



Male Colors: The Construction of Homosexuality in Tokugawa Japan

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Tokugawa Japan ranks with ancient Athens as a society that not only tolerated, but celebrated, male homosexual behavior. Few scholars have seriously studied the subject, and until now none have satisfactorily explained the origins of the tradition or elucidated how its conventions reflected class structure and gender roles. Gary P. Leupp fills the gap with a dynamic examination of the origins and nature of the tradition. Based on a wealth of literary and historical documentation, this study places Tokugawa homosexuality in a global context, exploring its implications for contemporary debates on the historical construction of sexual desire.

Combing through popular fiction, law codes, religious works, medical treatises, biographical material, and artistic treatments, Leupp traces the origins of pre-Tokugawa homosexual traditions among monks and samurai, then describes the emergence of homosexual practices among commoners in Tokugawa cities. He argues that it was "nurture" rather than "nature" that accounted for such conspicuous male/male sexuality and that bisexuality was more prevalent than homosexuality. Detailed, thorough, and very readable, this study is the first in English or Japanese to address so comprehensively one of the most complex and intriguing aspects of Japanese history.

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Richard says

Not many scholarly works read well, but this one does. Even if you are not a student of Japanese history and culture, "Male Colors" is a pleasure. Yes, there are sections with a lot of Japanese names (particularly when the author cites a string of sources), but by and large, this work is very accessible to us mere mortals who are interested in the history of same-sex love.

Initially, as the author describes, same-sex love in Japan was something practiced by elite groups: first the Zen Buddhist monks who are believed to have imported the practice from China (a curious notion because this also carries the connotation that homosexuality came from "some place else") and then the samuri elite. While factors such as the lack of eligible women may have contributed to the general acceptance of bisexuality, many, if not most, of the practitioners of nanshoku had deep emotional ties to their partners. But as urban life began to grow, nanshoku was popularized through a combination of the kabuki theater and the commercial sex enterprises that cropped up.

Also interesting were all the examples of art depicting nanshoku, some of it quite ribald and most of it graphic. But that just lends more weight to the notion that there was no stigma attached to boy love during this period in Japan, at least not a universal stigma; it was quite nearly universally tolerated and any effort to control nanshoku usually was to control violent fights over popular boy prostitutes rather than a governmental decree against homosexual sex.

The book is heavy on male sexuality with little mention of lesbianism, but that's hardly a surprise considering most cultures tend to be strongly patriarchal and it is the men who record history. And as usual, it appears that it was through contact with the West, particularly with Christian missionaries, that the practice of nanshoku was eventually shunned into the crepuscular corners of Japanese culture. More evidence that if there is harm caused by same-sex activity, the harm is caused by a prudish societal mentality originating in a rigid Judeo-Christian ethic that thrives on domination and guilt.

shuya says

well written, the reading is easy. Interesting, but to be read with a knowledge of Edo-period Japan because some details are not exactly true or are vague. But as a student of Japanese culture and history I did learn many things and the bibliography is also very interesting.

Christopher says

Fascinating look at a very seemingly recent controversial subject. The history in this book is at times unbelievable but always revelatory. Just incredible.

khordofon says

É curioso ver o que o autor considera "homossexualidade" -- ele mesmo diz com todas as palavras que o Japão da época Tokugawa era basicamente bissexual, então acho que, talvez, "a construção da bissexualidade masculina" ou "a construção do amor entre homens" coubesse melhor ao título.

Porque toda a construção social aqui gira em torno da bissexualidade, e de uma bissexualidade muito específica: uma com rapazes jovens como objeto de desejo e da mulher como esposa; depois de certa idade era incomum que esses rapazes (agora homens feitos) fossem desejados por outros homens. Em vez disso, era eles que desejavam -- e também procuravam esposas, criando uma situação em que um homem casado poderia, ainda assim, buscar rapazes mais jovens em prostíbulos ou companhias de teatro (mas isso também era questão de idade: depois de certa idade, ficava esquisito para o homem buscar homens mais novos).

Gostei muito do livro em especial no começo e no fim: no começo ele fala um pouco de relacionamentos entre samurais, que tinham como objeto de desejo não o jovem crossdresser, mas sim o jovem guerreiro; no fim ele fala bastante de questões de gênero e sexualidade no geral, sobre como a androginia era muito cotada -- a ponto de, além de existirem homens prostitutas que se vestiam e agiam como mulheres, também existirem mulheres prostitutas que se vestiam e agiam como homens --, sobre como o Japão mudou sua visão da sexualidade quando tentou imitar os países ocidentais, por aí vai. O meio me entediou um pouco, já que foca muito na questão da prostituição. Mas é um bom livro, e realmente queria que a parte final fosse mais explorada em vez de sabermos sobre mais exploits e confusões da pesada porque um maluco queria muito muito um ator-prostituto e (deu polícia)...

Nicole says

A great book if you are interested in sex and society in Japan. It predominately looks at the acceptance of homosexuality in Japan throughout history, tracing its origins in earlier historical eras through the pre-modern through laws, literary sources, and art and explaining its patterns within different segments of society. I found it totally intriguing, since I already like the subject, and the frequent use of woodblock prints to support his argument is great, though possibly not for those prone to blushing at explicit pictures. There are a few minor areas in which I question his conclusions, but in general I felt his argument fits well into the wider scholarship, and his questions are insightful. He does do a little bit of comparison with other societies, but as he is a Japanese historian rather than a scholar of gender and sexuality, he limits those moments. He also uses Japanese terms when he feels an accurate translation is lacking, but not to an annoying extent, and overall I felt his writing style was quite readable rather than full of dense language.

David says

Interesting! There's this weird thing that no one seems to know why there's no evidence of man-on-man oral sex. We know men did it to women, women did it to men, women did it to women ... we know that when men were having sex with each other, one would often play a female role ... and since women did perform oral sex on men, it seems reasonable to assume that they would ... but, apparently, it never happened and we don't really know why.

Two old gays' advice to their young married neighbour:

""Beat her to death, mister, and replace her with a sandal-boy!""

Christopher says

Well written, with a sense of humor and an ability to find the best quotes and passages in order to explain an era of bisexuality which far surpasses that of our own self-congratulatory time.

Mrs. Fujiwara says

And so today I finished reading carefully yet another thesis for my MA. It had been quite a while since I've done that to a book on Japanese studies because I was dedicating myself into analyzing works about the Jesuits in Brazil. But things happened in the meantime and probably up until the end of the year I'll be able to do what I like the most: to study about Japan's culture alone and deeply. By reading these studies I always find something new that raises up my researcher spirit. It was the case with this book, of course. I remember telling my Mentor a couple of years ago that it would be important for my theme to understand Japan's sexuality during medieval times because of the impression it let upon Christian missionaries in the XVI century. This work just proves it. With amazing writing skills the author unfolds to the reader the importance on nanshoku - male-male sexual relationships - in Japan during the Tokugawa rule without forgetting to trace its older origins. To those familiar with the theme or with Dover's works on the subject, he compares the importance of it to Japan's society with that of paiderastia in Ancient Greece. Based on Japanese sources as well as great western studies and literary narratives, the scholar details intimate preferences - like their love for youths and effeminate kabuki actors - proving that it was not only common among monks and warriors but also a widely accepted practice, tolerated by authorities and exalted by famous figures such as the poet Basho. The greatest surprise to me, however, was his proving a point I've thought about in the beginning of my own studies, many years ago. When I read "Ugetsu Monogatari" by Ueda Akinari (thank you dear Duda!) for the first time, I saw in the story called "Kikura Chigiri" (The Chrysanthemum Vow) not only a perfect example of the partnership idealized by Japanese men in medieval times, but also the importance of intimate and sexual relationships amongst them. What was my surprise, then, when I saw Mr. Leupp analyzing this particular tale and informing us that the word "kiku", Chrysanthemum, was not only a representation of the imperial family, but also an important symbol of nanshoku itself. Of course I was delighted to see that my ideas were going the right way even back when I was still at the University! With this satisfied feeling all over now I'll put aside for a while these readings about male relationships (because too much of the same thing is boring) and read something else, probably reread the first volume of one of the greatest western works on Japanese culture while savoring a nice cup of jasmine flavored green tea.
