Queer Spaces and Identity in Premodern and Modern Japan

Pyokyeong Son

Politics of Sexuality

Dr. Rachel Gelfand

24 Apr 2024

A standard Western perspective of sexuality and queer identity is to view it as a personal, yet socially active political identity, backed theoretically by critical thought. Queer activism in the United States, the context in which most of queer theory is formulated, is rich with examples of heroic activism, pioneering individuals, advocacy organizations, and academics that formalize it all; it is still, however, as Frederik Jameson might call, "the 'emotion' of great historiographic form"—a convenient narrative that homogenizes and reifies the myriad experiences of queer people not just in the U.S., but worldwide (Jameson via Chu, 87). Queer individuals have existed throughout history in various cultures, and the specific strain of queer theory originating in Western society is merely a limited set of struggles outlined by the suffering queer people in the U.S. have undergone, against the repressive dominance of initially religious, then capitalistic, and finally legal systems that emerged throughout modern history; it is not my intention to diminish these experiences. Instead, I aim to enrich the diversity and nuance of the queer experience by incorporating the experiences of Japanese queer people throughout its own extensive history, and by adjusting the focus of queer theory not only on the intersection of race, but also of ethnicity and culture—after all, Japan has been referred to by Western and Central Asian countries as the *Far* East, and I find it reassuring to find, in this culture, ample evidence of queer spaces incompatible with Western thought. This inclusion of Eastern experiences is analogous to the "struggles of the proletariats of different countries, and bring forth the common interests of the entire proletariat." Indeed, for the disenfranchised, "every class struggle is a political struggle." (Marx, 15, 11)

Western imports of queer activism have indeed done well in Japan; Tokyo's pride parades are longer and more extravagant than ever, international pressure on stagnant policy and law affecting queer people has materialized and filtered down to everyday life, and there are more spaces than there have been—compared to early modern history—for queer people, albeit under borrowed nomenclature—ge'i (gay, ゲイ), Bi'an (ビアン, lesbian), or toransu (トランス, trans). However, this critical, antagonistic, and separatist view is limiting within the context of Japanese culture, as Japanese psychologist and sociologist Doi Takeo suggests: "In the West with its

emphasis on the freedom of the individual, people have always looked down on the type of emotional dependency [in Japanese society]." (Doi, 85). In a society of homogenization, collectivism, and coordination, separatist thought can offer little for true acceptance of the marginalized; “queer-ness” is formulated less into individual identity and more into the spaces one inhabits, in a society where identity arises within the collective. To reject mainstream identity in Japan is to reject one's national and cultural identity; to sever ties within one's family is to sever ties with all of society—an isolation whose degree is greater than what one may experience in the U.S: Doi suggests that the Japanese nation is a family form, with "The Imperial family [serving] as a kind of substitute for the public spirit in the West-ern sense before the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution." (Doi, 59)

It is not a Japanese queer person's goal to separate, but to assimilate into society, and in the process, to preserve and formulate their identity in a way that harmoniously interacts with the general public. It is helpful that no cultural or religious baggage exists in Japan that directly opposes queerness, and as Mitsuhashi suggests, it is a " European invention, imported without judgment" during the Meiji reformations. Thus it would be the goal of queer activism in Japan not to fight against a historically sparse religious, cultural, and historic oppression of queer people, but instead fight to end the irresponsible import of Western legal and linguistic tools by mainstream Japanese society, without consideration of the context in which it is deployed. In that spirit, I argue in this essay that (1) Japanese pre-modern history is ripe with queer social spaces that have a distinct character from Western spaces as ("structured camaraderies") but instead as social institutions that functioned as a critical part of mainstream culture. (2) I further argue that using Western language of individual identity not only fails to model the struggles a modern Japanese queer person has but actively harms efforts of queer people's livelihoods and happiness. Rather than considering the ultimate goal of queer activism as to construct queer spaces based on identity, I argue how the creation of collective spaces within and around mainstream culture assists the creation of individual queer identity in Japanese society, and the future direction it will take.

I

Japan has a history of embracing queer subjects within essential cultural spaces. The first takes the form of kabuki (歌舞伎, musical-like performance during Edo) performers—all male performers some of whom cross-dressed for female roles—and their peripheral sex work culture, and the second of transgender (or cross-dressing) individuals in religious ceremonies. Throughout the Edo period, we observe a description sexual desires broadly categorized as "joshoku (女色), when the object of male sexual desire is towards female, and danshoku (男色) when towards another male." In numerous artistic depictions of sex work and play (including the famous gabu-yuenzu-byoufu (歌舞遊宴図屏風, a wall painting depicting post-kabuki play)) there are two distinct spaces of sexuality which a single *man* (only gender which records remain) can both harbor—of desiring a man or a musume (daughter). Note that musume is a term used to describe not necessarily a daughter but *femininity*—a man may perform in kabuki (a kagema), or engage in sex work dressed up femininely, who would be a feminine male or a musume—this is mirrored in the modern term of otokono-ko, (equivalent to femboy in Western cultures) where ko is a homograph of musume. It is important to emphasize that harboring desires of danshoku is not considered an identity or an action, but only of desire and emotion, and was never used to circumscribe one's sexual identity: "the world of jyoshoku and danshoku were equally proportioned in the painting [of gabu-yuenzu-byoufu]—may not that be a reflection of society of the time?" (Mitsuhashi, 9). This is mirrored in modern Japan, as Doi describes; when constructing a sociological account of the evolution of homosexual behavior in Japan, he define t "homosexual feelings" as "referring to here are not homo-sexuality in the narrow sense […] of sexual attraction and the inclination to sexual union between members of the same sex, but [to] cases where the emotional links between members of the same sex take preference over those with the opposite sex" (Doi, 112). Doi equivalently laments that "it is true that in recent years Japan has come increasingly to resemble America in this respect, but the old tendency would still seem to persist in large measure." Through the lens of amae (甘え, dependence) we observe

homosexuality to consist of emotional dependence, rather than sexual attraction, in Japanese society, and this tendency persists to its modern instantiations in Japan, as we will see below.

Adopting Mitsuhashi's typology of the desire of danshoku in Edo based on the object of desire, there are four categories of sexual behaviors: (1) large age difference, with femininity (2) without femininity, (3) small age difference, with femininity, and (4) small age difference, without femininity. The Mitsuhashi considers (4) as purely a "modern formulation in which a man loves another man without performance, exemplified in nicho-me's gay town" (Mitsuhashi, 91), and while acknowledging that "this may have happened [in Edo] between men out of desire," noting "there was no socially available space in which it was systematized." (Mitsuhashi, 63). Indeed the sexual desires of danshoku were that more of difference and contrast—whether that be between a feminine and masculine man, an old and young man, or commonplace heterosexual sex and performance and surreality. A man who cross-dresses during sex or performance was not considered a homosexual—there was no word describing it—, but that they are objects of danshoku, a form of desire.

The spaces that accommodated these individuals were prevalent within society: kagema-chaya (tea houses of kagema), in which kabuki performers or young boys who did or did not cross-dress, sexually or casually attended to men. The phallophilic desire itself was also not considered marginal as shown in the "common epithet of the period: eating a bamboo, I become a man", a metaphor for oral sex, considering there were no such rituals in seijinshiki (ceremony of becoming an adult) (Mitsuhashi, 104). Overall, as Doi summarizes, "The attraction that homosexuals from the West are said to feel for Japanese society is probably due partly to the absence from the outset in Japanese society of any restraints on homosexuality [before the Meiji constitution], and partly to its extreme tolerance of expressions of homosexual feelings."

These glimpses into the premodern Japanese culture are in stark contrast to the historical form Western queer spaces took, as Foucault in the famous introduction of his book "History of Sexuality: We the Other Victorians" suggests: "[Victorian] puritanism imposed its triple edict of taboo, nonexistence, and silence," in which "sex [was] so rigorously repressed, […] because it is

incompatible with a general and intensive work imperative." (Foucault, 6) European history is littered with ideologies and concepts that consider sex taboo, and silence its discussion; sex itself is absent, refrained from, and exempt from cultural artifacts and political discussion, and queer desires more so; to a degree that Foucault considers that the "mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression […] anticipating coming freedom." (Foucault, 6)

Looking back into Edo, the conception of a pre-modern, pre-institutionalized society having ambiguous sexual boundaries is considered a "universally historic principle" (Mitsuhashi, 36), is compatible with analysis by Canaday's *The Straight State* where she describes a pre-modern U.S. society gradually constructing a "heterosexual state"—as in the U.S. during when "the federal government went from a fledgling to a full-service bureaucracy", "homosexuality went from a total nonentity to a commonly understood category." (Canaday, 258) Through the establishment of state apparatuses homosexuality was no longer "not bound up with [actions] but […] as a class of person" (Canaday, 219). Japanese modernity took a similar route during the mass import of Western state apparatuses, including common law, during the Meiji restoration and Taisho era; Mitsuhashi specifically chronicles the import of pathologizing classifications of queer people in "late Meiji to early Taisho era (1890s to 1910s), in which [Krafft-Ebing's theories] were imported." and was readily adopted by Japanese psychologists as "the idea of hentai (abnormal) desire, which then spread to the public […] and by the 1920s homosexuality was a widespread concept." (Mitsuhashi, 67) It was through what at the time many called civilizing the society, that the methods of identification and repression of queer desires were imported from Western society, just as the U.S. constructed its own through the lens of economic productivity. It is utterly tragic that "In Japan, which has little history of criminalization and has tolerated the existence of atypical people to some extent," the modern import of European ideals "has only functioned as a new form of oppression." (Mitsuhashi, 67)

It is this destruction of pre-institutionalized spaces and construction of a homosexual identity through legal and medical state apparatuses that form the history of sexuality in

Japanese, and more generally in East Asian cultures. It is not that in these cultures "societies are still deeply engrained in traditional Confucian norms that reify heterosexual and family values" (Yue, 749), but that the spaces constructed that was indeed compatible with societal norms, of danshoku, kagema-chaya, or kabuki performance, were destroyed and their associated desires pathologized through the import of the alternative values of nuclear family, economic productivity, or alternative morality that Japan has indiscriminately imported.

II

Considering the historical spatialization and acceptance of queer people in culture, it is not difficult to see why some Japanese queer academics, and even the general public, sense a dissonance between the current LGBTQ+ movement and their cultural background: Mitsuhashi goes as far as to say: "I consider there are no LGBT people in [Japanese] history. […] using the concept of LGBT and applying to Japanese culture would not only cause misunderstandings but also dangerous." (Mitsuhashi 56) Due in part to the "conflict-oriented nature" of Western queer activism which Mitsuhashi argues is born from the "conflict between religion and rights in Western society," the concept of Western queerness is marked squarely on the individual person. However, the Japanese person, as DT conceptualizes, bases identity on their amae towards another—the currency by which space is constructed. Instead of relying on structured camaraderie, the emotional economy of dependence provides alternative guarantees and characteristics of space, as "amae itself […] seeks to achieve identity with another." (Doi, 81) Even the sense of self is foreign to a Japanese: "The expression [jibun ga aru] (self exists, 自分がある), "[jibun ga nai] (self does not exist, 自分がない) is probably peculiar to Japanese," in that there can be an existence of self without identity; also notable is that "[in Japanese] the first person pronoun is often omitted," that one "defines the relation to […] the human relationships in which he finds himself."(Doi, 132) The third person pronouns are also ungendered in Japanese, but one may choose to gender oneself by calling themself "[watakushi], [boku], or [ore], to mean simply "I," [which] suggests a rather more reflective view of the self." (Doi, 133) This is an

individual relating to the spaces in which they inhabit through the introduction and reference of oneself, a proclamation of how one intends to interact with you and your group as a man, woman, or neither. It is a proclamation not of identity—[watashi] does not indicate woman, but feminine; [ore], not male but masculine, and [boku], a mix of both; one often chooses different pronouns in different social circles depending on how their place within the group. Through this process of introduction and acceptance, it is the goal of "the individual […] to make the group's interests accord with his own." (Doi, 134)

In sparsely structured, disparate, and decentralized communities such as queer spaces, identity is further deeply entrenched within belonging. Many interviewees of Queer Japan have trouble with or refrain from defining their identity through (Western) queer terminology but instead through the emotions and desires they harbor, and how it enables them to interact with the community they belong to. Nogi Sumiko does not clearly state if she's a transmasc man or a lesbian woman—a gender-identity conflict she had "trouble with before" —, but simply states that "I like women now." (Kolbeins, 7:30). Togame Gengoroh, a gay erotic manga artist, focuses more on his interactions with American fans during visits to Toronto, NY, and LA, than on his sexual identity, and he talks more about his "sexual attraction" or "[hentai] (pervert/abnormal, 変態) attraction" he feels towards men, dismissing the Japanese term for homosexual ([douseiai], 同性「愛」) which emphasizes affective love. His interview mostly consists of how he interacts with his fans through a shared desire, and manga acting as a medium to express desire—a space in which he and his readers can explore their desires.

Nowhere is this prioritization of space and desire over identity more present in the conflict between the two queer bars, Gold Finger (lesbian-targeted) and Grammy Tokyo (transmasc or "FTM" targeted) in the documentary. The respective owners, Ogawa Chiga and Inoue Kento had a fall-out when Kento, before establishing Grammy Tokyo was excluded from Goldfinger after his transition; Ogawa justifies: "You live your daily life as a man; I respect that, so please respect my space as well." (Kolbeins, 22:00) Neither Ogawa nor Kento emphasizes their own identity; Kento found himself lost as a transmasc person not because he was excluded

for what he was, but that he "felt part of [lesbian social circles] because there wasn't really a space for FTMs." (22:25) While the fallout was resolved through a collaboration event between the two spaces, it nevertheless exemplifies that conflicts are rarely of identity than it is about spaces; the introductory narration (presumably an interviewee) suggests "I don't mind who you date or what you do…but it's how you will live within and interact with the traditional community, within your family and society." (Kolbeins, 1:05)

This usage of space and desire to define one's elusive and fluid identity is present not only in adamantly collectivist societies like Japan but elsewhere too, evident considering that desire, not identity, motivates how one acts. Chu exemplifies this understanding in critiquing trans-exclusionary political lesbianism of the 70s, which she diagnoses: "radical feminist theories claimed [that] the feminist revolution could only be achieved by combing constantly through the fibrils of one's consciousness." Chu illustrates her sexuality not through a political call-to-action like the mentioned Valerie Solanas's SCUM manifesto or Atkinsons's organization Lavender Menace, but instead through her memory of managing her high school basketball team, "of postgame exhaustion, of boys, sex, and other vices; of good taste and bad blood and small, sharp desires. […] these bus rides are about the gayest thing I can find." Through desire, she relates to the communities around her—through her metaphoric "crush" on feminism in college, she interacts with the society around her. She never once calls herself feminist, but instead that she loves feminism; never identifies with something that "any good feminist bears stitch[es] into […] her heart that tapestry of qualifiers […]: radical, liberal, neoliberal, socialist, Marxist, separatist, cultural, corporate, […] pro-sex, first-, second-, third-, sometimes fourth-wave," but instead, of what she wants (out of her transition): "the intimacy of long-distance female friendship, for fixing my makeup in the bathroom […], for sex toys, for feeling hot, for getting hit on by butches." It is such desires that define what one is, not the political labels one assigns to oneself; and spaces that are constructed upon identity—like Atkinsons' or Kennedy's, as Chu mentions—rather than desire, Chu implies, are bound to devolve.

Queer spaces in Japan and US, through different processes, converge onto the same conclusion; Japan constructs queer spaces as one structured upon desire ([danshoku], [kagema-chaya], [shinjuku nichome]), and a person introducing their relation to the space through desire; and the US constructs political labels of queer desire (gay, lesbian, Marxist, feminist) from which space is instantiated, that "hails" (Jameson, The Political Unconscious) a person, who then adopts that label can include oneself in that space. It is universal that desire is the fundamental force of human sexuality—a tautology—and which space is structured upon. Only when we have uncovered this subject of all queer phenomena can we discuss what Amia Srinivasan suggests "is ugliest about our social realities, [that] racism, classism, ableism, heteronormativity shapes whom we do and do not desire and love, and who does and does not desire and love us." (Srinivasan,98) This is consecration of desire as a new object of study, of what one wants, not what one is (as Western queer thought heretofore concerned itself with). It is, as she points out, an irony considering, for example, "how important the idea of being 'born this way' has been to the gay rights movement," while the idea itself is antithetical to the "constructivist, anti-essentialist tendencies of feminism." (Srinivasan, 98)

Navigating sexuality in terms of desire itself is uncharted territory, but is also at the core of what queer theory is; to construct a structured, rich, and inclusive understanding of the diverse forms that human desire can take. I argue this is the essence of what feminism, now queer theory, and ultimately any critical theory of the relations of society may take, and the sense in which we classify the strains of ideologies: Marxist, liberal, socialist, syndicalist, separatist, etc., as having the same purpose: to allow desire to flourish without circumscription and repression.