

# From Samurai to Capitalist: Male Love, Men's Roles, and the Rise Of Homophobia in Japan

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Within the last decade, scholarly study of the acceptance of homosexual behavior in many non-Western cultures has advanced considerably. Building upon Gilbert Herdt's (1981, 1984) pioneering fieldwork in New Guinea and my own study (1992) of the American Indian berdache alternative gender roles, the most recent research has focused upon Asia. Paul Gordon Schalow has translated Ihara Saikaku's (1990) 17th century literary masterpiece on male-male love in Japan. Books by Serena Nanda (1990) on India, Bret Hinsch (1990) on China, Peter Jackson (1989) on Thailand, Stephen O. Murray (1992) on the Asian-Pacific islands, and my recent work (1991) on Java, have all helped to fill out our knowledge of male homosexuality in these lands. Unfortunately, only a few essays have focused on homosexuality among women; a major study on lesbianism in non-Western cultures remains to be done.

Tsuneo Watanabe and Jun'ichi Iwata's *The Love of the Samurai* (1989) attempts to cover the history of male-male love in Japan from the 16th to the 20th centuries. Besides sexuality, their work tells us a lot about masculinity and homophobia. Sometimes patterns in our own society become more clear when analyzed from the perspective of a different culture. Watanabe offers an interesting argument that men in modern societies have given up "the right to be feminine." In contrast to pre-modern Japan, where males who dressed as women in *kabuki* theater were honored, and where even samurai warriors wore makeup and dressed androgynously, 20th century Japanese men have adopted the Western view that only women are supposed to exhibit beauty. Men are told that they should *possess* what they want (i.e., a beautiful woman), rather than to be beautiful themselves. This transformation of beauty into a feminine attribute "is in reality a limitation or reduction of the domain of masculinity itself.... [It is] the body itself which modern civilization refuses to allow to men ... and demands of men that they be only an active, invisible and disembodied spirit" (p. 130). Modernization has meant that men have had to renounce androgyny. Watanabe sees an

unconscious desire of many men to break out of this increasingly restricted masculine role, which explains the anxiety that "normal" men have about transvestites and gays: "What they see in 'perverts' with so much aversion is the external projection of their own self-image" (p. 128).

Watanabe concludes that homophobia arises from a detest of the notion that a man would offer himself "as a beauty ... as a passive object of desire" (p. 131). Yet, the impact of gay liberationist ideology is beginning to challenge this. By making androgyny more socially acceptable, he suggests, gay liberation can help all men in reconnecting with their full human potential. Just as lesbians have greatly aided all women through their activist contributions to the feminist movement, "male homosexuality, too, will be an essential catalyst in the development of all men, helping in the re-erotization of the male body" (p. 135).

In order to help develop this re-erotization of the male body, Watanabe has provided an overview of the history of male homosexual attractions in Japan. The earliest Christian missionaries in Japan reported in horror the widespread social acceptance of male-male sex, especially among Buddhist monks. With Buddhism not being condemnatory toward homosexuality, and with male monks being prohibited from even touching a female, it is not surprising that same-sex relationships were common. Demographic factors also played a role. Unlike Europe, whose population had been reduced by numerous plagues, witch-hunts, wars, and massacres of dissenters, and which encouraged procreation in order to produce soldiers and settlers for its expanding colonial empires, Japan was a non-expansionist island with limited space. As population numbers reached an optimal point for the land available, there was pressure to reduce population growth. Abortion, infanticide, and non-reproductive forms of sexual expression were demographically useful means of keeping the population stable.

In this context, a Jesuit missionary wrote about homosexuality, "Nobody, neither man nor woman, young or old, regards this sin as abnormal or abominable; this sin is well known among the bonzes [Buddhist monks], and is even a widespread custom amongst them" (p. 20). Another missionary wrote about the monks: "The abominable vice against nature is so popular that they practice it without any feelings of shame. They have many young boys with whom they commit wicked deeds" (p. 20). Each monk was assigned a boy (age 10 - 17) as his pupil, and many of these teacher-student pairs became lovers.

The Mahayana Buddhist *Rishu-kyo* sutra states, "Voluptuousness is pure ... desire is pure ... physical pleasure is pure.... All creatures are in essence pure" (p. 46). Since the body was not despised, as in Christianity, but was seen to be sacred, the sexual act was considered the holy union of two bodies (p. 44). Monks wrote numerous poems of love expressed toward their

student/boyfriend, and this intimate loving relationship underlay the Buddhist system of education.

A number of novels, from the 14th century onwards, show that boy-love was commonly accepted in other areas of society as well. By the 15th and 16th centuries, Japan entered a long period of civil conflicts among *samurai* warriors. Each samurai took a pubescent boy as a page and assistant, and many of these *wakashu* youths became the lovers of their adult samurai sponsors. Since the samurai trained his *wakashu* to become a samurai (by about age 23), this homosexual relationship also fulfilled an educative function similar to the teacher-student Buddhist tradition.

Under the shoguns a new art form emerged which celebrated male beauty. In 1374 an eleven year old boy dancer became the lover of the shogun, and under the shogun's loving patronage he became a genius playwright and founder of the *No* theater for the shogun's court. *Kabuki*, another form of dance that was originally performed by women, after 1629 became popular when young men performed while dressed as women. Many of these male actors took men as lovers, and started dressing in women's clothes in daily life, not just on stage. Transvestism entered Japanese popular culture through *Kabuki*, and grew to represent traditional Japanese culture in the full flower of its civilization.

Shogun Tsunayoshi (ruled 1688-1703) was so fond of homosexuality that he kept about 150 young male concubines in his palace. He educated them, and some of them later became leading government officials. As male love became more popular among the noble classes, and spread among the merchants and commoners as well, the authors conclude that 17th and 18th century Japan was a "Golden Age of homosexuality" (p. 88). The book's numerous illustrations of man-boy sexual and emotional interactions perfectly demonstrate the authors' points. Still, for most men their sexuality was bisexual rather than homosexual or heterosexual. As in ancient Greece, mature men were expected eventually to take a female wife and produce offspring. Despite this bisexual ideal, some men continued their sexual relationships with males (not to mention monks, who never married), giving evidence of a life-long homosexual orientation among some.

This social acceptance changed in Japan after 1868, when the Meiji restoration government embarked upon a strict course of Westernization. Influenced by Christian missionaries and Japanese intellectuals who were impressed by the West, the Meiji government began repressing Buddhism, and also passed a law against sodomy. However, Watanabe argues that capitalism, rather than Christianity *per se*, exerted the biggest influence against homosexuality. As industrialization revolutionized Japan, and brought the need for more population to provide a growing labor force, a new repression emerged against non-reproductive forms of sexuality. Once Japan embarked

on an expansionist military policy after 1900, even more people were needed to man the armies and navies, and to staff the large economic and political bureaucracies necessary for administering an empire. Just as had earlier happened with expansionist industrial capitalist governments in Europe and the United States, Japan rejected its sexually-diverse heritage in favor of pro-natalist and anti-homosexual policies imported from the West. The requirements of being a good citizen in an expansionist capitalist state meant the necessity of producing more children to add to the growing work force.

These economic factors, plus continued Western influence, explain homophobia in contemporary Japan. However, for the pre-modern era this book demonstrates that Japan deserves to be ranked, along with the cultures of ancient Greece and the American Indians, as one of the world's most important examples showing how a society can incorporate male homosexuality into the core of its social organization. As more research is being done, and more examples of such societies are being uncovered, it is not homosexuality that is abnormal in human behavior but homophobia.

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