

# OVERCOMING INFERIORITY THROUGH THE PAST- ORIENTALISATION AND THE PRESENT-OCCIDENTALISATION

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This article examines the erasure of Japan's premodern homosexual culture, known as *nanshoku*, through the lens of Orientalism. It argues that the decline of *nanshoku* through Japan's westernisation following the Meiji Restoration (1868) entailed a process of "past-Orientalisation" and "present-Occidentalisation." While Edward Said theorised Orientalism as a Western discourse that subjugates the "Orient," this study extends his framework to analyse how Japan internalised Orientalist logic to distance itself from its own past. By historicising its own sexual past as an "Othered" element belonging to an inferior "Orient" ("past-Orientalisation"), Meiji Japan sought to align itself with the dominant Western cultural and ideological framework ("present-Occidentalisation"). Drawing on the discourse of Orientalism and expanding its application to Japan's internalisation of Oriental inferiority, this study explores how Japan's restructuring of its sexual norms was not merely a process of westernising the past norms but a subjective redefinition of its own identity. This article further contends that this pattern persists in contemporary Japanese society, where discourses on gender and sexuality essentialise Western paradigms. By illustrating how Japan's internalisation of Western ideology contributed to the persistent suppression of its cultural autonomy over sexuality, this article contributes to the discourse on how societies in the non-West have shaped modernity under the enduring legacy of Orientalist frameworks.

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## Introduction

Culture of sexualities is a rich source for the investigation of interpersonal relationships in ethnography. In colonial Latin America, sexual practices represented a caste to which individuals belonged in colonial society, where female chastity and male promiscuity symbolised privileged positions (O'Connor 30-31). In ancient civilisations such as Rome, Greece, and Persia, legal restrictions against homosexuality reveal that concerns about citizenry and the concept of human dignity developed alongside the flourishing of philosophy (Kelleher 1-24). However, the culture of sexualities and its trajectory also inform power relations that the region has endured upon encountering with the dominant external cultural norms. In Japan before the Meiji Restoration in 1868, male homosexuality was commonly practised, yet the memory of this culture has been erased in the contemporary Japanese society (Furukawa and Lockyer 98-127). In this essay, I argue that the politically motivated revising of past homosexual culture through Japan's westernisation since the Meiji era (1868-1912) parallels the imposition of Orientalism, a philosophy theorised by Edward Said. Specifically, I contend that Japanese governmental intention to erase homosexual culture was a process of Orientalising its past self to bring its present self closer to the Occident — a representation of power in global politics from which the Empire of Japan wanted to sought recognition.



## Review of Discussions on Orientalism Practised in the Orient

In Orientalism, Said claims that the concept was established by Western Orientalists to make a distinction between “the West” and “the Orient” to assert Western superiority in politics, economics, culture, academia, and bodily races that created Western civilizations. The discourse of Orientalism reveals the West's process of “Othering” the exteriority. Thus, “the Orient,” which in Said's argument initially referred to the Middle East and Arab world, transcends the geographic location of the Orient to encompass indigenous cultural spaces in the East, such as pre-modern Japanese homosexual practices, which this essay examines.

Regarding the practice of Orientalism within “the Orient,” Said extends his argument by claiming that today the practice of Orientalism is also joined by individuals from the Orient who were educated in the United States and adapted to playact the exoticised, eroticised image of the Orient as constructed by Western Orientalism, the phenomena of which he calls “a triumph of Orientalism” (323). Other scholars also have further developed theories on how Orientalism has been exercised within “the Orient” by analysing its dynamics in specific cultural practices. For example, by focusing on the imperial Japan's promotion of traditional Japanese handcrafting in its Asian colonies, Yuko Kikuchi's theory of “Oriental Orientalism” argues that Imperial Japan responded to Euro-American cultural dominance up until the wartime by spreading its own handcraft traditions and subjugating traditional crafts of its colonies in Southeast and East Asia. These colonies, themselves subjects of Western Orientalism, were thus hierarchized by Japan as part of Japan's effort to overcome its own sense of inferiority as an “Oriental” nation (Kikuchi). Similarly, Koji Kobayashi et al. proposes the notion of “self-Orientalisation” in the field of Japanese sport brand advertising in the global market, in which Japanese individuals subjectively reproduce Japan's cultural image as a desirable “Other” to European and American audiences (157-174). These theories illuminate how “the Orient” has subjectively performed what has been labelled as “Oriental” in either a subversive way (as in Kikuchi's “Oriental Orientalism” theory) or in an adaptive, yielding manner (as in Kobayashi et al.'s theory and Said's “triumph of Orientalism”) in response to the acknowledgement of

the Oriental gaze directed towards them from the West. However, further arguments must be made about the subjective eradication of Oriental cultures within “the Orient” as a result of the internalisation of the philosophy of Orientalism. By examining Japan’s strategic erasure of its traditional homosexual culture as one form of cultural eradication driven by Orientalist shame, this essay seeks to identify the notion of “Oriental inferiority,” wherein Japan found itself positioned lower within the power-knowledge framework upheld by the Western Orientalists. The essay further examines the notions of what I would call “past-Orientalisation” and “present-Occidentalisation,” in which Japan tried to make a distinction of cultural power imbalances marked by “time,” rather than conventional geographical spatiality as practised by the West, in order to assert its cultural superiority in the present by aligning its present self with the culture in the Occident and degrading its own past as containing despicable “Oriental” elements.

### **Background of Japanese Homosexual Culture and Philosophical/Religious Justification**

The dynamics of “Oriental inferiority” that led to the “past-Orientalisation” and “present-Occidentalisation” are deeply complex because, for the widely accepted male homosexual culture in Japan up until the Edo-period, the encounter with the West entailed a painful clash of dissonant ideologies about sexuality, along with the introduction of the philosophy of Orientalism, which hierarchised them. But in order to discuss this complex intersection of philosophies, it is essential to first understand the historical background of homosexual culture in Japan.

Since ancient times, spaces associated with power that were dominated by male populations had evolved alongside *nanshoku*, the term for traditional male homosexuality and its culture in Japan. The first allusive reference to *nanshoku* appears after the eighth century during Heian period (794-1185), in traditional-style poems compiled in 万葉集 *Man-yo-shu*, the oldest extant compilation of poems, suggesting that *nanshoku* was practised in the palace (Leupp 25). The Heian period was marked by stable power maintained by emperors for almost four centuries, during which culture, including homosexual practices in the palace, flourished. By the fourteenth century, under the Kamakura shogunate



(1185-1333), which marked the commencement of the feudal military government, male homosexuality in Japan spread from the ruling class of shogunates, who took over the nobility in the Heian period, to the warrior class, and eventually to the bourgeois. This was due to the expansion of the feudal system into rural areas, where *nanshoku* was often practised in lord-retainer relationships (Leupp 47-57). By the early Edo period (1603-1868), *nanshoku* had become a conduct that deserved to be praised. *Nanshoku-okagami* [The Great Mirror of Male Love], a nonfiction novel published in 1687, portrays male homosexual love stories that presented *nanshoku* as an integral mindset that strengthened the moral codes of the samurai, emphasising values such as loyalty and sincerity to maintain faithful and intimate lord-retainer relationships (Ihara). These documentations demonstrate that the martial culture had institutionalized homosexuality by the early Edo period and that Japanese male homosexuality had strong ties to vertical male relationships.

While practising male homosexuality, people sought ideological justification for their practices in philosophy/religion. This phenomenon was also prevalent in China, where Confucianism, yin-yang, and Daoism played a significant role for Chinese monks and literati, who were the major body of the homophilic practices, in interpreting homosexuality (Leupp 11-22).

In medieval Japan, Buddhism fostered the social acceptance of homosexuality by providing an interpretation that justified *nanshoku*. Unlike continental Buddhism, in which homosexuality was regarded as a sin that violated the religion's goal of overcoming desires, Japanese Buddhism was more open towards male homosexuality (Leupp 21-32). This contradictory situation is argued to have arisen from the reality in which monasteries in Japan had become another centre for male-male sexual relationships since the medieval era. Tsunoda et al. argue that the environment where approximately three thousand juvenile monks underwent training for a decade in the desolate Mount Hiei, the tradition of which had been practised since the ninth century, led the trainees to naturalise the expectation of sexual relationships with androgynous-looking male monks (114 cited in Leupp 28). Hinsch attributes the divergent evolution from Continental Buddhism to the possibility that Japanese monks, upon their return from studying Buddhism, may have modified the continental teachings to align with their own homosexual desires, which they had observed during their time in China (cited in Leupp 21). Japanese Shintoism, another major religion practised in Japan (though more commonly understood as a national identity (Godart 75)), was also tolerant of sexual desire by seeing it as purely natural phenomena, while only penalizing bestiality and incest and allowing room for believers to interpret their sexual passion for the same sex as equally encouraged as heterosexual desires (Crompton 415). Therefore, premodern philosophy/religion in Japan did not function as ethical frameworks to outright reject homosexuality. Instead, individuals sought philosophical justification for their homosexual desires by refining and reinterpreting the teachings to align with their personal experiences.

### **Decline of *Nanshoku* through the Clashes of Ideologies under the Orientalist Gaze**

What allowed Japanese male homosexuality to flourish until the mid-nineteenth century was the national isolationist policies implemented by the Tokugawa shogunate in a step-by-step manner, which were completed in 1639 and lasted until the 1850s when it reopened the border by signing unfair diplomatic treaties with Western nations, including the US, Britain, Russia, and the Netherlands. The isolationist policies were

rooted in fear of Spanish and Portuguese aggression and the Christian influence, which led to the banning of Christianity in the initial phase from 1614 (Hagemann 151-153).

One might contextualise the decline of *nanshoku* after the end of the isolationist policies in the narrative of the westernisation of Japan following the Meiji Restoration in 1868. However, I argue that the complicated trajectory of the eradication of homosexual culture, through which the governmental and public attitudes struggled to align, is a strong representation that the westernisation was not an ideologically straightforward shift with a positive mindset for the advancement of national competitiveness. Rather, I contend that it was a process of acknowledging Orientalism and its own Orientalised position and endeavouring to overcome its Oriental inferiority.

The Japanese encounter with Western philosophy and religion concerning sexualities was not as simple as the dichotomous clash between traditional Buddhism and Shintoism and Christianity newly spread by missionaries. Before the Meiji era in Japan, there was no obvious distinction of categories between "religion" and "philosophy" such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shintoism, and those between "science" (Godart 74-75). If anything, the concept of "religion" started to emerge in the 1880s to specifically indicate Christianity, gaining the connotation of being in opposition to scientific rationality and patriotic loyalty because Christianity was prohibited by the government (Godart 75). As a full-scale introduction of Western nomenclature began in the Meiji Restoration, the institutionalised concepts of "religion," "philosophy," and "science" were brought in, which collaboratively contributed to the degradation of homosexual culture in Japan. Specifically, Christianity's disapproval of homosexuality, with the "religious" concept, was tied with the "scientific" category of sexology, which defined homosexuality as a perverted and unnatural attitude of humans. Meanwhile, Western "philosophy" denied the existence of traditional philosophies in Japan that had previously justified homosexuality, regarding Western-style philosophy as the only legitimate forms of philosophy (Furukawa and Lockyer 119; Godart 75-76). It is noteworthy that the majority of Japanese philosophers back then admitted that pre-Meiji "thoughts" like Buddhism did not meet the standards of "world philosophy," with Godart



describing this attitudes as “secondary-orientalist’ essentializing of Western thoughts” (76). Thus, it is reasonable to argue that the Western-style philosophy indoctrinated in Japan included Orientalism, which hierarchised the cultural imbalance of categories. The discourse of Orientalism also connotes “homosexual otherness” built on eroticised myths about the non-West, which I argue was internalised in Japan as a sense of inferiority regarding its own sexual body (Averbuch 318). Therefore, nanshoku was placed under structural subjugation in terms of the concepts of religion, philosophy, and science, with the Western hegemony in each being affected by Orientalism.

#### “Past-Orientalisation” Accompanied by “Present-Occidentalisation”

The Oriental inferiority led to the “past-Orientalisation” in the form of detaching the pre-Meiji philosophy/religion from its present self by devaluing them. In the context of homosexuality, past-Orientalisation was followed by “present-Occidentalisation.” The Meiji government pursued the criminalisation of homosexual acts through the sodomy ordinance in 1873 by drastically revising Tokugawa criminal codes with the aim of gaining approval from the Westerners, given the fact that all European powers except France penalised homosexuality at that time (Furukawa and Lockyer 108-110). It also published a school guide advising male students to be wary of the seductive behaviours of older male students (Yamaguchi 1901 cited in Leupp 1997:203). This was due to the reality that nanshoku culture among the abolished samurai class in the Edo period was taken up by middle and high school students’ vertical relationships in the Meiji period (Furukawa and Lockyer 100). These governmental efforts to conceal the homosexual remnants in society by revising the legal framework in order to historicise them parallel the Western Orientalists’ effort to “Other” homosexual cultures in the “Othered” space.

The discourse of Orientalism practised in this context by Meiji Japan is by and largely invisible because it is subjectively practised in its indigenous land by the objects to be Orientalised themselves. However, in this act of self-Orientalisation, the entity being “Othered” is its past self, meaning that the distinction of inferior “Other/Orient” and superior “us/Occident” is structured through the historicization of “time.” Thus, underlying the westernization of the sexual norms throughout Meiji Japan is the discourse of Orientalism, and it was the process of Orientalising its past self and Occidentalising its present-self to overcome the Oriental inferiority.

#### Legacy of Orientalism and Future Vision for Addressing Sexuality Issues in Global Contexts

In the turmoil of westernisation under the influence of Orientalism, Meiji Japan relinquished its bodily autonomy of indigenous sexual culture and partially lost the subjectivity of its own present body in exchange for gaining the subjectivity to Orientalise its own past body. This absence of bodily autonomy over one’s sexual self persists, as the perception of homosexuality eternally shifted from an indigenous view that considers it a taste to an exogenous view that defines it as an identity through the modernisation process. (Saeki 127). The lack of autonomy over one’s sexual self and culture is naturalised in contemporary Japan, while the society essentialises the Western ideology on gender and sexuality to interpret its own reality. For example, current efforts at the legalization of homosexual marriage in Japan, which requires the reinterpretation of the Article 24 of the Constitution that presumes only heterosexual unions, primarily focus on adopting Western-style theories and legal practices (Kobori 101-104; Horie 37). It is crucial to recognize that this dependency on Western-style solutions is rooted in the Orientalist influence on the process of drafting the Constitution with European legalists involved, who embedded Western ideology which was homophobic

during the Meiji Restoration (Furukawa and Lockyer 1994:109). The naturalised sense of not possessing autonomy over their gender and sexual culture is also evident in the public myth that women's liberation movements in Japan had been merely Western imports, despite the contradictory fact that the efforts were made by early Japanese women's liberation activists (Ueno 10). Such condition in the non-West represents the continuous reproduction of present-Occidentalisation within the "Othered" non-West nation that has strived to overcome Oriental inferiority, the phenomena of which I argue is the legacy of Orientalism imposed upon "the Orient."

What is immediately apparent from the trajectory of sexual and gender culture in Japan is that Japanese current gender norms are a system shaped by structural subjugation of its sexual self and cultural identity in relation to the West. Thus it is vital for the future of Western feminism and Western governments' efforts to not promote itself as leading the world in addressing gender/sexuality-related issues, so as not to reconstruct the power/knowledge relations between "the West" and "the Orient" and reproduce Oriental inferiority. To achieve this, it is essential that influential bodies of knowledge production, including academia in the West, recognize more widely the discourse of Oriental inferiority and the subsequent present-Occidentalisation ongoing in "the Orient." It is my hope that countries, regardless of their positions on the West-Orient spectrum, join in discussions on gender and sexuality liberation on equal footing.

#### Footnote

1. Furukawa and Lockyer argue that the public ignorance of pre-Meiji male homosexual culture, or *nanshoku*, is attributed to two major systemic constraints. One is the restriction of freedom of speech during wartime from the late 1930s, which limited the available medium through which the culture of *nanshoku* could be informed in the public sphere. The other is the shift in the framework for the public understanding of male homosexuality from an indigenous culture to sexual perversion in the 1920s.

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