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Queer Japanese Identities:
An antidisciplinary approach to constructions of identity in Japan

I call upon here, not only the antidisciplinary paradigm of 'Cultural Studies' but also its approaches to re-evaluate, re-analyse, re-theorise, re-interpret and re-negotiate cultural theory concerning 'Japanese Identity'. To simply ask 'What is Japanese Masculine Identity?' is to miss the point entirely. What remains important, is that outreach to not only theorise and inform, but appreciate the cultural sensitivities involved in the process.

My paper activates this provisional project through an examination of hybrid youth queer subcultures, and their renegotiation of a specifically Japanese hegemonic heteronormativity. Identity and community play an important role in the Japanese context. Both have been a ubiquitous discursive force in the construction and maintenance of queer sites within Japan.

As Zygmunt Bauman aptly stated: " 'Community' is nowadays another name for paradise lost – but one to which we dearly hope to return, and so we feverishly seek the roads that may bring us there." (Bauman 2001, 3) Community is evoked to make us feel that we are a part of something, that we belong. However, substantial theoretical work has been done on the fallacy and hypocrisy of community based relationships. Benedict Anderson's much famed theory into the nation state as an 'imagined community' sheds much needed light onto this imagined political formation. Anderson goes on to argue, "communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined." (Anderson 1983, 17) It is specifically the way in which Japanese queer communities and identities are imagined that activates this examination of Japanese masculinity.

Western conceptions of identity have long remained the unmarked sign of the theoretical world. Dennis Altman recognises this theoretical flaw when he notes, "almost everything written in English assumes the western world as the unstated default model" (Altman 2004, 119). However, Altman goes on to argue in the same sentence that "the growth of gay and lesbian ethnographies actually perpetuates western dominance" (Ibid.). Here, Altman fails to recognise the possibility of a non- anti- or contra-western conceptualisation of 'queer'. While 'influence' may have been a safer terminology, it would be rather easy, and erroneously naïve to assume that non-western cultures unwillingly and unwittingly take in and adopt western modes and models of queer identity construction. Historical reductionisms and cultural essentialisations such as these leave little theoretical room for accounts of marginalised sub-cultural formations.

Before a discussion concerning the ways in which Japanese identities are imagined is embarked upon, a clear framework of reference needs to be established to ensure the same theoretically fallacious assumptions are not made. 'Sexual Identity', as it has become known in the West, has only been synonymous with individual and social identity since the late-nineteenth century. It has now become unconsciously assumed

that "[sexuality] is an integral and important component of self and identity, and yet it perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of self for an individual to express, to explore, and to have positively validated." (McKenna, Green & Smith 2001, 302) However, societies such as Japan have long paid less attention to the identity aspect of same-sex sexual attraction. Firstly, as Dr McLelland has discussed at great length, the vernacular inapplicability of many Japanese and foreign imported words to describe the queer experience in Japan. This is a result of the majority of "terms currently available tend to conflate homosexual attraction with cross-dressing and transgenderism." (McLelland 2000) However, while this may be pertinent to those who make the decision to follow the so-called 'coming out' narrative, negligible research has been conducted concerning those who duck the sociological radar: those who feel no need to 'come out'. In the Japanese context, a clear distinction needs to be made as to the universality of a queer-consciousness. To simply assume that all those who participated in queer-conduct have a queer-consciousness would be a specious conclusion. This conflation, which is often the bedrock of queer theory, is not as unequivocally applicable in the non-Western context. The extraordinarily large population of queer-acting, yet not queer-conscious Japanese is due for particular attention. While the West operates under the assumption that all those who act queer, are queer, the sexological assumption may be more arbitrary than rational. For example, different axioms of heteronormativity are at work in the Japanese context. Japanese masculine sexuality, whilst appearing comparatively fluid from a Western viewpoint, is actually more negotiable. To be more specific, Japanese models of masculinity are founded upon what has been termed the 'salaryman' model. This conflates idealised notions of the masculine figure, "becoming and remaining the *'daikokubashira'* (main pillar) provider and head of the family and household" (Robertson 2003, 129). Whilst this may appear as nothing extraordinary in contrast to the Western masculine equivalent, the difference lies in what is not being said. The fact is, there is significantly less emphasis placed on masculine sexuality being as strictly heteronormative as what is found in Western models. The emphasis in the Japanese identity model lies in the kinship structure as a whole, sexuality is a mere by-product of this consanguineous construction (McLelland 2000). McLelland and Robertson both highlight this contesting, "as long as an individual's sexual practices do not interfere with or challenge the legitimacy of the twined institutions of marriage and household, Japanese society accommodates – and in the case of males, even indulges – a diversity of sexual behaviours." (Robertson quoted in McLelland 2000) Whilst heteronormativity is still assumed as the most prolific discursive constraint, there remains a space for negotiation to take place.

From this point, a discussion surrounding what could be termed 'identity-appeasing' circumstances will be considered. This stems from the perception that while one aspect of an individual's identity is successful and fulfilling, certain other aspects may be left unfulfilled in exchange. For example, a man may have a very successful job, a wife who he cares and provides for. A family that, whilst existing around him, always remains prioritised behind the ever-important workplace. Up until the 1990s, this could very easily be an applicable descriptor for many Japanese men working the economic dream-machine that was post-war Japan. Full and unquestioned loyalty to one's company provided the perfect identity-appeasement that an individual could desire. In this case, identity and community worked concurrently to satisfy both the 'belonging' criterion of community, and the sense of self provided by identity. Bauman theorises this symbiotic relationship more specifically by stating:

> *The idea of 'identity' was born out of the crisis of belonging* and out of the effort it triggered to bridge the gap between the 'ought' and the 'is' and to lift reality to the standards set by the idea – to remake the reality in the likeness of the idea. (Bauman 2004, 20)

The idea, or more appropriately ideal, that identity was moulded from was that prescribed by the state. The overlapping discourses of sex, gender and nationality should not be overlooked here. The sanctioned Meiji civil code dictating women be 'Good Wives, Wise Mothers' (Robertson 1999, 5), directly corresponded to men being "strong and tough and encouraged to have control and dominance over women." (Sugihara & Katsurada 1999, 635) This traditional framework of gender division managed to keep Japanese masculine identity construction under close governmental control. The collapse of the Japanese economic bubble in the early 1990s hit Japan like an ideological earthquake.

> A number of 'shocks' have buffeted Japan in the 1990s, including the collapse of the bubble economy, major currency fluctuations, a prolonged recession, the Great Hanshin (Kobe) Earthquake, scandals involving leading politicians, bureaucrats, and corporations, the Aum Shinrikyo cult gas attacks, and increased violence and drug-related crime. These have affected the very cohesion that helped Japan achieve economic success in the post war period, eroding self-confidence and leading to reflection on the state of society. (East Asia Analytic Unit 1997, 15)

The once glorified, idealised and powerful 'salaryman' as the centre of Japanese masculinity began to see cracks forming in the desexualised, but highly structured kinship formations we see in traditional Japanese society. As James E. Robertson proves when he discusses different class-based inequalities within Japan, "most Japanese people (white- and blue- collar) are in fact not employed by larger corporations but by medium-small enterprises. Some 70 per cent of all Japanese employees are employed by firms with fewer than 100 workers, 50 per cent by firms with 30 or fewer employees." (Robertson 2003, 128-129) This highlights the fact that while the ideal image of Japanese masculinity was the 'salaryman' working for a large corporate conglomerate, the reality was somewhat different. This, along with an ever competitive job market, traditional strongholds such as 'lifetime employment' and 'age vs. salary' employment schemes being faded out, the once glorified norm of Japanese economic success is itself being problematised. The 'salaryman' identity was no longer ideologically watertight. It leaks discontent, displeasure, frustration and dissatisfaction.

Lars Dencik theorises this disenfranchised identity phenomenon as such:

> Social affiliations – more or less inherited – that are traditionally ascribed to individuals as a definition of identity: race … gender, country or place of birth, family and social class are now … becoming less important, diluted and altered, in the most technologically and economically advanced countries. At the same time, there is a longing for, and attempts to find or establish new groups to which one experiences belonging and which can facilitate identity-making. (Dencik quoted in Bauman 2004, 24)

Whilst Dencik was writing from the Scandinavian experience, the same could be applicable to the Japanese 'salaryman'. The question thus remains, is there a link between the movement away from the 'salaryman' as the exalted masculine identity, and the movement towards more western constructions of sexual identity with it's 'coming out' narratives and 'Pride Parades'? A closer examination of the

communities reveals the warm, cosy and comfortable place that was the democratic nation state has seen the so-called rug pulled out from under it. Capitalist democracies rely on, above all, economic success as its primary goal and driving force. When this begins to show cracks at the seams, so too does the 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983) that it facilitates.

The Japanese capitalist nation state was failing to provide the stable, safe environment that it once did. Citizens were turning to other aspects of their life(style) to invoke that sense of community. Possibly, for many same-sex attracted individuals, that attraction provided the opportunity to venture outside the (now burst) economic/hegemonic bubble. A new sense of security and comfort was sought and found in the 'queer community'. Although, once again, it is important to stress that this sociological phenomenon did not develop and mature in the same way 'queer communities' were developing in the West.

Unlike the West, the Japanese Society of Psychiatry and Neurology only removed homosexuality from the list of mental diseases in 1995 (Kazama & Kawaguchi 2003, 180). Combine this with Japan's nonexistent anti-homosexuality laws and one could understand why there is no perceived need to form communities around the common goal of emancipation. The deterioration of the 'salaryman' as a representational discourse, combined with bourgeoning of a multitude of masculine identities, resulted in a diaspora of queer sites throughout Japan. While Western queer communities were based on shared goals, Japanese queer sites allowed and encouraged a fluid and transgressional participation of its population. To gain insight into this queer-participatory, Internet studies have proven effective yardsticks to relative involvement in queer activities.

The Internet, due to its endemic popularisation, has spawned a whole raft of web-based sites for a multitude of queer-related purposes. However, what may seem like a tool to access and exchange with the globalised queer world at large, the fact remains that "material written in Japanese is generally accessible only to Japanese people themselves" (McLelland 2003, 52). This corresponds to the Japanese Internet being extremely introverted, in the global sense. Despite this, the Japanese Internet is thriving with queer sites, very few of which have been paid any significant academic attention. I wish to break these (web)sites up into two main categories, 'deai' (encounter, meeting) sites and community based sites.

'Deai' sites have come about predominantly due to the integration of Internet technologies into the 3G CDMA mobile phone platform. This has essentially mobilised the internet to an even greater extent and given access to a wider population base. 'Deai' sites operate when an individual places a so-called 'personal advertisement' onto the 'keijiban' (bulletin board) requesting anything from a one-time sexual encounters, boyfriends, friends, to someone to go to the 'sento' (public bath) with. One particular site has recorded over 52 million hits, with almost 100,000 in one day. This may give some idea of the scale to which these sites are being accessed. As these sites offer avenues to form communities, they are a discrete, yet easily accessible way to make queer associations. The fact that a man can access the internet from his mobile phone, arrange to meet someone for sex/friendship/company is further facilitating the negotiable nature of Japanese sexuality. Although perhaps notably, questions need to be asked as to why there is a perceived need to be discreet,

it does accommodate the traditional Japanese demands for quick and easy accessibility.

Secondly, and due of just as much critical attention is the recent rise in popularity of community based websites. In particular, the 'mixi' (www.mixi.jp) website, whilst not specifically gay, has a reportedly high proportion of queer-participants. This site, even though it can also act as a place to meet sexual encounters/partners/gay friends, it is different in that it has much more than the traditional 'stats' (or statistics). It is furnished with photos, hobbies, work, interests etc and as a result one's sexuality becomes intermingled in the sea of other identity traits. So whereas the global-gay-megasite 'Gaydar' places itself firmly against global heteronormativity, 'mixi' operates ideologically somewhere in between. It also remains acutely pertinent to note that these websites are almost exclusively used by youth, and does show the underlying cultural sentiment towards queer lifestyles, indifference.

Essentially, indifference is a theoretically unsatisfying conclusion to arrive at. While queer characters are given limited representation in the mainstream media, "the homosexual man is still represented in 'feminine' terms although he is received not so much with sympathy as irony and humour." (McLelland 2000) Theorists of Japanese culture have usually swung either on the side of Japan's lack of awareness and visibility of queer, or the ill-needed fight for queer rights. It may superficially appear a satisfactory response considering the anti-discrimination movements fighting anti-homosexuality laws in the West. However, indifference is the sociological equivalent to invisibility. It also stands against any solid identity and community formation that may tend to emerge. The scattered, disenfranchised and fragmented identity constructions could be seen as a result of this indifference.

Indifference may, however, be the starting point to re-evaluate, re-analyse, re-theorise, re-interpret and re-negotiate queer Japan. Cultural theorist Brabazon postulates:

> To transform cultural studies into a discipline makes it look inward for answers, rather than outward for interesting questions and connections. Cultural studies offers an imagining space – suggesting what the world could be like. By actively seeking out the moments of disruption, struggle and ambivalence in everyday life, cultural studies continues to renew itself and maintain relevance. (Brabazon 2000, 86)

Does this indifference, however, equivocate what queer Japan wants. At this point, identity politics come into significance. Identity, "is revealed to us only as something to be invented rather than discovered; as a target of an effort, 'an objective'; as something one still needs to build from scratch or to choose from alternative offers and then to struggle for and then to protect" (Bauman 2004, 15-16). The question in Japan's case is whether sexuality can account for a queer-based identity. Japanese societal indifference to queerness can be met with either acceptance or resistance. Further critical research into the burgeoning net-based sites of resistance and acceptance are needed to track the conflicting and often contradictory tropes of queer masculinity in contemporary Japan.

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