

SEXUALITY IN JAPAN

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Historical work on sexuality in Japan usually emphasizes the extent to which Confucianism, though increasingly important in political culture and education, had less impact on sexual behavior and public culture than was the case in China. Under the Tokugawa shogunate, after 1600, some new regulatory steps were taken, but they were less sweeping than in China; and while women's behaviors drew scrutiny, the emphasis on chastity was less elaborate.

Concubines. As in China, many earlier traditions persisted. Emperors and other men in the upper classes continued to deploy a number of concubines, as elsewhere both for sexual purposes and to assure the generation of sons. The complex approach of Japanese Buddhism persisted as well, in some cases linking sexual and spiritual expression.

Theater and art. The most striking changes during the early modern period overall involved public culture, often reflecting the growth of cities. New theater forms, including Kabuki, emerged in the 16th century, frequently emphasizing bawdy scenes. Many plays were organized by former prostitutes seeking to leave the profession. Ultimately the government banned female performers, but males, sometimes portraying women, maintained many of the same themes, including representations of sexual passion and "love-suicides". From the 17th century onward, erotic art burgeoned – known as *shunga*. These woodblock prints, produced in the thousands, won a wide audience, and though they were banned by the government as obscene, in 1772, they continued to circulate underground. Here was a Japanese tradition that would persist into modern times. The presence of children in shunga art suggests a strikingly uninhibited quality in sexual culture.

Geishas. The geisha tradition became more elaborate. Here, women became skilled in various performance arts, not usually involving sexuality; their talents in music and dance, however, greatly exceeded the training of the respectable wives whose roles centered on motherhood. Some geisha would develop a sexual relationship with a male patron, but the institution overall differed considerably from outright prostitution.

Prostitution. Government measures to regulate, and tax, actual prostitution expanded. Prostitutes were confined to particular urban districts, forbidden to leave except for ceremonies when a family member died. Their activities were rigorously controlled, with little individual freedom. The official organization of Japanese prostitution was another tradition that would persist into later periods. In relevant port cities during the early modern period, prostitutes did service Chinese and European traders – resulting in the arrival of syphilis into Japan early in the 16th century. Here too, regulation intruded: specific brothels were designated for foreign use (and with higher rates established for the Europeans).

Public Baths. The tradition of public baths, often steam baths, had started earlier in Japanese history, sometimes associated with Buddhist monasteries and often aimed at medical treatments. The institution expanded in the early modern period, reflecting a degree of comfort with nudity. The Tokugawa government tried to make sure that the two sexes were separated in public bathing, but many houses set up only a board between the designated areas, which allowed considerable voyeurism.

Social divisions. Pronounced divisions opened up between the strict sexual codes applied to the samurai warrior class, as part of military discipline, and the behaviors of groups both above and below them. Samurai might be executed if caught in adultery. Here, Confucian morality was brought to bear. Among other groups, in contrast, extramarital affairs were more common, and even illegitimate children might be accepted.

Study questions:

1. What were some differences between Japanese and Chinese sexuality in the early modern period?
2. Why have foreign (particularly Western) observers often had trouble interpreting practices like the geisha houses and public baths?
3. Why and how did erotic art gain particular currency in Japan?

Further reading:

Geisha. By Liza Dalby (University of California Press, 1998).

Forbidden Art: erotic images from Japan's Edo period. By Helsinki City Art Museum (Helsinki City Art Museum, 2002).

Selling Women: prostitution, markets and the household in early modern Japan. By Amy Stanley (University of California Press, 2012).

Sex and the Floating World: erotic images in Japan, 1700-1820. By Thomas Screech (Reaktion Books, 2009).

19TH CENTURY

Like Russia, Japan entered a period of rapid change in the late 19th century, under the spur of massive political reforms in the Meiji era as well as the upheavals of early industrialization. But Japan also resembled other societies in Africa and Asia in terms of the potential impact of Western moral criticisms. Indeed, with a more varied and permissive sexual tradition than neighboring China, Japan was particularly vulnerable. Several important responses folded into the reform movement – without, however, transforming key traditions beyond recognition.

The Critiques. Western visitors, as Japan was pried open to international exchange, notoriously misunderstood key Japanese customs such as the geisha houses or the public baths. Christian missionaries, now flocking in, could be particularly harsh. In Western eyes, geishas seemed to be prostitutes, pure and simple. And Japanese art that had highlighted women in erotic poses was pornography, nothing more nor less. Japanese men, though effeminate in many ways, seemed hopelessly addicted to sex. Traditional tolerance for homosexuality, including the assumption that people could participate both in same-sex and heterosexual indulgence, was also widely attacked.

Reforms;

Homosexuality. The Japanese government in its reform mood was unusually sensitive to this kind of criticism and, without surrendering all tradition, proved eager to measure up to Western definitions of civilized behavior. Geisha houses were not abolished, but regulation increased. Erotic art was now banned as pornographic. Government ministers highlighted Confucian emphasis on the importance of family – a variety of measures tried to encourage a range of family activities, including dining together, and the campaign sought to bolster sexual respectability as well. In 1873 an unprecedented law sought to outlaw homosexuality. This turned out to go too far, and it was rescinded seven years later. However, official disapproval of same-sex behavior remained high, forcing greater concealment.

Monogamy. One measure that did stick was a law outlawing concubinage, a major blow against sexual traditions in the upper classes. Monogamy was now the legal norm. Another law, officially outlawing abortion, sought to emphasize the importance of reproductive sex, as did the “wise mother” image promoted for women by the Meiji government.

Family and courtship. However, these steps did not result in a fully Victorian-style family, in large part because gender differentials remained more pronounced. Mistresses were still widely tolerated. Arranged marriage continued to be the norm, with couples often not meeting until their parents had completed negotiations (and sometimes not until the ceremony itself). Parental permission was legally required for men under 30, women under 25. Courtship was also discouraged by the rigorous separation of the sexes in schools. When one westernizer proposed that the absence of love could be grounds to

divorce, his measure was rejected. Chastity in marriage remained essential for respectable women, while a law allowing a husband to kill his wife and a lover was not repeated until 1908.

Despite some new regulations, Japanese public culture did not renounce discussions of sexuality. Sexual scandals of prominent people received wide attention. Sexual themes continued in art and poetry. As in the West, scientific findings about sexuality and sexual issues were widely publicized as well.

Urban sexuality. The complex adjustments in law and culture were accompanied by wide changes in sexual behavior in fact – often associated with urbanization. Here was a pattern broadly similar to what happened in the West and in Russia, a disjuncture between official commentary and actual practice. Exploitation of women in the factories was widespread, heightened by the low wages for female labor. Women in trades like waitressing were encouraged to flirt, and their styles of dress became more provocative. Large pleasure zones arose in cities, complete with brothels. Some families in the countryside deliberately sold a daughter into prostitution, in order to support the siblings. By the 1920s it was estimated that 50,000 prostitutes were servicing several men each day; and there was considerable export of Japanese women to other parts of Asia (where Japanese-run brothels often had special prestige).

The 1920s. Other changes began to affect even middle-class behavior by the 1920s. The idea of marrying for love gained ground, though it sometimes provoked bitter clashes with parents and, not infrequently, suicide – all widely publicized. Western fashions also drew new attention, prompting moralists to worry about the impact “frivolous Western influence” was having on Japanese youth.

The decades around the turn of the century showed a fascinating mixture of themes, with some of the standard impacts of early industrialization combining with government efforts to appease Western critics while at the same time many traditions survived with only minor modifications.

Study questions:

1. How did the Japanese seek to respond to Western criticisms of sexual patterns? Were the changes significant?
2. From the standpoint of sexuality, how did family patterns compare to those in the 19th-century West?
3. Why did prostitution expand so rapidly?

Further reading:

“Managing the Truth of Sex in Imperial Japan.” By Sabine Fruhstuck (*Journal of Asian Studies* 59:3, 2000).

“The World’s Oldest Debate: prostitution and the state in imperial Japan.” By Sheldon Garon (*American Historical Review* 98:3, 1993).

Sandaken Brothel No. 8; an episode in the history of lower-class Japanese women. By Y. Tomoko (tr. K. Taylor, M.E. Sharpe, 1999).