



Japan

by Mark McLelland

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2004, glbtq, inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Male homosexuality has a long and well-attested history in Japan going back at least a thousand years, but it was not until modern times that female same-sex eroticism gained similar exposure. Today, blending elements from indigenous traditions and recently imported western discourses of sexual identity, Japan is home to one of the most diverse and dynamic queer cultures in Asia.

The Japanese entertainment world has long supported openly gay, transgendered, and transsexual personalities, and in recent decades there has been a boom in queer-themed art, film, and literature. Tokyo, Osaka, and numerous smaller cities support significant queer communities and there are a growing number of lesbian and gay rights organizations.

Pre-modern Japan

During Japan's feudal period (1600-1867), elite men were free to engage in both same- and opposite-sex affairs. At this time, *nanshoku* (eroticism between men) and *joshoku* (eroticism between men and women) were not seen as mutually incompatible. *Wakashudo*, or "the Way of Boys," was a socially validated mode of sexual expression where adult males, who might also be married, were able to pursue male youths who had not yet undergone their coming-of-age ceremonies.

Elite men were also able to pursue transgendered males of all ages from the lower classes who worked as prostitutes or actors in the all-male kabuki theater. However, neither the adult male lovers nor their youthful or transgendered partners were considered "homosexual" in the modern sense. Youths were expected to give up the "passive" role in relation to adult men once they came of age, and transgendered actors and prostitutes were considered to have chosen that lifestyle out of financial necessity.

Early-modern Japan

The Meiji period (1867-1912), during which Japan was opened to the West, coincided with the development of European sexology. From this time on, discussions of "perverse sexuality" began to circulate in popular magazines that advocated the improvement of public morals. The previous discourse of *nanshoku* and the transgender practices associated with the kabuki theater were portrayed as feudal, incompatible with "civilized morality," and something that ought to be eradicated.

However, the harsh legal persecution of homosexuals that was taking place in most European states and in the United States at this time was never reduplicated in Japan. Except for a short period between 1873 and 1881, when "sodomy" was criminalized, Japan has never legislated against either male or female



Top: Japan and neighboring countries in 2004.

Center: An eighteenth-century Japanese print of a man with two youths.

Above: A photograph of a street scene from Tokyo's Shinjuku District created by David Monniaux in 2005. Today, the Shinjuku District houses more than 200 gay bars. The image of the Shinjuku District appears under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike France license.

homosexual acts.

Despite the prevalence of a new discourse pathologizing same-sex relationships, popular culture remained an innovative site for gender play and experimentation, especially in the all-woman theater troupe, the Takarazuka, founded in 1913. The Takarazuka's "male-role" players or *otokoyaku*, like the *onnagata* of the kabuki theater, were often implicated in homosexual scandals, which helped increase the public visibility of lesbianism.

Also, for the first time in Japanese history, during the early twentieth century large numbers of young women were leaving home and being billeted together in boarding schools and factory dormitories where intimate relationships often developed between them. Referring to them as "class S" in which the "S" stood for "sister," "*shojo*" (girl), or even "sex," the media were fairly indulgent of these partnerships, it being expected that when the girls graduated or left work, marriage would "cure" them.

Post-war Japan

After Japan's defeat in World War II, the Occupation forces were more interested in monitoring political than sexual discussion, and it was possible for new kinds of sex-related publications to emerge that were considerably more frank than any publications that existed in English at this time. From the early 1950s, "perverse" or "mania" magazines, as they were termed, had an extremely wide range of interests and, purporting to offer true accounts, drew upon anecdotes about sexual behavior from Japan's feudal past as well as from European and Asian societies.

Significantly, these early magazines did not segregate material into hetero- or homosexual-themed issues, as became increasingly common in the 1970s, but presented a wide range of "perverse desires," including sado-masochism, scatology, cross-dressing, and male and female homosexuality. Importantly, the magazines featured stories about homosexual meeting places, and their readers' columns functioned as rudimentary personal ads, enabling men and women who expressed an interest in "sodomia" or "lesbos" to begin to network and set up discussion groups, newsletters, and social organizations for the first time.

According to reports in these magazines, the most visible homosexual group to appear immediately after the war were the *dansho* or cross-dressing male prostitutes, who plied their trade beneath the trees in Tokyo's Ueno Park. Several reasons are given for an apparent "boom" in male prostitution, the main one being that many men had been introduced to homosexual sex and developed a liking for it while serving in the army.

Media also reported on the "mania" for female cross-dressing. It was suggested that some women who could not find husbands after the war were passing as men in order to gain better employment and higher levels of pay, even going to the extent of setting up households with other women.

The early 1950s saw the development of a new style of "gay bars." In these, transgendered male hostesses known as "gay boys" served drinks and provided conversation for customers, often making themselves available for after-hours assignations. During the 1960s, gay bars became popular hangouts for a diverse clientele, many of them heterosexual, who enjoyed the female-impersonation and floor shows staged by the gay boys.

At this time numerous gay boys made the transition from the subculture to the mainstream entertainment world. The most famous of these "gay boys" to emerge as mainstream entertainers include singer and actor Akihiro Miwa, the actor "Peter," and singer Carrousel Maki, who, in 1972, became Japan's most high-profile entertainer to undergo a complete sex-change.

"Gay boy" remained the most prominent term for describing transgendered men working in the entertainment industry until the early 1980s. At this time two new Japanese-English neologisms appeared:

"newhalf" and "Mr. Lady," which designated entertainers who had gone beyond the wearing of women's clothes, make-up, and hairstyles and had developed breasts through the use of hormones or implants. Like gay boys, and the *onnagata* before them, newhalf work in the entertainment world as dancers, singers, and sex-workers, often based in cabarets and "show pubs" where the clientele is predominantly heterosexual.

Numerous bars also exist now in Japan's major cities where homosexual men go to meet each other. However, unlike western gay bars, which are often very large and feature multiple rooms and dance floors, Japan's "homo bars" are small, hole-in-the-wall joints that seldom seat more than twenty customers. These bars are prolific, with the Shinjuku Ni-chome area of Tokyo, alone, housing nearly two hundred.

Just as there were bars employing transgendered male staff, similar establishments existed where transgendered women, frequently referred to as *dansosha* or "male-dressers," worked as bartenders and hosts. In the early 1960s, cross-dressed female staff were known as *danso no reijin* or "male-dressing beauties," a term that had been used to describe the male-role players in the Takarazuka revue.

The mid 1960s saw a boom in interest in female cross-dressers, and a number of bars featuring cross-dressed hosts sprang up in entertainment districts in Tokyo and Kyoto. In the new style bars, the hosts were expected to be able to sing and to dance with the customers as well as mix drinks and provide stimulating conversation.

These bars had gender roles similar to the butch/femme distinction prevalent in working-class lesbian subcultures of the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. Although they were visited by some lesbians, including male-role actors from the Takarazuka and other women from the entertainment world, their clientele was mixed. It was not until the early 1980s that modern-style lesbian bars developed. Even today they are far fewer in number than those catering to gay men and are seldom found outside Tokyo.

Queer Publications

Japan's first homophile magazine, *Adonis*, was published between 1952 and 1962 but was available only via subscription and did not reach a wide audience. The first commercial gay magazine was *Barazoku* (Rose Tribe), which appeared in 1971 and is still published today. Several other gay magazines have come and gone, but *Barazoku* remains the most general, with a monthly circulation of between thirty and forty thousand.

Unlike western gay magazines such as the *Advocate*, Japan's gay press has tended to be entertainment-oriented and to focus on erotic stories and pornography, giving little space to lifestyle or rights issues. Publications like *Adon* in the 1980s and *Fabulous* in the 1990s, which attempted to distance themselves from pornography and include more high-brow discussions to do with gay lifestyle issues, have failed to reach a wide audience and have gone out of business.

However, there has been a strong tradition of *minikomi* ("mini" as opposed to "mass" communications) circulated by gay groups that have highlighted social issues. With the advent of the Internet in the late 1980s, these publications have proliferated and their distribution has greatly increased.

Numerous publications also exist that cater to Japan's transgender community. While there were several privately circulated newsletters for male cross-dressers as early as the 1950s, the first commercial magazine, *Queen*, was not published until 1981. It continues publishing today, with a circulation of around seven thousand.

Queen is closely associated with the Elizabeth chain of cross-dressing clubs and is primarily aimed at amateur cross-dressers who have little or no involvement with the entertainment world, and it avoids any association with prostitution or pornography. Other titles such as *She Male* (1992-present) and *Newhalf Club* (1995-present) cater to transgendered people working in the entertainment world and their admirers and

are much more erotic in content, as are many newhalf sites on the Internet, which are basically fronts for transgender prostitution.

Lesbian publications have found it more difficult to find a niche in the marketplace and have tended to come and go rapidly. The first lesbian publication, *EVE&EVE*, appeared in 1981 and survived for only two issues. However, there has been a strong tradition of lesbian *minikomi*, and there is a large lesbian presence on the Internet.

Japan's queer publications are niche-marketed, and there are no cross-over magazines that cater to a wider queer constituency. However, the important genre of boy-love *manga*, written by and for women, contains graphic representations of male homosexual love and appeals across gender and orientation boundaries. These magazines are enjoyed by many gay men and lesbians as well as by heterosexual women.

Queer Activism

Japan's first queer activist was Ken Togo who, in 1971, founded the Zatsumin no Kai, or Organization of Miscellaneous People, which fought for the rights of sexual minorities, including lesbians, gay men, and sex workers. He has repeatedly run for political office in the national Diet, Japan's parliament, but without success.

Togo is a colorful character, a gay bar owner who expresses himself through the effeminate mannerisms of the 1960s gay boy. He is also the editor of the magazine *The Gay*, first published in 1981 (and previously titled *The Ken*), which contains an interesting mixture of explicit pornography and gay-rights discourse. However, despite Togo's prominence on Tokyo's gay scene, his style of activism has had only limited success, and he has been marginalized by more recent western-style gay groups.

The 1970s saw the development of numerous small organizations, often centering on the clientele of specific bars. However, their activities were more social than political.

Japanese lesbian and gay liberation movements began to pick up pace in the mid-1980s, with the founding in Japan of a branch of the International Lesbian and Gay Association. Probably the best known group dating from this time is Ugoku Gei to Rezubian no Kai (Group of Moving Gays and Lesbians), also known as OCCUR, which, in 1988, became involved in a legal dispute with the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, which had refused to allow them access to its residential meeting facilities. OCCUR took the relevant government body to court and won the case in 1994; it also won the appeal launched by the government in 1997.

In 1994, Tokyo saw its first lesbian and gay parade, which has since become an annual event. Other regional gay and lesbian parades are also held, particularly in Sapporo, the capital of Japan's northernmost island of Hokkaido.

When compared with many western nations, homophobia in Japan is less intense. Japan's legal system has taken a hands-off approach to the private sexual behavior of its citizens; neither of its two principal religions, Buddhism and Shinto, condemns homosexuality; and neither religious nor political figures have campaigned on an anti-gay platform.

So far, the increased visibility of Japan's sexual minorities has not been met with the same conservative backlash that has been apparent in the United States. However, gender norms remain rigid, and there is no legislation protecting lesbian and gay partnerships, insurance benefits, or inheritance rights.

Transsexuals, in particular, are disadvantaged since they cannot officially change their sex on identity documents. The late 1990s saw the launch of legal challenges to change this situation and, given the success of previous legal actions, it is hopeful that the situation will improve in the near future.

Bibliography

Chalmers, Sharon. *Emerging Lesbian Voices from Japan*. Richmond, U.K.: Curzon, 2002.

Fushimi, Noriaki. *Gei to Iu Keiken* [The Experience Called Gay]. Tokyo: Potto Shuppan, 2002.

Leupp, Gary. *Male Colors: The Construction of Homosexuality in Tokugawa Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

Lunsing, Wim. *Beyond Common Sense: Sexuality and Gender in Contemporary Japan*. London: Kegan Paul International, 2001.

McLelland, Mark. *Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan: Cultural Myths and Social Realities*. Richmond, U.K.: Curzon, 2000.

About the Author

Mark McLelland is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Centre for Critical and Cultural Studies at the University of Queensland, where he researches and writes about sexuality and the media in Japan. He is author of *Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan: Cultural Myths and Social Realities* and editor of *Japanese Cybercultures*. He serves on the editorial advisory board of www.glbtc.com.