

BOOK REVIEWS 書評

Male Colors: The Construction of Homosexuality in Tokugawa Japan, by Gary Leupp, University of California Press, 1996.

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Gary Leupp is quite conscious of the political import of his study of the culture of male same-sex behavior in Tokugawa Japan. He expects that showing how *nanshoku* was socially constructed will bolster the argument that any and all sexual behavior is likewise a cultural product, and thus hopes to encourage his readers "to tolerate sexual diversity in the contemporary world." (p. 9) While acknowledging the possibility of "essentialism" (the theory that homosexuality is innate and ahistorical), he ultimately takes the extreme social constructionist position that homosexual behavior is always the result of social conditions. His survey of *nanshoku* history leads him to the sweeping conclusion that *nanshoku* developed first as a result of the absence of women in monasteries, and soon spread to all-male samurai warrior bands. He proposes that *nanshoku*, having been institutionalized in these elite settings, was then adopted by impressionable "bourgeois society" in the Tokugawa period. Since there is little historical data to support this view, it appears that what inspires it is, ironically, a belief that heterosexuality is essential and that homosexual behavior only emerges when that essential identity is somehow thwarted.

That such an argument is unlikely to have any impact on contemporary hostility toward lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered persons, is not the point. The problem here is that this argument is based on circumstantial evidence. Leupp's discussion of homosexual behavior in monasteries is a hodgepodge of references to events widely disparate in time and context. Most of the sources for this discussion of medieval period phenomena are Tokugawa period writers, men whose tendency to ridicule monks reveals an antipathy for Buddhism that completely obviates their reliability as objective sources. Furthermore, Leupp treats Japanese Buddhism as though it were a simple monolithic entity, remarking, for example, that "In Buddhist Japan . . . clerics were in theory denied all sexual outlets." (p.36) This comment overlooks all of Pure Land Buddhist thought and ignores the profound ambivalence toward all aspects of monastic discipline that has characterized Japanese Buddhism, even the medieval Tendai school

Leupp is on firmer ground when he gets past his introductory, background chapter and begins his study of *nanshoku* behavior in Tokugawa Japan. Here he pulls together a great deal of the relevant scholarship to date, culling literary, pictorial, and historical sources to produce a richly textured account of *nanshoku*. He tells us about men's feelings as well as their conduct, provides economic and demographic data, discusses the impact of government policies and religious ideologies, weighs the influence of the factors of age and status, and considers how concepts of gender affected the conventions of *nanshoku*.

It is obvious to the most casual reader of *nanshoku* literature that its basic convention was the romantic or sexual relationship of an older male who played the active role in anal intercourse with a younger male who took the receptive part. Most often there were

status differences as well; monks became involved with acolytes, lords with their pages, and patrons solicited prostitutes. What is interesting in this regard, though, is that it was age that invariably correlated with sexual expression, not status. (pp. 137-144) As Paul Schalow also noted in *The Great Mirror of Male Love*, differences in age, however minor they may have been, were the basis for designating one partner to the senior role, and the other to the junior position. However, sexual receptivity did not correlate with social passivity or submissiveness. That is, a younger man of high status might, having noticed another's love, initiate a relationship with an older man of lower status, yet the younger man is always depicted as the "insertee" in anal intercourse. Thus, our assumptions about the power dynamics in these relationships, that the lover dominated and the beloved was subordinate, are frequently stymied. A case in point is the story told in *The Great Mirror of Male Love* of a youth who angrily punishes his older but meekly acquiescent lover for an imagined insult, loses all sense of proportion, causes his lover's death, and then takes his own life in remorse.

While Leupp mentions power as an issue in the culture of *nanshoku*, he does not delve deeply into the ramifications of the question. What Leupp does offer is some interesting data on sexual practices. Leupp also tackles the apparent problem of criticism of male-male sexuality that crops up in the sources by showing that what is actually problematized is the social disorder and physical violence that sometimes erupted in the context of love affairs between men.

In his final chapter, "Nanshoku and the Construction of Gender," Leupp raises an array of challenging issues. Having demonstrated, for example, that heterosexual and "lesbian" fellatio was practiced, but that male-male fellatio was specifically avoided, Leupp speculates that this was because "Male-male fellatio was too ambiguous an act for men whose sexuality had been molded to fit clear active and passive categories. As a patriarchal, hierarchical class society, Japan had to preserve *some* exclusively heterosexual role, lest the whole basis of the society be undermined. Perhaps a ban on male homosexual fellatio was necessary to preserve the fundamental notion of male-female sexual roles." (p. 194) Now, I am willing to entertain the notion that male-male fellatio was taboo because male-male sexuality was conceived on the basis of rigid active-passive roles and this sexual act did not clearly fit into this particular dichotomy. To suggest, however, that the very structure of heterosexuality in Japanese culture and "the whole basis of society" could have been threatened by this act is an extravagant claim.

Leupp seems to have felt compelled to account for the fact that passive partners in anal intercourse were not despised in Japanese culture. His logic is that in the West misogyny inspired disdain for men who took what was considered a women's role but that this did not have the same effect in Japan because there women were held in relatively high esteem. While I appreciate the perspective that Leupp offers in this regard, that there was a disjuncture between official Confucian ideology, which was infamously derogatory of women, and women's actual roles and status in society, (p. 184-187) this is a good example of a persistent tendency of Leupp's, namely, to posit the Western experience as natural and the Japanese difference as requiring explanation in Western terms. Isn't it equally plausible that the notion that sexual receptivity is demeaning is primarily an attitude about sex, not about women, and that in Japan, fewer anxieties about sexuality left men and women free of this Western notion of sexual receptivity as demeaning?

Leupp describes sexual practice in Tokugawa Japan as a variegated and flexible world: Men's taste in sexual partners ranged from women, to female impersonators, to youths, and, occasionally, to masculine men. He discusses a Japanese appreciation for androgyny at considerable length. This is interesting material but in another example of the persistence of a Western conceptual framework in his work, in his conclusion Leupp sums this all up with the simplistic assessment that "most Tokugawa men" were

“bisexual” (p. 199). This is also the root of his observation regarding pre-Tokugawa nanshoku that there was a “tendency to feminize the younger partner” and that “[h]eterosexual desire was evident in the construction of sexual objects made up, coiffured, and dressed much like women.” (p. 56) Leupp thinks of beauty as necessarily feminine or masculine, but I think human beauty in pre-Tokugawa Japan was conceived in terms that were not based on gender. It is not so much that youths were feminized, as that what was considered beautiful was, essentially, gracefulness and vulnerability. The first was usually a function of social status and the second is typically a function of age.

Leupp accomplishes in *Male Colors* what he had set out to do. He definitively demonstrates that nanshoku was a unique cultural phenomenon, one that was widely accepted and practiced. It is, nevertheless, unfortunate that this book is so dependent on Western conceptual categories, because sexuality is an area in which Japanese culture is dramatically different from the West and has the potential for radically expanding our understanding of the nature and parameters of human experience. Although this work does not contain that vision, now that this field is fashionable rather than taboo, perhaps it will inspire others to take up that task. *Male Colors* is welcome for drawing attention to the fact that there is an abundance of data on the subject.

Edo Craftsmen: Master Artisans of Old Tokyo. Text by Thomas F. Judge, photographs by Tomita Hiroyuki
NY: Weatherhill, 1994. Hardback edition, 144 pp., over 200 duotone (fine quality black and white)
photographs, format: 8½” x 11”, \$34.95

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This book tells the compelling story of Japan’s vanishing breed of *shokunin*, artisans who produce fine handmade products in traditional styles, forms, and techniques. Much of the commentary on the twelve artisans chronicled here focuses on the painstaking fabrication processes involved. The exquisite photos of the artisans at work in their studios and statements by the artisans themselves draw the reader into their world, illuminating their motivations in pursuing professions that did not offer assurances of financial success or fame. More broadly, the book underscores how changes in lifestyle and technological advancements have fostered the transition from the early modern to the modern age.

The artisans highlighted here—a woodblock printer, metal carver, kimono tailor, crest (*mon*) printer, brush maker, Kabuki calligrapher, lacquerware maker, screen (*sudare*) maker, household shrine maker, cabinet maker, wood carver, and temple carpenter—all live and work in Tokyo, a city in which the plight of traditional culture is perhaps more dire than elsewhere in Japan. Rarely in the book does the reader sense the fate of other traditional crafts in Tokyo or elsewhere in Japan. In addition, because only male artisans are highlighted here, the important contribution of women to the history and preservation of traditional Japanese crafts is also unstated. Nevertheless, these artisan’s observations may be viewed as representative of the many challenges facing those who seek to preserve traditional crafts and customs.