



Sabine Frühstück

Gender and Sexuality in Modern Japan

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reviewed by [Flora Rousset](#)

A must-read—across disciplines and times

From the Meiji period, which established the father figure as the centre 'of both the family and household system (*ie seido*)' (3), through Article 14 of Japan's 1946 constitution, which declares gender, sexual, racial and social equality (7), to the #Me-Too movement of 2017, which culminated in the much publicised critique of Itō Shiori concerning Japanese legal institutions with regard to rape (1), Japanese society experienced deep transformations.^[1] In *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Japan*, scholar Sabine Frühstück provides insightful accounts of how redefinitions of gender identity and sexuality have created new constellations in and alternatives to the traditional family, the job market, the media and the arts. The accessibility of her work makes it a must-read for the classroom. Indeed, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Japan* functions, I believe, as an extensive introduction to gender identity and sexuality in modern Japan, presenting readers with concise descriptions of pertinent events. References at the end of each chapter invite us to further pursue issues raised in the sections of these chapters.

In covering what is called 'modern Japan,' that is, the period of Japanese history ranging from the Meiji Restoration to the present (2–3), Frühstück sketches, in the eight chapters of her book, a multi-faceted portrait of gender and sexuality studies by bringing together archives, resources and methods from various disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, sexology, history and visual studies. She analyses decisive moments on the level of individuals, as in Chapter 3, 'Redefining Womanhood,' in which she sheds light on the controversial political positions of Yosano Akiko with regard to motherhood and imperialism (83–84), and on the level of groups, as in Chapter 4, 'Sex at War,' which elaborates on the struggle for recognition for victims of the '[military] comfort women system (*ianfu seido*)' (103).

Although one might question Frühstück's choice in attempting to cover such a vast time frame, one should note her success in giving a general account of Japan's transformations about gender identity and sexuality, while offering more precise anecdotes which serve less as examples than expressions of the necessity to recollect experiences. Chapter 7, 'Sexing Visual Culture,' best illustrates this balance: after having broadly discussed censorship and sexuality with regard to visual arts, Frühstück presents us with three specific cases. Her wish to prioritise affects over a purely academic approach can be seen in her work. Indeed, she elaborates her arguments

around 'three analytical sensibilities' (12): 'the transnational historical study' (12), 'the interdisciplinary study of sex, gender, and sexuality' (13) and the 'flexible intersectionality' (14). Her choice of words is indicative of how multi-layered such topics are (i.e., gender, race, class).

The transnational historical study and the interdisciplinary study in *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Japan* wonderfully exhibit sensibilities at work. However, it seems to me that the intersectional sensibility could have been more thoroughly addressed. While Frühstück analyses the multi-faceted discrimination endured by colonised people during Japan's imperialism, as she does in Chapter 4 about sex slavery and in Chapter 5 concerning sex work and sex workers, she does not really undertake a consideration of the intertwining of sex, gender and race when she discusses people defining themselves as men, as in Chapter 1, 'Building the Nation and Modern Manhood,' or when she focuses on queer lives as in Chapter 6, 'Queer Identities and Activisms.' The former parallels the construction of a male gender identity with the building of an imperial state, yet only timidly discusses the ethnic hegemony over those who were not seen as 'fully Japanese' that such constructs support. The latter explains how queer people attempt to achieve agency—whether political or personal—while leaving unanswered the question of discrimination based on gender, sexuality *and* race. We should note, though, that Frühstück does acknowledge that some observations are lacking when she contends that her book does not 'follo[w] an even and complete sequence of developments and events' (12).

Amalgamation or ambiguity, yet advances

Right from the introduction of her book, Frühstück tackles the ambiguity concerning considerations of gender identity and sexuality by reviewing the past 'amalgamation of biology, nature, and culture' in the Japanese word 'sex (*sei*)' (9?10). While this linguistic amalgamation slowly disappeared in the late 1920s and early 1930s (10), its cultural impact remained significant in subsequent decades and remains so today. Indeed, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Japan* often points to the underlying paradox of certain laws, political positions, and even artistic practices resulting from that impact.

This is particularly illustrated in Chapter 7, 'Sexing Visual Culture,' in which Frühstück investigates various forms of visual representation from woodblock prints to video games. Her focus on the work of three artists with regard to the 'arbitrariness and complexity of the obscenity [jurisprudence]' compellingly sheds light on the ambiguity surrounding free speech and artistic licence when it comes to the creation of provocative and subversive—sometimes even shocking—art pieces (173). On one hand, the law aims at protecting children from pornographic content, and at defending gender equality by refusing to permit content that could be read as perpetuating sexual violence or gender discrimination; on the other hand, the law could be seen to be reinforcing binaries and norms. As Frühstück demonstrates, the 3D-printed Rokudenashiko vulva kayak—work of manga artist and sculptor Rokudenashiko—and especially its digital data, which the artist distributed to the most generous of her funders (183), incurred the wrath of police and judiciary, but 'sexually explicit manga and anime' in general are rarely subjected to legal scrutiny (185).

A similarly ambiguous attitude can be found in Chapter 6, 'Queer Identities and Activisms.' Having explained how forms of male-male and female-female sexualities have existed before the Meiji era with its failed attempt to ban anal sex (144–45), Frühstück elaborates on the growing visibility, within the population, of queer lives. Yet the Japanese government has still not legalised homosexual marriage, while allowing sex change only on condition that 'transgender people ... no longer have functioning reproductive glands' and have been diagnosed with a gender identity disorder (158–59). The overt surveillance of queer people provokes an indirect punishment,^[2]

and that seems to disrespect people's lives. Further, while numbers of municipalities and local governments elect 'openly transgender people to public offices' and offer 'same-sex legal partnership certificates' (154–55), the Japanese government applies what Frühstück rightly calls 'policy inertia regarding the explicit prohibition of discrimination on ground of sex and gender' (158). The discrepancy between local and national agendas nourishes the ambiguous behavior of Japan's government, which tries to control the decline of the country's population: Japan is a country that acknowledges sexual diversity, yet rarely takes legal steps to protect it (158).

Do we find ourselves, then, in a house of mirrors in which only representations of normative sexual and gender expressions are reflected to us? Frühstück would respond with a yes. She would nonetheless indicate that, despite these ambiguities, inclusiveness is becoming central to debates concerning gender and sexuality. She details in each chapter of *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Japan* the successes achieved by LGBTQ+ communities and feminists as well as by their allies, and concludes her book on a positive note. In Chapter 8, 'Epilogue,' she summarises the fall of 'The Penis' (191) with the rise of the '(J-)Humanity' (199). The '(J-)Humanity' seems inclined, along with the rest of the world, to embrace more widely 'possibilities of overcoming established boundaries of gender and sexual practices and identities' (201). Although there will still be backlashes both in Japan and elsewhere, and although new technologies, in particular robotics (204), tend to perpetuate gender, sexual and racial binaries, there is hope. And this hope, as Frühstück writes, lies in the '[i]nterdisciplinary examinations of the shapeshifting of local sexual cultures' (205) across regional differences in a spirit of friendship and alliance.

Notes

[1] Freelance journalist and writer, Itō has publicly denounced the silence, in particular that of the Japanese legal system, in response to cases of sexual violence. She recounted her experience in her book *Black Box / Burakku bokkusu*, Tōkyō: Bungei shunju, 2017.

[2] I am using 'surveillance' and 'punishment' in Foucault's terms. See Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, Paris: Gallimard, 1993 [1975].

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