are a number of benefits and stressors that both men and women experience in this system, but for the sake of brevity I will focus on male-male sexuality and leave discussion of other issues to other endeavors.

\(^{104}\) Many Japanese workers put in great deals of overtime in an effort to show allegiance and commitment to the company – and get a raise. This sometimes leads to exhaustion and even death by overwork, known as *karoshi*, which is a serious social problem in Japan.

\(^{105}\) (Widmer, Treas and Newcomb)
Conclusion

While these topics of homogeneity, candor regarding sex and romance, media treatment of queer issues, the construct of the family, and the economic mechanism of lifetime employment seem unrelated at first, the conclusions that can be drawn from analysis of these connect together to paint a clear picture of a society that inhibits public expression of sexual orientation or romantic interest.

The existing concept of *wa*, or group harmony, was made into a core cultural aspect during the Meiji reformation, when the newly nationalized Japanese government used it as a tool to unify a formerly “fragmented” people into one group, subject to the emperor. Using this and the newly developed concepts of the *kokutai* and the *yamato-damashii*, the “official” narrative of the Japanese nation was started. In order to maintain the continuity of this narrative and the purity of the *kokutai* and *yamato* race, many racial and ethnic minority groups were denied official recognition, even as recently as the 1980s. Evidenced by the fact that some Japanese people believe that homosexual attraction does not occur in Japan, this whitewashing of Japanese society continues today and includes gender and sexual minorities, most relevantly same-sex attracted men.

Secondly, Japan’s generally sex-negative outlook on sexuality also inhibits a public expression of same-sex desire or romantic attractions. In 1998, Japan had a 2% “whole-hearted” approval rating for homosexual sex (the USA’s at the time was 19%). If trends in other nations can be assumed similar to those of Japan, then it is possible Japan’s approval rating has increased in the last decade-and-a-half. However, There are further complications: “love” as most of the English-speaking world knows it is a decidedly Western concept, and so it cannot be expressed as easily in Japanese contexts. There is also a huge dearth of sexual education in Japan even for heterosexual sex. These
facts combined illustrate a Japan that has difficulty engaging in meaningful discourse regarding the
Westernized love the culture has ostensibly adopted (if only on the surface) and is generally
unprepared to have casual or professional conversations about sex, be it homosexual or
heterosexual. Combined with the traditional approach of love and sex being “behind closed doors,”
Japan remains a culture ill-suited for candid expression of sexuality, be it hetero or homo.

Thirdly, the Japanese media’s portrayals of same-sex characters and relationships more often
than not leave something to be desired. The primary fictional conduit for male-male sexuality, *yaoi*, is
in reality unrelated to male sexuality and is much more female-centric, exploring subversions of
gender roles and acting as a romantic fantasy escape for its intended female audience. It also
portrays typically unhealthy and unrealistic relationships, which could affect a) “average” people’s
understandings of how same-sex relationships work and b) how same-sex attracted men think their
relationships should work. *Bara*, while more directly related to male-male sexuality, is generally too
pornographic to be used as a locus for serious public discussion in Japan’s sex-negative society on
issues of male-male sexuality. Finally, portrayals on television are typically limited to *tarento*, ranging
from manipulations playing on outlandish stereotypes (as in the case of Hard Gay) to actual
transgender performers who, while legitimate performers, receive much of their attention from the
mainstream media due to their observed place in the *bessekai*.

Fourthly, the institution of the family in Japan has a huge impact on the appropriateness of
expressing same-sex sexuality and relationships. While the family system was present in Japan for
centuries, the institutionalization that occurred as the emperor became the focus of the new
Japanese nation and Japanese imperialism began changed the family from simple lineage and
lordship to an institution that was proclaimed to be the basis for an entire civilization and the
defining feature of a culture. While contemporary family units can be configured in increasingly non-
normative ways, they are still regarded as “abnormal” by normative Japanese society and are part of the bessekai. This institutional pressure and social scrutiny is highly accountable for Japanese people’s hesitancy to publicly enact any expression of non-normative sexual or romantic attraction.

Finally, and arguably most influentially, the lifetime employment system has forced same-sex attracted individuals into a situation where enacting “authenticity” through public identity is impossible or unfeasible. As it became the only way to survive economic need and social scrutiny, the system created a definite structure that most Japanese families were obliged to fill in order to support themselves and the nation. However, this obligation requires that any exploration of one’s own sexual attractions be conducted as an extramarital affair, and that an attraction may never be allowed to be public – for life.

There are additional factors which prevent Japanese culture from witnessing a powerful movement towards equal recognition – both socially and politically – of same-sex sexuality and relationships. One such factor is the lack of urgency that urged the Gay Rights movements in the West, particularly in the United States. While Americans experienced the overt discrimination and institutionalized harassment that led to the Stonewall Riots in the late 1960s, Japanese society as a whole does not engage in overt discrimination. People are not typically fired from their jobs if they choose to tell their employer about their sexuality – it is generally a non-issue. Because there is no overt discrimination to light a proverbial fire underneath “queer” Japanese folk, a strong political movement seems unlikely. Another factor is a cultural and literary acceptance of social obligation epitomized by the giri-ninjō conundrum. Giri (social obligation) comes into conflict with ninjō (one’s own desires) frequently in Japanese literature, particularly in regards to love. While some choose ninjō, their stories typically end in pain and tragedy. While it may be less desirable, accepting one’s

106 (Takatori and Ofuji)
social obligation is generally seen as the preferable and nobler option. Because this motif appears throughout almost all Japanese literature, it has become a part of the culture and is also, therefore, an inhibitor of public expressions of same-sex desire: while one’s ninjō may be to have a primary same-sex relationship, giri mandates that an individual foster and maintain a heteronormative nuclear family for the sake of society and the nation.

Ironically, while concealing one’s sexual preference and attraction is done to ensure that group membership and one’s perception as a part of the central community (and away from the bessekai) is maintained, studies have shown that the concealment of stigmatized identity has the potential to severely impair interpersonal interactions.107 Because intercultural psychology is extremely difficult, it would be of great interest if further research were conducted by Japanese or so-called gaijin (foreigner) psychologists to see the effects that concealing or repressing one’s sexual and romantic attractions have on individuals living in a Japanese social context. Undoubtedly there are different nuances, but there is a possibility that – even in a society that prides itself on adherence to the group – there is some psychological value in expressing one’s deepest attractions and desires. Such research might allow more and more queer Japanese people to enact the words of my Japanese Women’s Studies professor in Kyoto, Minamoto-sensei: “jibun-rashiku ikite kudasai.”108

107 (Newheiser and Barreto)
108 “Please, live like yourself.”
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