Zero to hero
Global love in provincial Japan

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Respond To This Article

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Western images of Japan tell a seemingly incongruous story of love, sex and marriage – one full of contradictions and conflicting moral codes. We sometimes hear intriguing stories about the unique sexual culture of Japan – from vending machines that dispense soiled schoolgirl panties (Gerster 143), erotic manga (Ito 70; Newitz 2) to automated love hotels (Kersten 387) available for the discreet quickie. These Western portrayals seem to focus primarily on the unusual and quirky side of Japan’s culture constructing this modern Asian culture as simultaneously traditional and seemingly liberated. But what happens, when Japanese love goes global – when exotic others (Westerners) enter the picture?

This article is shaped by an understanding of a new world space where cultural products and national images are becoming increasingly globalised, while at the same time more localised and “fragmented into contestatory enclaves of difference, coalition and resistance” (Wilson, 1). It examines ‘the local’, briefly exploring the racial and gender ideologies that pattern relationships between Western and Japanese adults living in Japan focussing on the unique perspective of Western women living and working in provincial Japan. Our research is based on four month’s ethnographic field work carried out within a small provincial Japanese city (which was home to 130 native English speakers, most of whom are employed as English language teachers) and interviews with 12 key participants.

Japanese colloquialisms like sebun-irebun (seven eleven), burasagarizoku (arm hangers) and yellow cabs (women as easy to hail as taxis – by foreigners) are used to denote the sexual availability of some Japanese women (Kelskey, Flirting with the Foreign 178). Western women in this study have also invented a colloquialism to allude to sexual availability, with the term ‘zero to hero’ used to describe many Western men who, upon arrival in Japan, find themselves highly sought after by some Japanese women as prospective partners. Western women’s social appeal in the local heterosexual community, on the other hand, is in direct contrast to their male equivalents. A greater social distance exists between Japanese males and Western females, who report finding little genuine opportunity to date local males.

Letting the c(h)at out of the bag

While living and socialising with English language teachers we became privy to women’s conversation about interracial gender issues within Japan. Western women’s reflections about gender issues within Japan have, so far, been given little or no public voice. This is due, in part, to these women’s cultural and gender isolation while living in Japan, and a general reluctance to publicly voice their opinions, combined with issues about how much it is ‘politically correct’ to say. This reticence can be attributed to a genuine fear of being misconstrued as envious, either of their male colleagues’ newfound social status or Japanese women’s attractiveness. It may also be that, by voicing these observations about interracial gender relationships in Japan, these women will publicly position themselves as powerless and thus lose any voice they do have.

Western women who arrive in Japan with expectations of living active (heterosexual) sex lives often find themselves left out in the cold (My Nippon), and while many of their male colleagues are busy pursuing and being pursued by Japanese women their own social interaction with Japanese males is often restricted to awkward conversations with seemingly wary, shy or aloof Japanese men or crude suggestive conversations at the hands of drunken Japanese males.

Some women experience their sense of self-esteem, which relies partly on sexual identity and a sense of attractiveness, plummet in these circumstances. Clarissa, a 24-year-old Australian who spent a few months waiting for her partner to join her in Japan, noticed this happening to her. She was interviewed a week after her partner arrived.
I noticed that a while ago I was feeling unattractive because nobody does anything to indicate desire or attractiveness but as soon as they get drunk they can't get enough of you.... Sober they wouldn’t do anything but when they are drunk ... they crack onto you like any Western guy.

Participants in the study have proffered thoughtful explanations for this lack of Japanese male/Western female connection, other than in the comparatively uninhibited space of being 'alcohol affected'. The reasons given include the independent personalities of those Western women who choose to move to Japan, patriarchal attitudes towards women in Japan and a general lack of communication due to cultural or language difficulties.

A lot of the women who come over here are very strong and independent and they are feared [by Japanese men] the moment they get off the plane....We didn’t come over here because we are timid and shy and looking for men.

Toni (above) also makes clear that her own Western expectations for romantic relationships may exclude her from having relationships with many Japanese males of less than fluent English speaking skills.

I’m a talker and I like to talk about ideas and books and I would find it very difficult to have.... a more intense relationship with a person that I couldn’t communicate with on that level.

Western notions of romance and marriage, particularly Western women’s expectations concerning sex and romance, involve demonstration of warmth and affection, as well as a meeting of minds or in-depth conversation. Lack of a shared language and different expectations of romantic liaisons and love are some of the factors that can combine to create cross-cultural distance and misunderstanding between Western women and Japanese men.

Zero to heroes

Japanese women often seek Western men living in this transnational borderland as an alternative to Japanese boyfriends and husbands (Kelskey, Japanese Women’s Diaspora). Western women in this study used the term 'zero to hero' to depict sought-after Western males who misuse this rise in status and behave badly in Japan. These men, as reported, are greatly over-represented in Japan when compared to their respective home communities.

Above average-looking European guy, with above average intelligence seeks above average-looking Japanese lady who can cook a little. (Tokyo classifieds)

Open discussion about the appeal of Western men to Japanese women seems to elicit critical reactions on either side of the racial and gender divide. For instance online chat discussions about interracial gender issues in Japan evidences the fiercely defensive position many Western men take when confronted with this notion. (see Aldwinkle a, Aldwinkle b, Aldwinkle c). It is clear, therefore, that this phenomenon is not limited to our research location. Women participants in this particular study detailed many examples of 'zero to heroes' behaving badly including: overrated opinion of themselves; insulting and degrading behaviour towards women in public – particularly Japanese women; inability to work cooperatively with women superiors in the workplace; sexual liaisons outside of monogamous relationships and in some cases complicated webs of infidelity.

You know one guy’s left his wife, his Japanese wife. I didn’t even realize he was married because he had a Japanese girlfriend. I thought he was playing up on his Japanese girlfriend when I saw him with someone else, but he was actually playing up on both his
wife and his girlfriend.... I mean the guys are behaving in ways that they wouldn't get away with in their own countries. So the women from those countries are, of course, appalled (Marie).

Japanese women’s desire for the company of Western males seems based on essentialised notions of the Western male as being more gentle, romantic and egalitarian than Japanese males. Analysis by Creighton, along with our own observations, indicates that there is ‘prevalent use of foreigners, particularly white foreigners, or gaijin, in Japanese advertising (135)’, constructing a discourse of the ‘desirable other’. Western images and ideals are also communicated through media texts (particularly Japanese women’s magazines) and promote ideals like individuality, leisure, international sophistication and sexual expression.

It is clear from this research and other studies (Kelskey, Japanese Women’s Diaspora) that Japanese women (living in Japan) perceive Western men as being more affectionate, kind and egalitarian than Japanese males. However, the notion of a caring and romantic Western male does not seem to be based in the reality of the situation as described by in situ Western females. Here the zero to hero construction of Western masculinity holds sway. Western females in this transnational borderland portray many of their male counterparts as general losers. One participant explained the phenomenon thus:

I think that consciously or subconsciously the reason a lot of these men come over here is because they can’t really find a relationship at home. [She explains further] somebody [Western male] told me that I remind them of everything that they are not back in their own country.

Gerster describes the attraction Japanese women have for the West (America in particular) as a ‘fatal attraction’ because most of these women will not realize their desire to marry their Western boyfriends or lovers (146-148). These women’s desire for the West (which is accomplishable and articulated through a Western partner) seems doomed from the start and it is questionable as to whether these relationships fulfil the aspirations of many of these women. Nevertheless, some Japanese women and Western men are more aware of this and are relatively explicit about their own desires.

Japanese cute girl seeking native speakers [native English speakers] who don’t lie, never betray, are funny and handsome. If you are a man like that, try me. (Tokyo classifieds)

American, 33, from California looking for Japanese girl, 20s, for having fun together. No marriage-minded girls please. Japanese ok. (Tokyo classifieds)

Conclusion

The Japanese national desire to be viewed as progressive and modern is, as with most societies, closely aligned with material commodities, particularly Western commodities. This means that within Japan “Western images probably have more advantage over indigenous ones” (Gerster 165) particularly for Japanese women. The local assumptions and generalisations about the Western men and women living and teaching in this transnational borderland are seemingly constructed by essentialised understandings of Western masculinity and femininity and differentiating these with Japanese notions of masculinity and femininity. However, as Kelsky (Japanese Women’s Diaspora) and the participants in this study suggest, those Japanese women (who desire the West) may find their expectations do not match the realities of dating Western males in Japan since many Western men do not seem to live up to this essentialized view of the Western male as a romantic and egalitarian male partner who is ready to commit to marriage.

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