

14 Commodified romance in a Tokyo host club

Akiyo Takeyama

Introduction

Walk anywhere at night in Tokyo's famous Kabuki-cho sex district, the largest in Japan, and you can't miss them – young males, mostly, wearing fashionable dark suits with matching leather shoes and typically smoking cigarettes. They are hosts – “*hosuto*” in Japanese – men who make a living entertaining Japan's increasingly restless and well-heeled women. Thousands of these so-called hosts prowling the streets of Kabuki-cho, making every effort to draw women's attention. With their slim bodies, tanned skin, and perfectly set medium-long hair, they show off their assets like peacocks preening for the attention of potential mates. On the crowded streets, they intercept dressed-up female passers-by, handing out their business cards. “Hey, are you going back home? Why don't you stop by our club to relax and enjoy yourself?” they implore. Many women ignore their come-ons, but a few will inevitably go on to spend tens of thousands – and in some cases millions – of yen on hosts at host clubs. To explore why women are so intrigued by the host club scene which has only recently gained notoriety in Japan, I spent two months in the summer of 2003 interviewing people who participate in this unique subculture.

While hostess clubs are well established and normalized in male-dominated Japanese society (Yoda 1981; Allison 1994; Mock 1996), establishments catering to women have received little attention until recently. The first host club that opened in Tokyo in 1966 was a highly exclusive establishment serving upper-class matrons and wealthy widows and it remained largely invisible to the public.¹ As a result of news reports and other media attention in the past five years, however, the Japanese public has become intimate with such institutions. Mainstream media coverage has included inside exposés, hidden cameras and such sensationalized reports that some hosts have become overnight celebrities. While host clubs are still mainly centered in big cities like Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya, they have sprung up all over Japan, with an estimated 200 clubs and over 5,000 hosts plying an increasingly lucrative trade within Tokyo's Kabuki-cho entertainment district alone – the holy ground for sex-related businesses.² Moreover, the host business continues to flourish despite Japan's weakened economy.

Why did this little-known subculture suddenly emerge so prominently? To some extent, the recent success of host club establishments can be viewed as another

example of Japan's fad-driven consumer culture. In other ways, it reflects the undeniable economic power of Japanese women whose free-spending habits have evolved from satisfying material wants to less tangible desires. It also reflects the changing attitudes of Japanese women who increasingly choose to avoid the confines of Japan's marriage and family system.³ According to Japanese commentators, Japanese women are now fascinated both by the notion of romantic love (in a phenomenon now called *ren'ai shijōshugi* or “romance supremacy”) and by hosts themselves who sell romance as their main commodity (Ishizaki and Hamano 1998). While many housewives, office ladies, hostesses, and sex workers go to host clubs for no other reason than to have fun and escape from daily stress, others pursue a fantasy of romance, including sexual encounters. Their romantic aspirations, coupled with the rising commodification of male sexuality in the host club scene, have fostered a new form of intimacy, called *gijiren'ai* (pseudo-romance). As Chapter 13 by Dales suggests, *gijiren'ai* can be seen as yet another way in which Japanese women deploy men as “resources” to create a more woman-friendly lifestyle. As I argue, however, commodified romantic love in host clubs serves as an effective stimulus for women's greater consumption while also reinscribing gendered characteristics and hierarchical relations – paradoxically host clubs underscore the prevailing gender logic in Japan.

Such a paradox is well reflected in media representations. Western media have described the host club phenomenon as “turning the tables on the geisha club concept” and “traditional sex roles” (*Associated Press* 1996; *Marketplace Radio* 2003). In these reports, Japanese women are portrayed as being empowered. Japanese media, however, have represented female customers as the exploited victims of sleazy, manipulative male hosts. Yet neither representation adequately captures the complex relations that take place between Japanese women and their hosts. This is because the manner in which mainstream Japanese media perceive the host club phenomenon is deeply rooted in asymmetrical notions of gender and sexuality. For example, female hostesses are said to enact “natural” sex and gender roles when nurturing and comforting Japanese men. When male hosts play such “female roles,” however, they are perceived as “unnatural” and therefore disingenuous. The widely held assumption is that men go to hostess clubs seeking sex, whereas women's motivations are perhaps less obvious to the public. However, it would be a mistake to assume that the sex roles in host club culture are a simple reversal of sex roles operating at hostess clubs.

Though examining the phenomenon of host clubs against the backdrop of changing, yet still pervasive gender asymmetry in contemporary Japan, this chapter demonstrates how commodified romance in host clubs transgresses while simultaneously reinforcing prevailing gender and sexual inequalities. However, in conclusion, I will suggest how consumption can become a new medium for the subversion of gender-marked heterosexual norms – men as the penetrator and women as the penetrated – operating from within Japan's late-capitalist protocol.

Late capitalism and the supremacy of romance

Japan's postwar social structure centered on the nuclear family as the basic socio-economic unit and promoted a gendered division of labor – that is, men were the breadwinners and women were homemakers and consumers (Amano 1987; Ueno 1994; Dasgupta, Chapter 12 in this volume). Since the 1980s, when Japan's so-called "bubble economy" was in full swing, however, women's lifestyles have changed dramatically. More women were being employed in the newly developing financial, service, and leisure industries and were consequently becoming financially independent. Along with shifts in the economy from production to consumption, increasing numbers of Japanese women started to postpone or avoid marriage, and married women began having fewer children in order to enjoy their increased autonomy and financial independence (Kashima 1989: 103; Iwao 1993: 63; Imamura 1996: 4; Kelsky 2001: 2).

At the same time, a small number of Japanese men began to question their social role as workers/producers through which they were discouraged from expressing their own masculine aesthetic and narcissistic pleasure through consumption (see also Watanabe 1986; Miller 2003). As Chapters 11 and 12 by Taga and Dasgupta show, the bursting of Japan's bubble economy in the late 1980s followed by the great Heisei recession intensified concerns about men's well-being. The severe *risutora* (economic restructuring) fractured the lifetime employment and seniority system, which had long protected the salaried employee in core industries. Attention was drawn to the increase in the numbers of male suicides and *karōshi* (death caused from excessive work) as manifestations of the masculinity crisis that Japanese men were experiencing. In addition, women's increasing avoidance of marriage also created men's *kekkonnan* (marriage difficulties) and further fueled the sense of crisis (Itō 1993).

Such economic and demographic transformations encouraged by Japan's late-capitalism made it difficult for the family unit to maintain its role as a basis for both production and consumption as the individual instead became the iconic model of consumption and heterosexual romance, rather than marriage *per se*, was promoted through the media (Kitano 1991; Yamazaki 1993; Miyadai 1994; Ishizaki and Hamano 1998; Yoda 2000). Young adult fashion magazines, for example, traffic not only in fashion but also dating and romance. Leisure and service industries also intensively promote heterosexual romance through advertisements that feature couples giving gifts on Valentine's Day, sharing romantic dinners on *Christmas Eve* and other *amorous* settings. Pop songs played on trendy TV dramas reinforce the precious Gestalt of romantic love and encourage the listener to share in these feelings. These messages underlie the emerging view that, whether married or not, only a couple in the throes of romantic love is living a meaningful life and that being single is inadequate.

Ishizaki and Hamano point to the intimate connection between the supremacy of romance (*ren ai shijōshugi*) and late-capitalist economics in Japan (1998: 17; see also Kitano 1991). As they illustrate, various aspects of Japan's consumer-oriented economy are invested in promoting romantic relations. Thus, the

promotion of romance does not merely encourage the development of intimate human relations in an age when marriage and family are becoming increasingly unstable and decentered but also serves as a stimulus for greater consumption. Indeed, the host club as a consumer space, where romance is easily obtainable in exchange for money, reflects and intensifies the supremacy of romance in Japan's late-capitalist period, simultaneously catering to the desires of female consumers while profiting the club, the hosts themselves and by extension the Japanese economy. Host club culture offers, I argue, a sort of microcosm of the broader socio-historical context of romance supremacy within late capitalism.

Hosting service in host clubs

Fantasy,⁴ one of the largest host clubs in Kabuki-cho, employing over 90 hosts, is located in a basement and officially opens its doors at 7 p.m., but business really only gets going after 9 and typically lasts until dawn.⁵ Housewives, office ladies, nurses, and college students visit the club in the relatively early hours, and hostesses and sex workers stop by late at night after work.⁶ Outside the building's street-level entrance, a large glass showcase features glossy photos of the club's top-ranking hosts who entice women passing by with their celebrity-like features. Upon entering, the female customer descends into an opulently decorated open set with gold-colored chandeliers, red carpet, mirrored walls, and green faux-leather sofas neatly arranged in rows separated by various objects such as gold-painted sphinxes and lions. The host club, which has no windows, is a totally self-contained space, suggesting to the customer that her everyday life is left outside.

As a customer arrives, hosts greet her with a familiar call of "*irasshaimase*" (welcome). Unless she is a first-time visitor, she designates her own preferred host, who usually comes with four or five "helper" hosts. Once seated, her host starts up a conversation while the helper hosts serve alcoholic beverages in order to lighten the mood and relieve stress and tension. During the conversation, the hosts make sure that drinks are always fresh and food is served on small plates to those sitting at the table. They also offer efficient, highly stylized forms of service. If a woman wears a miniskirt, for example, a host will carefully lay a lace napkin on her lap so that she can relax without worrying about men peeking at her thighs. If she stretches her hand to reach for a cigarette, a host produces the light before she has time to put it into her mouth. Her host also escorts her to the ladies' room and patiently waits outside, ready with a steaming hand towel for when she emerges.

The smooth, glossy, superficial atmosphere derived from the club's décor and the hosts' polished etiquette makes the host club and the people in it seem phantasmal. In addition, every effort is made to construct a fantasy world in which women will willingly spend money to satisfy their desires whether to escape their everyday lives or explore, if only fleetingly, the potential for romance or sex. In terms of appearance, hosts offer a seductive masculine image – slim bodies, salontanned skin, trendy hairstyles and expensive brand suits and accessories. Hosts are good listeners, express sympathy and concern about their clients' everyday

complaints and take time to comfort them. Hosts also respond to customers' romantic aspirations and sometimes submit to requests for more intimate attention, including outside dating and sex.

In return, hosts, as well as the host club, receive money from their customers. The drinks and food are exorbitantly expensive. A bottle of champagne, for example, costs about 40,000 yen (almost 400 US dollars). The cheapest brand of *shochu*, a potato-based liquor, available at most stores for \$7 runs at about \$70 at host clubs. Dishes such as spaghetti, sautéed vegetables and fruit plates cost about \$50 each. Even if a female customer does not drink or eat, she is expected to pay the entire tab for the table and offer tips to the helper hosts. While an average tab at *Fantasy* is about \$400 for a night's worth (an average of two to three hours) of entertainment, a customer can easily spend hundreds more and even thousands of dollars per visit. By paying eight to ten times more than regular prices for drinks and food at the host club, the women customers acquiesce in accepting the value of the service (and romance) hosts provide.

What entices female customers to pay such inflated prices and spend great sums of money at the host club? The media have reported a variety of opinions. For instance, the editor of the monthly *Seiron*, an influential opinion magazine, proposes that hosts manipulate female customers into spending. According to the editor, hosts exploit naïve and vulnerable *shōjo* (female minors), and are nothing more than "lowlifes who prey on women" (*Seiron* 2000). As evidence, the editor writes about a 17-year-old high school girl who was "deceived" by a 20-year-old host into spending two million yen (nearly \$20,000) on him over half a year. Assuming that a high school girl couldn't have such a large amount of cash, the author suspects that her host forced her to work in the Kabuki-chō sex district. Interestingly, the author does not problematize the male-centered sex industry where the female minor was supposedly employed. Instead he posits the hosts as lowlifes and their female clients as victims.

The female customers in host clubs do not think that they are victims, but instead feel that going to host clubs is a personal choice. For example, a 22-year-old college student named Yoko, who is a customer and the "girlfriend" of a host at *Fantasy*, says:

Minors are not supposed to go to host clubs to start with. Apart from high school girls, there are some unwise and irresponsible customers who do not think of their financial capability and let hosts manipulate them. Like any other consumer activity, if you are not a wise consumer, you are easily manipulated into spending. If you know that and keep yourself in control, you can really enjoy host club entertainment.

Although it is expensive to go to host clubs, Yoko and other customers claim that there are few other places in Japan's male-centered entertainment world where women can safely enjoy romantic excitement.

Hosts themselves tend to explain that their stylized behavior, attitudes, and various kinds of "service" are a byproduct of Japan's male-dominated society.

Many hosts I interviewed regard their service as deriving from the Western gentleman's custom of "ladies first," providing women with courtesies not usually forthcoming from Japanese men. A 32-year-old veteran host, Ryū, for example, insists:

Host club culture couldn't exist in the West, where men are genuinely gentle to women and ladies-first services are provided for free. Host clubs can only exist in such a male-dominated country as Japan where men are insensitive to women's psychological needs.

Hence, some hosts posit themselves as "understanding, ideal "gentlemen" by aligning themselves with Western men's supposed chivalry. However, in the terms of this discourse women are once more posited as victims, this time of ordinary Japanese men's insensitive attitude toward women (see Kelsky 2001: 4).

In the above accounts, men see themselves as saviors of women. While conservative, mainstream opinions expressed by such men as the *Seiron* editor seek to rescue women from culturally deviant hosts, the hosts themselves think they are saving oppressed women from the "ungentlemanly" conduct and "insensitive" attitudes of other Japanese men. Clearly, neither perspective challenges the fundamental principles of Japan's male domination or attempts to construct relations of greater gender equality. While the editor of *Seiron* wishes to eliminate the host trade and protect the gender status quo, the hosts themselves depend upon the status quo to maintain their business. Thus, paradoxically, both perspectives support Japan's male-centered social structure.

Women's desires and social contexts

Some might ask: Are the female clients in host clubs really the victims of both social attitudes and the host clubs themselves, as conservative Japanese media and the hosts seem to argue? Or, as Western media and female customers suggest, are these women so empowered financially and sexually that their participation in the host subculture is a sign of liberation? These kinds of either-or questions, however, simplify and overlook the complex and contradictory forces at work on the host club scene.

For example, Megumi, a 31-year-old housewife and part-time worker, visits the host club *Fantasy* once a week in order to recuperate her "lost" feminine attractiveness and self-confidence. Megumi says that once they get married, women in Japan are not treated as individual women. Since her marriage ten years ago, which she insists was based on love, Megumi's husband has recently begun to show less interest in her. Her neighbors, she says, call her the wife of Mr. So and So or the mother of So and So, and she feels as if she has lost her self-identity. Megumi confides:

In the host club, hosts call me by my first name and treat me as an individual woman. They pay attention to what I'm wearing, my hairstyle, my cosmetics,

and give me timely feedback. These comments help motivate me to make an effort to become more beautiful because there's someone who's always caring about me.

Megumi adds, "Re-recognizing my female attractiveness boosts my self-confidence in many ways."

Housewives like Megumi, who actively seek individual recognition in order to avoid being a part of the nameless "wife and mother" collective do not intend to challenge the norms of feminine appearance or overturn the existing gender hierarchy. This is because such a challenge would risk undermining the effectiveness of their feminine performance. In order to experience themselves as feminine and attractive, they need an audience of sensitive yet domineering men. Although the female clients attempt to liberate themselves from the Japanese patriarchal family system which reduces them to their roles as wives and mothers by creating a fantasy world where their unique feminine identity is recognized and cultivated, they also reinforce social norms of ideal feminine appearance. As a result, gender hierarchy is still very much manifest in host clubs, where Japanese women's self-autonomy collides with gender norms that continue to posit women's physical attractiveness as their most important attribute and the need for this attractiveness to be endorsed by an appreciative audience of men.

Hence, despite the symbolic subordination of the hosts manifest in their subservient manner and eagerness to please, gender relations at *Fantasy* are not simply a reversal of those operating at hostess clubs and more widely throughout Japanese society. In addition, gender relations are not static but are transformed as time goes on. One veteran host explains that even though women may appear to have greater power over hosts at the beginning of a relationship, they are eventually undermined. The host comments:

At first, a host obeys his customer in order to be liked, however he will gradually, yet steadily try to shift the power relation once he is assured that she has fallen in love with him. He has to do so in a way the customer does not recognize. A capable host can do so and make his customer willingly provide whatever he wants – money, cars, expensive watches, you name it.

His assessment is supported by female customers such as Nakamura Usagi, a famous writer and host club patron, who reportedly spent 15 million yen (roughly 150,000 US dollars) in 2001 at her favorite host club. In an interview with the *Japan Times*, Nakamura said:

With the host, it starts off with you being the one governing the relationship, but before you know it, he's the one in control. You just don't know when it shifts. The thing is, *if you fall for him, you lose*, because you want to listen to him so he thinks better of you . . . I think that although many customers may feel like an *odajin* (lord) while they're in the club, they are really more like a servant of the host.

(*Japan Times* 2003; emphasis added)

Nakamura suggests that the game of romance, while helping women to rediscover their female attractiveness, eventually leads them to *lose* when they let the host govern the relationship. These accounts from a veteran host and a female patron might seem to reinforce the view that hosts are manipulative and female clients are victims. However, hosts and their clients do not see it this way. Instead, hosts understand women's self-devotion and largesse as a result of women's "motherly instinct," while their female clients explain it as a matter of personal choice.

While feminist scholars have argued that many so-called gender traits are not biological attributes but socially constituted, women's "motherly instinct" is one supposed biological trait that hosts constantly refer to. Reiji, a charismatic 37-year-old host, insists that women's motherly instinct makes them feel good about their devotion to others, in particular the men they love. Technically, once they understand the logic of motherly instinct, Reiji says, hosts can take advantage of it and kill two birds with one stone – customers' satisfaction and hosts' success (Reiji 2001: 108). A typical plot involves a host asking his clients' help to achieve his sales goals; and hopefully, to become a "number one" host at the club. As all hosts know, however, the method of entreaty is the key to unlocking a bounty of riches. Instead of "Please spend more money on me," a host might instead plead, "You are the only woman I can ask. Please help make me a real man" or "Please help me achieve my goal and then I can make you happier." In this way the host thinks that he neither begs nor cajoles his customers but activates their motherly instinct to make the women submit to him voluntarily. Moreover, he avoids *feeling an obligation to return the money they spend on him or guilt about what they may do on his behalf*.

Akemi, a woman in her forties, exemplifies an extreme case of a female customer enabling her host. She divorced her husband of two years after falling in love with a young host and became a sex worker in order to financially support him. She spent over 100 million yen (nearly \$1,000,000) on him over eight years and helped elevate him to the top rank among hosts at his club. When he opened his own host club and broke up with her, she finally realized that their romance was, after all, a pseudo-romance. Because she has spent all her income on the host and has no savings, she still lives in an apartment house and works in the sex industry. Despite these drawbacks, Akemi still believes her spending was justified by the mental support she received and the joyous times she spent with him. She says, "Although I spent so much money on him, he never asked me to do so. I voluntarily did it. I did it in order to satisfy mainly myself. The harder things got, the more love I felt for him and the more strength I felt within myself."

Akemi's understanding of her behavior as a personal choice, as well as the *hosting technique* employed by Reiji to take advantage of motherly instinct, shows how gendered individuals in society utilize and interpret male-centered social situations differently. Whether taking the issue as personal or biological, these views depoliticize socially constructed gender difference. Furthermore, romantic love both veils and privatizes gender hierarchy. In *Ai to shionhugi* (Love and capitalism), a popular novel based on her own host club experience, Nakamura Usagi challenges these views by having the book's male host and protagonist ask

reflexively: "Why do women believe love is something requiring self-sacrifice for others, particularly for their men? Whose value is it?" (2002: 102–103). Nakamura suggests that Japanese society, in which women are evaluated through the success of their men, underlies women's devotion to men. In her interview with the *Japan Times* Nakamura elaborates on the connection between the female clients' devotion for their hosts and the hosts' success in monthly sales competitions, saying:

I always live with anxiety about my position in the world [because] I cannot numerically express my value as a woman, or what I do professionally. So when I entered the [sales competition] game, I was projecting myself onto my host. And when he was moving upward it made me feel as if my own value was rising as well.

(*Japan Times* 2003)

Nakamura deftly captures how male-centered social structures confer a subsidiary status on the value of women and their work. Within such structures women are encouraged to devote themselves to men and live vicariously through projecting themselves onto their men. The gender imbalance at work here is made clear when it is considered how women's self-affirmation through devotion to the hosts in host clubs stands in stark contrast to the manner in which male clients present themselves as "splendid men" in hostess clubs (Yoda 1981: 27; Allison 1994: 24). Psychologist Yoda Akira describes how the male clients of hostess clubs desire to show off their own capabilities as successful and powerful men (Yoda 1981: 27). Unlike the female clientele in host clubs, men who visit hostess clubs expect the hostesses to act as a feminine audience and show great interest in their impressive stories and masculine display rather than project themselves onto their hostesses or enjoy their success vicariously through the success of their favorite hostesses.

Hosting, whether in host or hostess clubs, is a profession that diagnoses the desires of the customer (who is socially situated as a gendered being) and then converts these desires into something tangible and exchangeable for money. At a host club, women may desire a variety of things—ladies-first service, stress relief, special recognition of their self-identity, cultivation of their female attractiveness, and intimate relationships. In order to satisfy their desires, the host club environment provides women with experiences that Japanese society in general fails or refuses to provide. Nonetheless, the environment is also very much embedded in the overall gender hierarchy of society and largely reproduces it. This is because desire, which derives from the frustrations of everyday life, relies on the existing social context for its recognition. In this sense, as Foucault reminds us, "Where there is desire, the power relation is already present" and therefore, total transgression is impossible (1978: 81). Nevertheless, Foucault adds, "where there is power, there is resistance" (ibid.: 95). Since power is not out there to be seized but emerges as it is exercised and negotiated from innumerable points, subversion is possible only from within the power dynamics (ibid.: 93–95; see also Butler 1990:

31; Kondo 1997: 152). The next section considers some transgressive elements of the gendered interactions that take place in host clubs.

Non-penetrative sex

One specific example of how normalized patterns of gender and sexuality can be subverted in the host club environment is the manner in which sexual relations are carried out between hosts and their clients. Female clients demand that hosts maintain an attractive appearance and display a sensitive, caring attitude. As Dales describes in Chapter 13, Japanese women are thinking in increasingly instrumental terms about their own sexual pleasure and it is common for women to expect their sexual partners to have the so-called "3Cs," that is, be "comfortable, communicative, and cooperative" (Miller 2003: 54). Conventional sex discourse in Japan, as in many other cultures, is centered on male erection, penetration, and ejaculation (Segal 1994: 266; Allison 1996: 62). In Japanese, for example, the phrase "saigomade itai" (meaning to "carry on till the end") indicates penetration and by extension ejaculation. Everything else is considered peripheral, or *zengi* (foreplay).⁸ The phrase indicates a male perspective since the "end" envisaged is male and not female orgasm. In short, sex is something that is "done" by men to women, and is always already understood from the male point of view.

Women's sexual dissatisfaction relates not only to men's attitudes about sex but also to the humdrum sexual life that the marriage system unintentionally creates. Tachibana argues that the current marriage system legitimizing sex between couples and promoting it as part of a national project to increase childbirth also provides a sense of security and citizenship. This system, however, has the effect of making sex feel less than exciting and even obligatory. This is because security (*anshin*) and excitement (*kōfun*) are inversely proportional: *anshin* outweighs *kōfun* when sex receives official permission and takes place routinely in the context of marriage. On the contrary, prohibition, illegitimacy, and temporality enhance *kōfun* (Kishida and Takeda 1992: 35; Tachibana 1994: 150; see also Ishizaki and Hamano 1998: 174). Hence, the monogamous marriage and coupling system that aims to limit women's sexual contacts outside of the relationship and to maintain security ironically undermines eroticism and sensual stimuli within the relationship. Likewise, because of their illegitimacy and ephemeral nature, extramarital or unforeseen sexual relations generate increased sexual excitement.

While men (funds permitting) have unfettered access to hostess clubs and the sex trade and therefore do not have to make a choice between sex which is *anshin* or *kōfun*, Japan's double standard in sexual matters requires women to choose one and relinquish the other. Women who have chosen the safety of monogamy are socially validated as faithful wives and girlfriends, whereas those who choose sexual excitement are viewed as promiscuous. Despite these perceptions, many women today seek the excitement of commodified romance so as to revel in feelings of sensual excitement not readily experienced in monogamous relationships.

Women who are dissatisfied with male-centered sex and/or humdrum, secure sex might be able to pursue more reciprocal and stimulating sex in host clubs. While accurate statistics on women who actually have sex with their hosts is unknown, most hosts suggest that more than 80 percent of hosts have had physical relations with their clients and almost all hosts engage in some sort of sensual contact including cheek-to-cheek dancing, touching, exchange of eroticized glances, sexual conversation and kissing. The majority of hosts have also had penetrative sex with some clients. Nevertheless, I want to highlight the occurrence of *non-penetrative sex* as an alternative form of heterosexual practice that takes place in the host club environment.

Akemi, for example, admits that her ex-host often slept with her without sexual intercourse taking place. Akemi explains that hosts are often drunk or so tired after work that they have no energy for sex or have erectile difficulties. She says,

I was rather happy to see such an unostentatious aspect of him because it meant to me that I was special enough to be shown his unperformed self. Because I really loved him, I was very happy just to be in his arms, being kissed and cuddled.

When asked if she was ever sexually satisfied, Akemi answered:

What really matters is not sexual techniques or size of the penis but the affectionate heart and passionate feeling. If you are really passionate about the relationship, just holding hands and cuddling each other gives you an electric pulse you feel in your entire body.

Sachiko, a 46-year-old widow, also stresses such feelings in her ongoing, year-long romantic relationship with Hikaru, a 29-year-old top-ranking host. She admits that she does not have sex with him but believes that he is serious about their relationship. "After all," she says, "sex does not really matter. I guess women oftentimes just want to be held tightly. Affectionate cuddling communicates feelings much better than a fragile physical connection, and satisfies women more holistically." Miki, a 33-year-old divorced mother with two sons who has been involved in a three-year romance with a host, shares Sachiko's view. Miki explains that her marriage became sexless because of her ex-husband's inconsiderate and disinterested attitude toward her. She says that:

[In contrast], my host is a good listener and consultant on personal matters, making me feel that he will always be there for me. This *kimochi* (heart and feeling) is more important than mere physical relations for me. Because of the *kimochi*, even just being touched on the shoulder or kissed on the forehead is very special to me.

Female clients like Akemi, Sachiko, and Miki attempt to cultivate the "3C" – comfortable, communicative, and cooperative – relations with their male hosts.

They emphasize heart and feelings in sexual matters more than sexual technique, penis size or physical intimacy. In addition, they challenge the social perceptions that place some women outside of the category of ideal "woman" based on their age and marital status (see also Dale, Chapter 13). Yet, while they actively undo the conventional understanding of ideal women as young and single and of sex as a heterosexual penetrative act, they simultaneously reinforce the assumption that unlike men, women cannot have sex without love. Some would also argue that these women are simply putting a gloss on their hosts' sexual disinterest and that inevitably this kind of affectionate or passionate feeling will fade away. Indeed, hosts say that ideally they want to make money without having "actual" sex which takes up their time and energy. In this respect, hosts who satisfy their clients with non-penetrative sex might be seen as taking advantage of women's feelings. However, in the end, the hosting business does rely upon satisfying the needs of female customers. Koji, a 25-year-old veteran host who has been a host since the age of 17, uses a common metaphor shared by hosts to explain the kind of service he aims to provide – "*kayui tokoro ni pin-pinto de tega todoku sabisu*," – literally, service that scratches the exact point where the customer feels itchy. The metaphor suggests that even if the customer cannot verbally articulate the exact spot, the host has to locate it and know how it should be scratched.

Although Koji employed the metaphor to explain the hosting service in general, it is also applicable to sexual contexts – even if a woman does not or cannot overtly express where and how she can get pleasure, it is the host's job to intuitively find the right spot(s). When he judges that what she wants is not something he can provide, he has to find something else to substitute so as not to lose her. The customer, too, needs to negotiate with her host if she does not want to dismiss or lose the host. In this respect, romance without penetrative sex is a result of the negotiation between some female clients and their hosts. Female clients like Akemi, Sachiko, and Miki in turn prefer a more communicative and negotiable form of erotic contact rather than mere physical connection and genital pleasure.

Although these women do not overtly overturn the existing male-centered discourse about sex and female passivity in sexual matters, they do challenge the norm and create an alternative paradigm for sexual relations, one that relies on non-penetrative, non-reproductive and negotiable (albeit commodified) sex. Through prioritizing their own physical and affective needs, female customers challenge the manner in which heteronormative sex is tied up with an officially endorsed ideology of national reproduction. Non-penetrative sex is also a challenge to the gendered understanding of heterosexuality – the phallogocentric assumption that sex is something "done" by men to women (Allison 1996: 92). Non-penetrative sex blurs the traditional dichotomy structuring sexual relations in which men are active and dominating and women passive and subordinate. While the multiple heterosexualities which are enacted in the host club environment may not overthrow the wider sex and gender system *per se*, nevertheless the sexual relations encouraged by the host club culture do contest common-sense notions about "good," "normal," and "natural" sexuality which is normally defined as "heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial" (Rubin 1984: 280).

Conclusion: cultural politics as resistance

Alternative, consumer-based forms of romance and heterosexuality, such as those promoted by the host clubs, are often viewed as mere entertainment or escapism. It is claimed that because they do not lead to organized social movements which challenge the status quo there is no real liberation (Saitō *et al.* 2001: 141; see also Miyoshi and Haroutunian 1989). However, this perspective more or less assumes that consumption is a passive affair, foreclosing political possibilities for resistance. It also overlooks the fact that consumption is not simply the activity of buying ready-made commodities and meanings but rather a social enterprise leading to the creation of new markets, the cultural production of new meanings, and the transformation of social values and ethics (Miyazaki 1994; see also de Certeau 1984).

Cultural production is inevitably contradictory, that is, simultaneously contestatory and complicit. It can, however, be more effective than social movements in disturbing the status quo in late-capitalist society, where power, as Foucault argues, is everywhere, not to be seized or overthrown in any one place, but "runs through the social body as a whole" (1978: 94–95; see also Kondo 1997: 184). Because of the decentralized, intangible nature of power relations, subversion is possible only from within, not from outside (Kondo 1997: 152). In this sense, host club culture in Tokyo is both a part of the larger social context and a site where subversion is possible from within Japan's late-capitalist protocol. Its sporadic violation of social assumptions intensifies the transformation of gender characteristics and sexual relations, impacting on the existing heteronormative gender system. In so doing, the host club phenomenon reflects the paradoxes inherent in the rapidly changing, yet still pervasive gender logic at work in contemporary Japan.

Acknowledgements

My research in Japan has been funded by the following grants: Freeman Foundation (June–August 2002); Department of Anthropology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (June–August 2003); NSF (July 2004); and Japan Foundation (August 2004–present).

Notes

- 1 McLelland (2005) describes numerous host clubs where "gay boys" served a clientele of both men and women in the early 1960s. He also points to a few establishments where *dansō no reijin* or cross-dressed female hosts entertained a similarly mixed clientele. In this chapter, however, I focus exclusively on the recent development of *josei senjō hosuto karabu* (host clubs for women only) since the number of such clubs is rapidly increasing and receiving sensational treatment in the media.
- 2 Accurate official numbers are not available. Unofficial estimates suggest that the number of host clubs in Kabuki-chō is 200, employing 5,000 hosts; figures based on Nakatani (2001: 98), as well as information obtained via interviews.
- 3 One of the ways that women attempt to avoid the system is postponing or avoiding marriage and having fewer children. The average age of first marriage, for example,

rose from 24.4 in 1960 to 27.4 in 2003 (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research). Meanwhile, the fertility rate dropped from 2.16 in 1971 to 1.29 children per couple in 2003, a record low.

- 4 My analysis in this chapter is based on archival research and interviews on men's beautification practices conducted in the summer of 2002 and preliminary ethnographic research in the summer of 2003 and 2004 at a Tokyo host club called *Fantasy*. My investigation consisted primarily of participant observation as a researcher, interviewer, and customer in and out of the club; in-depth interviews with dozens of hosts and six customers (a 31-year-old housewife, a widow in her early forties, a 33-year-old divorced woman, a 22-year-old college student, a 26-year-old hostess who used to work in the sex industry, and a sex worker in her mid-forties) and extensive media discourse analysis. All names, including that of the host club, are pseudonyms.
- 5 The current Entertainment and Amusement Trade Law in Japan forbids host clubs to operate between midnight and sunrise in order to eliminate "unhealthy" sexual encounters. Nonetheless, the host business prospers during those illegal hours and silent approval is given by the authorities.
- 6 The majority of female clients in host clubs are hostesses and sex workers who visit after work, i.e., early morning. Therefore, most host clubs open around midnight. *Fantasy* is one of a few host clubs which opens earlier to attract so-called "ordinary women" such as housewives, widows, office ladies, nurses, college students, etc.
- 7 Yoko believes that she is a real girlfriend of her favorite host Takuya; however, other hosts in the club assume that she is a pseudo-girlfriend because if she were a "real" girlfriend, Takuya would not let her come to the club and spend a lot of money on him. In addition, Takuya would not want her to see him flirting with other customers.
- 8 In the sex trade, "honban" (the real thing) refers to vaginal penetration.

References

- Allison, A. (1996) *Permitted and Prohibited Desires: Mothers, Comics, and Censorship in Japan*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- (1994) *Nightwork: Sexuality, Pleasure, and Corporate Masculinity in a Tokyo Hostess Club*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Amano, M. (1987) *Jiritsu shinwa wo koete* (Beyond the myth of independence), Tokyo: Yushindō Kabunsha.
- Associated Press. (1996) "In Japan, host clubs provide women with dream dates," 1 October.
- Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge.
- de Certeau, M. (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Foucault, M. (1978) *The History of Sexuality*, New York: Pantheon Books.
- Imamura, A. E. (1996) "Introduction," in A. E. Imamura (ed.) *Re-imagining Japanese Women*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Ishizaki, M. and S. Hamano. (1998) *Sono otoko de ino?: ai to sei ni tomadou anata e* (Are you really satisfied with that man?: For you who wander in love and sex), Tokyo: Nipun.
- Ito, K. (1993) "Okoroshisa" no yukai: *danseibunka no bunkashakagata* (The future of "masculinity": The cultural sociology of male culture), Tokyo: Shinyōsha.
- Iwao, S. (1993) *The Japanese Woman: Traditional Image and Changing Reality*, New York: Free Press.
- Japan Times. (2003) "Shopping queen shelves host 'illusion'," 12 January.

- Kashima, T. (1989) *Otoko to onna kawaru rikigaku* (Men and women, changing power dynamics), Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.
- Keisky, K. (2001) *Women on the Verge: Japanese Women, Western Dreams*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Kishida, S. and S. Takeda. (1992) *Gen dai Nihonjin no renai to yokubō wo megutte* (About romantic love and desire among modern Japanese people), Tokyo: Besutoserazu.
- Kitano, M. (1991) *Hentai-ron* (Theory of strange love), Tokyo: Meimoru Shuppan.
- Kondo, D. K. (1997) *About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theater*, New York: Routledge.
- McLelland, M. (2005) *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Marketplace Radio. (2003) "Host club in Japan," 3 September.
- Miller, L. (2003) "Male beauty work in Japan," in J. Roberson and N. Suzuki (eds) *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary Japan: Dislocating the Salaryman Doxa*, New York: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Miyadai, S. (1994) *Seifuku shōjotachi no sentaku* (Choices made by girls in their sailor suits), Tokyo: Kodansha.
- Miyoshi, M. and H. D. Harootunian. (1989) "Introduction," in M. Miyoshi and H. D. Harootunian (eds) *Postmodernism and Japan*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mock, J. (1996) "Mother or mama: the political economy of bar hostesses in Sapporo," in A. E. Imamura (ed.) *Re-imagining Japanese Women*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Nakamura, U. (2002) *Aito shihonshugi* (Love and capitalism), Tokyo: Shinchōsha.
- Nakatani, A. (2001) *Hosutō ni manabu 82 no seikahō* (82 successful strategies to be learned from the king of hosts), Tokyo: Sōgohōrei Shuppan.
- National Institute of Population and Social Security Research. (2004) "Heikin kekkon nentei" (Average age of first marriage), "Hikonnritsu" (Non-marriage rate), and "Shushōritsu" (Birth rate). All available online: <<http://www.ipss.go.jp/syoushinka/syindex.htm>> (accessed 10 September 2004).
- Reiji. (2001) *Hosutō no sonokinisensu shinrišenjitsu* (Psychological tactics with which the king of hosts manipulates minds), Tokyo: Seishun Shuppan.
- Rubin, G. (1984) "Thinking sex: notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality," in C. Vane (ed.) *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Saitō, A., T. Mirami and S. Kameyama. (2001) *Otoko wo dakutoikoto* (What it means to make love to men), Tokyo: Asuka Shinsha.
- Segal, L. (1994) *Straight Sex: Rethinking the Politics of Pleasure*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Seiron. (2000) "Henshūcho kara no messeji" (Message from the editor), *Seiron*, March. Available online: <<http://www.sankei.co.jp/pv/seiron/koukoku/2000/0004/message.htm>> (accessed 15 June 2004).
- Tachibana, Y. (1994) *Hontō ni konomama de imo?* (Are you really satisfied with the way it is?), Tokyo: Yamato Shobō.
- Ueno, C. (1994) *Kindaikazoku no seiritsu to shuen* (Establishment and end of a modern nation-state), Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.
- Watanabe, T. (1986) *Datsudansei no jidai: andorofinasu wo mezasu bunmeigaku* (The post-men's age: enlightenment studies for the androgynous), Tokyo: Keisō Shobō.
- Yamazaki, K. (1993) *Danjōron* (Discussion on men and women), Tokyo: Kinokuniya Shobo.

- Yoda, A. (1981) *Otoko ni tote onna towa nani ka* (What does the woman mean to the man?), Tokyo: Nihonjitsungyō Shuppan.
- Yoda, T. (2000) "The rise and fall of maternal society: Gender, labor, and capital in contemporary Japan," in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 99(4): 865-902.

Literature and Society is a series that seeks to demonstrate the ways in which Asian literature is influenced by the politics, society and culture in which it is produced. Titles include:

Chinese Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination (1905–1945)
Haiping Yan
The Body in Postwar Japanese Fiction
Edited by Douglas N. Slaymaker

Routledge Studies in Asia's Transformations is a forum for innovative new research intended for a high-level specialist readership, and the titles will be available in hardback only. Titles include:

1. **Genders, Transgenders and Sexualities in Japan**
Edited by Mark McLelland and Romit Dasgupta
 2. **Developmental Dilemmas**
Land reform and institutional change in China
Edited by Peter Ho
 3. **Japanese Industrial Governance**
Protectionism and the licensing state
Yul Sohn
 4. **Remaking Citizenship in Hong Kong**
Community, nation and the global city
Edited by Agnes S. Ku and Ngai Pun
 5. **Chinese Media, Global Contexts**
Edited by Chin-Chuan Lee
 6. **Imperialism in South East Asia**
'A fleeing, passing phase'
Nicholas Tarrow
 7. **Internationalizing the Pacific**
The United States, Japan and the Institute of Pacific Relations in war and peace, 1919–1945
Tomoko Akami
 8. **Koreans in Japan**
Critical voices from the margin
Edited by Sonia Ryang
 9. **The American Occupation of Japan and Okinawa***
Literature and memory
Michael Molasky
- * Now available in paperback

Critical Asian Scholarship is a series intended to showcase the most important individual contributions to scholarship in Asian Studies. Each of the volumes presents a leading Asian scholar addressing themes that are central to his or her most significant and lasting contribution to Asian studies. The series is committed to the rich variety of research and writing on Asia, and is not restricted to any particular discipline, theoretical approach or geographical expertise.

China's Past, China's Future
Energy, food, environment
Yaclav Smil
Women and the Family in Chinese History
Patricia Buckley Ebrey
China Unbound
Evolving perspectives on the Chinese past
Paul A. Cohen
Southeast Asia
A testament
George McT. Kahin

Genders, Transgenders and Sexualities in Japan

Edited by Mark McLelland and Romit Dasgupta

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO LIBRARY