

**In the Land of the  
Kami: A Journey  
into the Hearts of  
Japan**

Michael Hoffman

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## Author's Note

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THE STORIES COLLECTED here were originally published between 2000 and 2013, all but three in the Sunday Time Out section of the Japan Times, the three exceptions being *Holy Fools*, *Death I Love You* and *Wet Sleeves*, which first appeared in a bimonthly magazine, now sadly defunct, called *The East*.

The topics treated are somewhat whimsical. This book would scarcely be justifiable otherwise – there are so many unwhimsical books on Japan, written by people whose qualifications are a lot more impressive than mine. The stories (most of them) arose not from what I knew and understood but from what I didn't know and wanted to understand: What *is* Zen? Who *was* Confucius, about whom we hear so much and know so little? What was it like to be a kid in Japan 10,000 years ago, or 1000, or 500? How did death come to seem, as it did for many centuries, so much more important to the Japanese than life?

I mentioned qualifications. I claim two. One is simply my presence here over many years, which has given me a familiarity with a country and a culture that remain and always will remain, familiarity notwithstanding, strange to me. Another is my ignorance – rather, my willing acknowledgment of my ignorance, the pride I seem to take in a quality others see as a problem, one to be solved with knowledge. Knowledge is good but, like everything else, only in moderation. Let knowledge inform ignorance, not stifle it. There are more questions in these stories than answers.

This is not, as will be clear by now, a work of scholarship. My debts to the historians, literary translators,

“Japanologists” who have been my teachers and guides on this journey are many and deep, gratefully acknowledged throughout the text.

Most Japanophiles love Japan for its present – its technology, its manga and anime, its safe streets and punctual trains. There’s not much of that here. I love Japan for its past – not that I would have wanted to live in it, but contemplating it and the evidence it presents of the infinite mutability of human nature has been, and remains, an inexhaustible pleasure.

I drifted to Japan 33 years ago and, somewhat to my surprise, stayed. I sometimes wonder if I would have if not for Murasaki Shikibu and her majestic eleventh-century creation, the world’s first novel, *The Tale of Genji*, owing nothing to Japan’s cultural mentor, China, and antedating by a good half-millennium anything classifiable as a novel in the West. It was the first thing about Japan that astonished me.

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Hokkaido, Japan  
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# Do Our Genitals Define Us?

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DO OUR GENITALS DEFINE US? Increasingly, they do not. Is sexuality more complicated than male/ female? Increasingly, it is.

Or maybe not “increasingly.” Maybe the only thing that’s changed over the ages is how much of our true selves society lets us show.

The Bible, keystone arch of Western civilization, had it all figured out. “Male and female created he them,” says the Book of Genesis – “he” being God, “them” being us.

Turn now to Deuteronomy 22:5: “A woman must not wear men’s clothing, nor a man wear women’s clothing, for anyone who does so is an abomination to the Lord your God.”

What would the Lord our God have made of the twenty-first century and its explosion of sexual alternatives? Same-sex marriage is the barest tip of the iceberg. Language strains to keep up with new practices, or old practices no longer cloaked in shame or social disapproval: cross-dressing, transgenderism, androgyny, hermaphroditism – and more, much more.

Japan, where same-sex marriage is hardly an issue, let alone a right, would offend the biblical God less than other places – which is ironic, because Japan is among the modern world’s least Judeo-Christian counties.

Sexually, though – officially at least – it is overwhelmingly male/female.

Is officialdom deceived?

“Cool Japan” – manga- and anime-land – springs to mind as evidence that it is. Japan in fact was “cool” long before government PR machinery invented the label.

Myth takes us back to the formless void, where among the first generation of gods and goddesses are Izanagi (“He who invites”) and Izanami (“She who invites”). The biblical God’s creation of the universe is awesome and mysterious. Not so Izanagi and Izanami’s begetting of Japan, charmingly narrated in the eighth-century chronicle *Nihon Shoki*.

Imagine sexually awakened gods who, like children, don’t quite know what to do. They look at each other and are enchanted. Izanami speaks first: “What a splendid young man!” To which Izanagi replies, “What a splendid young woman!”

Their first offspring is a “leech child,” born without limbs or bones. What had gone wrong? The older gods explained: Izanami, the female, had spoken first. Initiative was the male’s prerogative. Chastened, they tried again. This time they got it right. Izanami gave birth to the islands of Japan, and to gods and goddesses without number. The poor deformed baby, placed in a boat of reeds, floated away, never to be heard of again.

Japan, begotten child of childlike gods, escaped the stern sexual discipline imposed by an asexual creator God whose grim intolerance of human passions caused him, for example, to destroy a city, Sodom, for a “sin” known ever since as sodomy. Japan acknowledged no sexual sins, least of all that one, as the sixteenth-century Christian missionaries who saw this “land of the gods” in its pristine state noted with squeamish disgust.

The missionaries were banished and Japan went into isolation for 250 years. In the mid-nineteenth century it

was “opened.” Powerless to resist American and European bullying, it feverishly set about “modernizing.” Science and technology were not all it felt it had to learn from the West. Though it never turned Christian, it did adopt a quasi-Christian morality, toning down almost to the point of squelching the indigenous sexual playfulness (whose dark side, alas, is exploitation, of women in particular). The result was the buttoned-down Japan of the familiar stereotype – which, like all stereotypes, begs the proverbial grain of salt.



“Have you ever wondered how you look as a female?”

A man not predisposed to answer “yes” probably wouldn’t be visiting a website that presumes to inquire. “Cross-dresser’s paradise” – that’s how the Elizabeth Club bills itself. Located in Tokyo’s Asakusabashi district, it is one of hundreds of similar establishments whose existence on the fringes of conventional society suggests conventional society’s failure to accommodate certain aspects – call them deviant if you like, but fewer and fewer people do – of human nature.

“Don’t you want to become a lady of your dreams?” the website’s enticement continues.

It’s easy enough. “At Elizabeth, we want your feminine experience to be all you hoped for. There’s a shop that carries everything you need to become a female: lingerie, stockings, wigs, high-heels, clothing, makeup goods, accessories, breast forms... After you change into women’s clothes, our makeup artists, all young girls, will transform you to a girl or lady of your dream... There is no limit except for your imagination.”

Clubs like this, and the widening appeal of cross-dressing and prime-time transgender TV stars – Matsuko Deluxe, Ai Haruna, Ikko – point to a restlessness within our conventional sexual boxes. Is it fanciful to foresee a time when we’ll burst out of them altogether? If so, there’s a lot of fanciful thinking around. Collectively it’s called “postgenderism.” One of its boldest exponents was feminist thinker Shulamith Firestone (1945-2012).

In *The Dialectics of Sex* (1970) she wrote, “The end goal of feminist revolution must be... not just the elimination of male privilege but of the sex distinction itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally. The reproduction of the species by one sex for the benefit of the other would be replaced by artificial reproduction.”

Male privilege four decades later remains alive and well, much more so in Japan than elsewhere, if the World Economic Forum’s oft-cited Global Gender Gap Reports are a fair measure. In 2012 Japan ranked 101<sup>st</sup> among 135 countries – in 2014 104<sup>th</sup> among 142 countries – in terms of female professional, economic and political empowerment.

Behind that is a long past that showed scant regard for women. Warriors despised their weakness; Buddhists dismissed them as polluted beings incapable of attaining Enlightenment; Confucianism stressed the obedience a wife owed her husband and a mother her son. The modernizing regime of the Meiji Era (1868-1912) assigned woman her post-Confucian place – no corporate warrior or captain of burgeoning industry, she, but a “good wife and wise mother” (*ryosai kenbo*); it was written into the Meiji Civil Code, which remained in effect until 1947.

Postgenderism? Not Japan’s forté. Even the grand coming-out party that is Tokyo Rainbow Week,

celebrated over ten heady days in April, of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) life, shows Japan to be rather behind most of the developed world, though slowly catching up. The gay pride movement in the United States goes back to 1968 (kindled, it is true, by a prevalent homophobia more virulent than anything Japanese LGBT people ever faced); Japan's did not begin until 1994.

All the same, there is a touch, sometimes more than a touch, of postgenderism in Japanese culture, going all the way back to Izanami and Izanagi's confusion over gender roles. Perhaps it's not quite what Firestone had in mind. Perhaps, though, it hints at a latent capacity, to be realized over time (for better or worse), for what she did have in mind. A whimsical notion, admittedly.

Let's see if it holds.



Manga and anime fans will know the term *futanari*, or “new half” – hermaphrodite characters endowed with feminine curves, voluptuous breasts and a virile penis.

Their popularity goes back to the 1990s and endures to this day. Possibly this has something to do with the economic downturn that started around then, eroding the socially sanctioned and officially promoted orthodoxies, sexual and otherwise, that had gone more or less unchallenged during the Meiji and postwar economic surges.

Possibly, too, there's a futanari element in the psychology of the nation itself.

American anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1887-1948) captured it in the title of her classic 1946 work on Japan, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* – beauty and strength, female and male. Among the book's

Japanese admirers was novelist Yukio Mishima (1925-1970). A year before his famous suicide by ritual samurai disembowelment and beheading, he made a speech in which, citing Benedict, he declared, "After the war the balance between these two (chrysanthemum and sword) was lost. The sword has been ignored since 1945. My ideal is to restore the balance. To revive the tradition of the samurai, through my literature and my action."

"The chrysanthemum and the sword" – they're in Japan's blood; both, together; at odds but inseparable. No man is *all* male, no woman *all* female. Femininity was despised in women – not in men. The fiercest warrior was likely to be something of a poet, shedding unashamed tears over the beauty of cherry blossoms and the dew on a flowering morning glory. Buddhism, the principal religion during the first thousand years of Japanese civilization, declared women to be unfit for Enlightenment – but not for reincarnation as a man in the next life. In some Buddhist sutras she changes her gender by meditating.

The female within the male, and the male within the female, seem closer to the surface in the Japanese tradition than in the standard Western ones. The 13<sup>th</sup>-century *Heike Monogatari*, an epic tale of the 12<sup>th</sup>-century Genpei civil war that marked the transition to military government under a succession of shoguns, tells of two brothers slain in battle and their widows who, to comfort their bereaved mother-in-law, present themselves to her clad in their late husbands' armor. This is a long way from the cross-dressing at the Elizabeth Club, but it had to start somewhere.

Some 450 years later, in 1686, the Osaka novelist Ihara Saikaku (1642-93) wrote *Gengobei, the Mountain of Love*, a cross-dressing tale whose most striking feature, besides the throbbing passion that animates it, is its perfect naturalness. Saikaku is evidently writing for

readers who will be amused, and moved – but not shocked.

Gengobei is a young rake who “devoted himself to the love of young men. Not once in his life had he amused himself with the fragile, long-haired sex.” When two of his especially beautiful lovers die suddenly, Gengobei enters the priesthood and renounces the world – not dreaming of the passion he has stirred in a pathetic young girl named Oman, “graced with such beauty that even the moon envied her.” Who should she fall in love with but Gengobei, “who had never in his life given a thought to girls”?

Cutting her hair and dressing like a boy, Oman boldly sets out for Gengobei’s mountain retreat. As a boy she is irresistible to him, but the truth is bound to out, and when it does, “What difference does it make – the love of men or the love of women?” [Gengobei] cried, overpowered by the bestial passion which rules this fickle world.”

By Saikaku’s time, the theater known as kabuki was already a flourishing art form. Its roots lay in popular entertainments, circa 1600, on the dry bed of the Kamo River in Kyoto – singing, dancing, acrobatics, skits, burlesques. The earliest performers were female, some of them dressed as men.

Then came the *onnagata* – male players of female roles. They were Japan’s first stars. The most famous of them all, Yoshizawa Ayame (1647-1709), was Saikaku’s contemporary. No woman, it was said, was more womanly than he – neither onstage nor off, for though unambiguously male (he was married and the father of four sons) he lived his private life in women’s clothes and with feminine speech mannerisms.

“Unless the *onnagata* lives as a woman in daily life,” he wrote in a treatise considered to this day a handbook of the art, “he won’t be an accomplished *onnagata*.”

Yoshizawa set the feminine fashions of his day. Women learned from him, not he from them, how to dress, apply makeup and comport themselves for maximum coquettish effect.

So it was with his artistic descendants as well. “Why should women appear when I am here?” demanded Nakamura Utaemon V, a famed onnagata of the 1920s. “There is no woman in all Japan who acts as feminine as I do.”



Two words often used today to sum up a progressive attitude towards sex are “tolerance” and “diversity.” Human beings are not all of one sort; no one set of practices is “right,” “good” or “natural” as against others that are “wrong,” “evil” or “unnatural.” A glance at the sexual frolics of premodern Japan might suggest precisely those qualities of tolerance and diversity.

Was Japan, before the West molded it in its own image, tolerant? One element it lacked might make it seem so – a “Lord your God” frowning on his creatures’ “abominations.”

“Sodomy” was an early casualty, the stigma remaining until the gay pride movement of our own time began to erode biblically-sanctioned homophobia. Japan, in that sense, was way ahead of its time.

In 1763 a satirical writer named Hiraga Gennai (1728-79) penned a gem of a story titled *Rootless Weeds*. His tale opens with Emma-O, the Buddhist lord of the underworld, about to pronounce judgment on a young monk who has just died of love for the onnagata Segawa Kikunojo II (a real-life actor who died in 1773). Counsel for the dead monk’s defense pleads for leniency: “How about letting him off with a soak in a boiling cauldron?”

“Most definitely not!” thunders Emma-O. “I’m told that something called ‘male homosexuality’ can be found all across the human world, and I absolutely cannot allow that kind of thing.”

To make a long story all too short, defense counsel produces a portrait of the onnagata – with whom Emma-O (did counsel foresee this?) promptly falls head over heels in love. What an unholy predicament!

“I hereby resign,” declares Emma-O, “as supreme ruler of the underworld. What’s a precious throne worth when I can go to the human world and share a pillow with *him*?”

Homosexuality in Japan “did not mean delicacy and effeminacy,” writes historian Hiroshi Watanabe in *A History of Japanese Political Thought: 1600-1901*. “Quite the contrary. From the Tokugawa Period (1603-1867) into the Meiji years (1868-1912), to say of a man that he ‘disliked women’ was to express a certain amount of approbation... For many samurai, excessive contact with women ran the risk of diluting their masculinity, notwithstanding that heterosexual sex was essential to the continuity of the house. To work at winning the heart of a woman was even more demeaning.”

Buddhist monks had other reasons for avoiding women. Religious celibacy vows do not seem to have precluded boys, however. “Boys appear to have served as surrogates for the females absent from the lives of the monks,” writes historian Gary Leupp in *Male Colors: The Construction of Homosexuality in Tokugawa Japan*. “Various Tokugawa Period jokes indicate the conflation of boys and women, and of the anus and vagina, in monastic society. In one, a priest on a religious retreat asks a friend to make him an *onyake* (artificial leather anus) for use in lieu of a boy. But he adds the request that it taste like a vagina.”

This is homosexuality not as lifestyle choice but as *faute de mieux*. Senior monks took under their wing acolytes young enough to look feminine, sexual relations being accepted as part of the acolytes' education. The boys were called *chigo*.

"Some monks during the medieval period," writes Leupp, "shaved [their *chigos*] eyebrows, powdered their faces [and] dressed them in female garb."

One tradition has Minamoto Yoshitsune, a hero of the twelfth-century Genpei civil war, spending his early years as the *chigo* lover of an abbot. "During this period," writes Leupp, "[Yoshitsune] wears cosmetics, wears his hair up in a girlish bun, blackens his teeth [as women of the day did], and thinly pencils in lines over his shaven eyebrows."

Is this tolerance, or exploitation? It can be a fine line between the two, and though it's hard to enter into the feelings of people of bygone times, it's the persistent hint of exploitation that disqualifies premodern Japan, sexually liberated though it seems in some ways, as a model for our own sexual liberation today. If liberation for some means slavery for others, it's damaged goods. Women in particular have little reason to regret the passing of the past. "A wife must think of her husband as her lord and look up to him with humility," explains the *Onna no Daigaku* (*The Greater Learning for Women*), a manual for female conduct written in the early 1700s. "A woman regards her husband as heaven."

Custom was custom, force was force. Most women submitted, with varying degrees of willingness, resignation and despair. Some did not submit. The mid-nineteenth century gives us the example of Matsuo Taseko (1811-94), an obscure peasant poetess from a village in present-day Niigata Prefecture who, in the 1850s and '60s, embraced the radical Imperial cause

against the Tokugawa Shogun who had shown himself helpless against the intrusive foreigner.

The year 1862 found her in Kyoto among swordsmen, assassins, poets and rabble-rousers, all bent on overthrowing the shogun and “restoring” the Emperor to real, not merely ceremonial, power. These were the birth pangs of the Meiji Restoration of 1868.

What was Taseko doing in the thick of this maelstrom? The only violence that she herself perpetrated was in her vituperative anti-Tokugawa poetry. More startling than her presence was her husband’s absence. “No other woman abandoned husband and family for the chaotic conditions in the capital [Kyoto],” notes her biographer, Anne Walthall, in *The Weak Body of a Useless Woman*.

Japanese history is rich in women of indomitable courage: a wife fighting and dying at her husband’s side, a widow defending to the death her husband’s name and cause. Taseko acted alone. Her husband, a well-to-do peasant, stayed home and minded the farm.

“Taseko,” explains Walthall, “became androgynous, an *onna masurao* (a ‘manly woman’)... By appearing in [Kyoto] at this critical juncture, she usurped the male prerogative to move about and to act on one’s own... not for her was the role usually assigned to women in revolution, that of ‘giving moral support to their men folk.’”

In becoming an *onna masurao*, did Taseko sacrifice her gender, or free herself from it? One of her poems suggests that the sacrifice, if such indeed it was, meant little to her:

*How awful to have the  
ardent heart of a manly man*

*and the useless body  
of a weak woman.*



Postgenderism. When Taseko's femaleness hindered her, she shucked it. And women today? Among *shojo manga* (comics for young girls), none has ever matched the inexhaustible popularity of *Berusaiyu no Bara* (*The Rose of Versailles*), which, since its original run in 1972-73, has been repeatedly recast as anime, films and musicals – all smash hits.

The story, set during the French Revolution, is about one Oscar Francois de Jariayes, born a girl but raised as a boy by a father who wanted a son. As a boy she masters fencing, horsemanship and combat; as a man she flings herself into the revolutionary drama and falls in love with a man. The all-female Takarazuka Revue has performed it over the years to audiences totaling millions. Its starring role, that of Lady Oscar, is a sure vehicle to superstardom for the lucky *otokoyaku* (female player of male characters – Takarazuka's answer to kabuki's onnagata) assigned to play it.

How to account for popularity on this scale? Evidently, today's young women see the sexually ambiguous Lady Oscar as a kind of role model. What does she say to them? That a female gets nowhere in the world as a mere woman? That any single gender – female *or* male – falls short of being fully human? That both genders are equally meaningless, relics of an outgrown stage in the evolution of our species?

Men, in that case, seem to be traveling the same road. Post-gender male par excellence is the *otaku*, the hyper-computerized “nerd” whose absorption in manga, anime and computer games renders him unfit for, uninterested in, and contentedly detached from, anything previous generations have recognized as “real life.”

Her we are in the heart of “Cool Japan.” In October 2008 a young man named Taichi Takashita circulated an online petition demanding the legal right to marry an anime character. “Nowadays,” the petition explained, “we have no interest in the three-dimensional world. If it were possible, we would rather live in a two-dimensional world.”

The desire to escape into a fantasy world is not new. What may be is the possibility of actually doing so – permanently. The 2-D girl of Takashita’s dreams is Mikuru Asahina, a beautiful but shy time traveler who figures in an anime series titled *Haruhi Suzumiya* – concerning which there is this interesting sidelight: In 2010, it hit the electronic grapevine that Aya Hirano, the 22-year-old voice actress who voices the series’ eponymous heroine, was not a virgin. The indignation and sense of betrayal that swept otakuland! One 23-year-old male fan told the weekly *Spa!* magazine at the time, “An idol must embody men’s ideal. To otaku, virginity is an ideal.”

Takashita may never win the legal right to marry Mikuru (though his petition drew three thousand signatures within two months), but he – like everyone else, nowadays – commands the technology to spend as much time with her as he pleases. Isn’t that as good as legal marriage? It is, if “postgenderism” takes on the added meaning, as it seems to be doing, of “postsex.”

(2013)