

Who's That Girl? Lesbian In/visibility in Japanese Society

Research >
Japan

Two of the most commonly asked questions when I first began my research on contemporary lesbian sexuality in Japan were: 'Are there any?' and 'Where do you find them?' These questions emanated from both Japanese and non-Japanese, from academics and non-academics, from men and women, and surprisingly even from Japanese gay men. The common assumption behind these questions was that, for the overwhelming majority of the population, self-identified lesbians did not exist in Japan, or at the very least they did not identify themselves as such in the public domain. This was the scenario up to the mid-1990s and to a large extent it is still the case today, despite the fact that there is a rich modern history of female same-sex desire to be found in Japanese literature and popular culture dating back to the early 1900s.

By Sharon Chalmers

There has been a consistent discourse around female same-sex attraction in Japan, albeit predominantly in terms of negative or unnatural (*fushizen*) desires. This public discussion began with the establishment of public education for girls in the early 1900s and followed through to condemnation of the independent 'new woman' (*atarashii onna*) in the 1910s. At the same time, with the emergence of sexuality discourses there were further outcries as Japanese social critics

denounced the 'masculinization' of Japanese women as represented by the *moga* (modern girl) and the male and female roles (*otokoyaku/musumeyaku*) performed by the all-female Takarazuka theatre troupe throughout the 1920s.

However, during the 1960s and early 1970s, along with massive social, political, and economic changes, a shift occurred that opened up a space for same-sex attracted women to create meeting places outside the privacy of their own homes. These spaces were either in short-lived bars or through meeting circles such as *o-miai*

(arranged meeting) clubs, both of which were primarily based on gendered role-playing. However, there was nothing inevitable or natural about how to behave despite the more commonly held assumptions about what it was to be *tachi* (butch) or *neko* (femme).¹ As one of the women (Fumie) with whom I spoke recounts:

'I was asked for the first time if I was butch or femme. "Dotchi na no?" (Which one?) So I asked: "Do I have to decide?" And the owner of the bar said: "You know, these young people now they don't decide on these things any

more." She complained a bit but didn't force me to say it.'

Gender ambiguity notwithstanding, these spaces did create the beginnings of a new socio-cultural context in which same-sex attracted women could meet each other. And throughout the 1970s more groups began to emerge, such as Subarashii Onna (Wonderful Women). At the same time newsletters also began to be produced and distributed through the *mini-komi* network. *Mini-komi* is a system of distributing informal newsletters – by groups that do not have access or choose not to contribute to the mass mainstream media – that have become quite sophisticated and have wide circulation among various subcultures.

Yet despite this increase in groups, images of 'lesbians' (*rezubian*) in mainstream Japanese culture continued to be centred on the pathological female deviant, represented in the guise of the heterosexualized butch/femme (*tachi/neko*) roles. Alternatively, and more

commonly, the word *rezubian*, or *rezu*, was inseparable from portrayals of female-female sex in androcentric pornography. This left most women who were questioning their sexuality few places to gain information.

These understandings have continued through the 1990s, the association of lesbianism with pornography being widely shared in Japan, amongst heterosexuals and lesbians alike.

Family and freedom

Juxtaposed to the above images is the centrality of being a wife and mother across all social relations. The concept of 'Japanese womanhood' is achieved through the representation of women's activities as concerned solely with 'the Japanese family' through the romanticization and glorification of the ideal of 'motherhood' and the Japanese housewife. This is despite the large increase in married women who work part-time and the significant numbers of women who enter tertiary education. Thus,

notions of the familial nature of Japanese society intersect across many areas of the social, economic, and political life, as shown by the fact that over the past 20 years the government, business sector, and bureaucracy have attempted to re-invent so-called traditional 'family values' as the basic unit of Japanese society.

Within this political milieu it is not surprising that lesbian sexuality has remained largely invisible in mainstream Japan. The Japanese 'gay boom' of the early 1990s did increase the visibility of homosexuality, but the ways in which both women and men were represented remained fixed in the category of voyeurism. While there was some increase in the number of lesbian magazines, due to the lack of resources and the lower wages that women earn, the opportunities for lesbians to produce, distribute, and buy lesbian-focused magazines remain extremely limited.

Yet, no story is ever that simple. On the one hand, as discussed above,

throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s there have been growing numbers of lesbian women who have become more visible, albeit generally still within the confines of the various lesbian scenes that exist throughout Japan. As a result, there now exists a variety of communities, tastes, and politics that one can access, including loose networks that offer various forms of support such as meeting spaces, the *mini-komi* newsletters, lesbian week-ends (which have taken place for over 17 years), various bars, lesbian businesses, lesbian mothers' groups, exhibitions, workshops, and the annual Japanese Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. On the other hand, despite the emergence of these events, for the vast majority of Japanese self-identified lesbians the risks involved in 'stepping out' are still too great, and this is not necessarily a desired goal. Indeed, what would the benefits of 'coming out' be in a society where 'form' holds precedence over 'tolerance' and where knowing

one's place is socially sanctioned?² In some ways and for the moment anyway, the ability of Japanese lesbians to move in and across identities may allow them more space and free them up from an identity politics that tends to demand to know 'who that girl really is'. <

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- 1 'Butch' and 'femme' refer to masculine and feminine women respectively, in lesbian relationships that emphasize gender role-playing.
- 2 For a detailed discussion of the specific conditions under which, in Japan, 'form' takes precedence over 'tolerance', see Sharon Chalmers, *Emerging Lesbian Voices from Japan*, London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon (2002).