BOOK REVIEWS


Over the past two decades researchers working in disciplines as varied as anthropology, history, and literary studies, not to mention feminist scholars, researchers from lesbian and gay studies, and queer theorists, have drawn attention to the problematic issue of trying to capture and delineate the spectrum of human sexual behaviour using post-nineteenth century, “Western” constructs such as homosexuality, heterosexuality, and bisexuality.

Until quite recently, the realm of sexuality was an area that received only scant attention in academic studies of Japan; anthropologist Anne Allison for instance observes that colleagues at the academic institution she was affiliated with during research for her study on bar hostesses, reacted to her topic with a mixture of ridicule and disbelief.

Fortunately, this situation has altered substantially in recent years, with publication of numerous studies dealing with the constructions and representations of sexualities. These works include Paul Gordon Schalow’s translation of Ihara Saikaku’s stories in The Great Mirror of Manly Love, Gary Leupp’s historical study of male same-sex eroticism in the centuries leading up to, and during the Edo period, Male Colors, Jennifer Robertson’s study of the intersections of gender, nationalism, and sexuality in the renowned all-female Takarazuka theatre revue, as well as recently published works by Mark McLelland and Wim Lunsing that deal with male same-sex attraction in contemporary Japan.

Gregory M. Pflugfelder’s Cartographies of Desire: Male-Male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse, 1600–1950, is an invaluable addition to this growing body of work. This is an extremely thorough, meticulously researched book—the result of twenty years of painstaking and at times (given the difficulties that must have been encountered when embarking on a topic of this nature) frustrating research.

As reflected in the title, Pflugfelder draws upon the metaphor of mapmaking. However, rather than physical spaces, the contours and terrains that are subject to his “mappings” are the lines and territories over which male-male sexualities have been delineated over three and a half centuries of Japanese history. As he notes in the Introduction, “how sexuality has been constructed in that region of the globe today called ‘Japan’ has been more often remarked upon than rigorously studied” (6). Consequently, Cartographies is concerned less with documenting and describing actual sexual practices, than with the ways in which these practices were represented in discourse—both official and popular—over this time period examined.

Journal of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies 6.2 (December 2001)
Moreover, although the discussion is underpinned by a consciously social-constructionist approach to sexuality, one of its major strengths lies with its avoidance of the imposing of “loaded” twentieth-century categories and definitions of sexuality—hence, the lack of terms like “homosexuality” or “bisexuality.” As the author observes in opening his discussion of representations of male-male sexuality in popular discourse over the Edo period, as attested to by a rich body of contemporary sources, individuals during this era did engage in sexual/physical/emotional relations with members of the same sex. However, “homosexuality” as a term to describe this desire would have been nonsensical to individuals living in that era. Rather the terms used in contemporary sources, *shudô* (“Way of Youth”) or *nanshoku* (a term difficult to render into English, but variously translated as “manly love,” “comrade love,” or “male colours”), have quite different implications. *Shudô* (and to an extent, *nanshoku*) for instance, connoted a “way” or “code” that had to be “mastered” (as with other ways like, *bushidô* or *sado*), and was based on a rigid set of expectations based on obligation and reciprocity.

The focus of the first two chapters of *Cartographies* is on the ways that this “way” was represented in both contemporary popular and legal discourses of the time. The former explores the intersections between increasing commercialisation of sex through (male and female) prostitution in the “pleasure quarters” of urban centres, and pre-existing nodes of male-male sexual intimacy within the Buddhist monkhood and samurai. Discussion of the latter examines contemporary official strictures and regulations on sexuality (including, but not exclusively, male-male sexuality), regulations which were primarily concerned with possible disruptions to social order, rather than sexuality (male-male or male-female) per se.

This form of “mapping” of male-male sexuality changed quite radically during the Meiji Period, when Japan embarked upon an ambitious state-driven project of “modernisation,” “civilisation” and nation-building. This was a project that drew partly upon existing Confucian-inspired ideologies inherited from the preceding Tokugawa regime, and partly upon contemporary Euro-American socio-cultural, economic, and political institutions and discourses. Within the framework of this, male-male sexuality as depicted in popular, legal, and medical discourses underwent a significant shift, as “identity” increasingly came to be defined by gender and sexual-preference, rather than status and/or region, as had been the case over the Edo period. As Pflugfelder observes, and as has been noted by numerous researchers of sexuality in the West (including Foucault, Weeks, D’Emilio, and Kosofsky-Sedgwick, among others), the late nineteenth century was witness to the medicalisation and problematisation of sexuality in general, and same-sex sexual behaviour, in particular. Indeed, it was around this time that the notion of “the homosexual” (and “the heterosexual”) as an individual was invented and defined.

The second half of *Cartographies* discusses the ways in which im-
ported Western medico-legal discourses (significantly, the influence of Western religious discourses was negligible) were adapted into Meiji and post-Meiji configurations of “civilisation” and “modernity” in these new mappings of male-male sexuality. In the author’s words, “it was at the point of intersection between Confucian propriety and ‘Victorian’ prudery, . . . that such measures were born” (147).

The result of this shift was, on the one hand the association of pre-Meiji shudô practices with uncivilised “barbarism” (behaviour not befitting subjects/citizens of a “civilised” nation), and the linking of a specific discourse of sexuality (premised on monogamous heterosexual coupling) to the modern Japanese nation-state. Furthermore, the configuring of sexuality within the framework of these imported systems of medical and legal knowledge led to the replacement of the pre-Meiji discourses of shudô and nan-shoku with dôseiai (literally “same-sex love,” or homosexuality as a category), and, as happened in the West, the birth of the “deviant homosexual” individual. Ironically, as Pflugfelder observes, this process of specification gave voice to the “pervert” in ways that would have been unimaginable in the context of earlier discourses of male-male sexuality.

In conclusion, I would strongly recommend Cartographies of Desire to any reader remotely interested in the ways in which sexuality (not just male-male sexuality) has been framed within the construction of the modern nation-state of Japan. Moreover, this is a work that also makes an invaluable contribution to the growing body of work on sexualities outside the Euro-American cultural orbit.

WORKS CITED


ROMIT DASGUPTA
University of Western Australia