

Book Review

The Work of Gender: Service, Performance and Fantasy in Contemporary Japan

Kai E. Tsao ^{1*}

Published: September 1, 2023

Book's Editors: Gitte Marianne Hansen and Fabio Gygi

Publication Date: 2022

Publisher: North Lincolnshire: NISA Press

Price: £27,66

Number of Pages: 250 pp.

ISBN: 978-8-776-94312-7

The Work of Gender: Service, Performance and Fantasy in Contemporary Japan is a collected volume of seven chapters that examine the performances of gender, intimacy and agency. The book is mostly written by early-career researchers, who applied an ethnographic approach to analysing the ways these performances are lived and commodified within interpersonal relationships and a service industry that caters to a variety of customers in present Japan. If you are a scholar with interests in reflexive methodology and/or social anthropological studies of Japan, or a reader who would like to learn more about gendered relations and sexuality in Japanese culture, I would highly recommend this engaging book.

As someone interested in gender, sexuality and visual methodology, I have rediscovered the joy of reading manga just over a year ago. I grew up in Taiwan in the 1990s, with many of the Japanese anime and manga available, and their popularity has only surged since then. It was not until more recently that I picked up manga again, having lost touch with it for over ten years. This time I have looked at it with a 'feminist' lens. The more I read, the more I find myself drawn to the social relations and culture depicted in this form of visual storytelling: how, for instance, one's mannerisms and the use of language are highly gendered, and the shifts in honorifics and names demonstrate the changing relationship between people. The stories also seem to suggest more openness to non-heteronormative identities. For example, in *Komi Can't Communicate*, the gender of the character Osana Najimi is ambiguous. Within the broad 'Boy's Love' label, more titles are produced to illustrate the barriers faced by gay communities in Japan. I first learnt about how same-sex couples may use adoption to be legally recognised as family from Tanaka Ogeretsu's *Escape Journey*, since same-sex marriage is not yet possible in Japan. As illustrated in this book *The Work of Gender*, there exists a service industry that has options for men *and* women, queer *and* straight people. I sometimes caught myself thinking: for a society that has such a rigid heteronormative culture (see, for instance, Jackson, Liu and Woo, 2008), Japan seems to be 'full of contradictions'.

Reading *The Work of Gender: Service, Performance and Fantasy in Contemporary Japan* has provided me a space to learn and to critically reflect upon my own interpretation of gender as performed and lived in Japan. I often think about my positionality and how my curiosity about Japanese culture arose, alongside the increasing interests in Japanese and Korean pop cultures in the 'Western' world. The ethnographic projects in this book provide insights into how researchers navigate the complex and unfamiliar field in which they situated themselves. Their discomfort and exploration collectively unveil how gender *works* at individual, interpersonal and structural levels.

¹ Equality and Diversity Coordinator at University of York, UNITED KINGDOM

*Corresponding Author: evangeline.tsao@york.ac.uk

Researchers who worked as service providers as part of their fieldwork provide narratives of their embodied experiences of the different types of commodified emotional work. Francioni's chapter 'Serving gender' (Chapter 2) vividly documents his conflicting affective responses and unease when working at the gay bar Zenith in Tokyo. Francioni's conceptualisation of service as expressing endless availability captures the expectation on staff to offer attentive care which requires the skill to anticipate customers' needs without them being directly expressed. While service provided at Zenith aimed at enabling gay male customers to have a good time at the bar, Fanasca's (Chapter 3) experience of being a female-to-male cross-dressed escort emphasises how the business profits on inspiring female clients' emotional response to their escorts performing empathy, affection and even love. In '(Re)searching (for) identities: Crossdressed ethnography in a *dansō* escort company', Fanasca expresses an empathetic critique of the potential harm brought by the industry in which the escorts' gendered self was constantly placed in negotiations, and the clients' feelings were being exploited for financial gains. *Dansō* escorts must play the role of a 'perfect man' that is charming, protective and non-threatening, befitting the fantasy of their female clients, in order to create a sense of companionship and closeness.

'Intimacy' is also deployed in sex work. In 'Professional amateurs: Authenticity and sex work in a 'delivery health' shop' (Chapter 4), Phillips' interviewees – who are women in their 40s and 50s delivering sexual services to men – considered their work as 'healing' that is possible only through a personal, close understanding of a client and indulging his needs. The attentive care that was required echoes Francioni's experience of serving at Zenith. Likewise, Kodaka (Chapter 5) gives us a glimpse of how intimacy is commodified between the actors *eromen/lovemen* and their female fans in an adult video (AV) industry targeting hetero-women, as the chapter title 'The coin-operated boyfriend' demonstrates. The marketing strategy of these *eromen* is modelled after the idols', offering opportunities for the fans to meet the actors in groups or in more intimate private meetings. These events enabled female fans to live out their fantasies, and to obtain their physical and emotional pleasure with financial transaction. Kodaka's narrative of taking part in one group event leaves a vivid impression of the intimate interactions between the actors and fans. Her analyses also indicate how women may choose to attain their desire through this commodification of intimacy – that could be financially exploitative – rather than offering free emotional labour in a 'love' relationship.

As Gygy and Hansen (Chapter 1) point out, the sense of 'bounded authenticity' and the agency of those participating in the service industry – the providers *and* the clients – stand out in most of these chapters. The genuine psychological and emotional responses, as the researchers analysed, are embodied experience mediated by financial transaction. The only exception here is the 'delivery health shop' (Phillips, Chapter 4) in which an *atmosphere* of authenticity was deliberately created. Still, what is clear is the participants' awareness of the rules and customs that they should adhere to, as well as the time (and space) limited nature of the service. These, in fact, seems to enable the clients to experience their scripted encounters comfortably and affectively.

This volume reveals that, unsurprisingly, gender performance in the service industry aligns with the heteronormative binary embedded in modern Japanese culture. And at the intersection of gender and the service client-provider relationship, hierarchies and power dynamics are shaped. Women working in sex services are still stigmatised (Phillips, Chapter 4), even by their male peers in the industry (Kodaka, Chapter 5). The AVs made for women continue to portray men as saviours, reinforcing the discourse that female agency and sexuality are dependent on men (Kodaka, Chapter 5). The masculinity sought by female clients may be a beautified androgynous character that is not threatening, still it should be charming and protective (Fanasca, Chapter 3). Even in the field of a gay bar, the performance of sexual roles aligns with the binary gender roles to build a 'pyramid of desirability' (p. 55). At Zenith, staff members were judged and categorised as *either* a masculine presenting 'top' *or* a non-masculine presenting 'bottom'; and the customers were empowered to 'correct' them when there was any slip in their language use or demeanour (Francioni, Chapter 2). The confession from Tazu, the non-masculine presenting owner of Zenith, is an intriguing one: sometimes, he did not know whether he should be a boyfriend or a mother to the customers. He was expected to be flirtatious, but also had to be materially and emotionally caring. How have these attributes been gendered, and why did Tazu present them in such a specific and conflicting manner?

These services are subcultures situated in a wider society where gendered interactions, over time, reshape one's experience of selfhood and their relationship with the public space. Simpkins (Chapter 6) observed and interviewed music performers at a Tokyo station, and his chapter demonstrates that the musicians' experiences of dis/comfort, im/mobility, security and threat, as well as their coping strategies, are all gendered. Male musicians considered their experience, occupying and transgressing in public space, as performing their authentic self and self-realisation. This sentiment was not shared by the female musicians. Instead, they performed 'charm' and created a 'non-threatening atmosphere' to navigate social interactions in a station space with a predominantly male presence. Public space around the station is coded: compared to their male counterparts who 'naturally' hung around to interact with their supporters, female musicians were much more cautious about the risks of inviting passers-by to take an interest in their performance. This makes me wonder: how is the performance of invitation gendered? How might female musicians be perceived if they invited an audience in a space where they were 'not supposed to be'?

The ethnographies in this collection provide a rich insight and reflection into the individual processes and interpersonal negotiations, contextualized in the macro-level of social structure and cultural scripts that prescribe what kinds of behaviour or ‘performance’ are acceptable. Gamberton’s (Chapter 7) experience of conducting fieldwork in Japan reveals the everyday gender labour as well as the systemic barriers a trans person had to navigate through. In ‘I sing the body contingent: Transition as gender-work in contemporary Japan’, Gamberton explains how binary gender norms are enforced in law in the name of protecting children and family units in Japan. This is suggested in Hotaru’s – one of Gamberton’s interviewees – narrative. Hotaru seemed to express a slight dismay about their gender being questioned by students, since a certain level of respect was expected in the professor-student hierarchy in Japan.

In contrast, the ideology of binary gender and family norms is so entrenched that Hotaru seemed to ‘naturally’ accept the public scrutiny of their family life as their gender became a communal concern. This reveals a sense of ‘collectivism’ that is different from the individualism and perceived boundaries between the public and the private in the West. Similarly, Gamberton’s reflection on his fieldwork becoming a communal affair (p. 186) represents this collectivism: he was ‘vetted’ by the community, and the respondents would check on whether their recommended interviewees were taken on. Gamberton’s ethnomethodology not only demonstrates the larger cultural forces at play, but also offers an opportunity to critically review how research ethics is considered in the UK.

Approaching the end of the book, I found myself drawn to Fabio Gygi’s writing on gender performance and ‘passing’: that it is ‘part of the work of gender, in that the performance is both artificially natural and deeply superficial. It is sincere, but not authentic, and it is precisely because it lacks authenticity that it entails a degree of freedom’ (p. 214). Although the *performance* of gender cannot be authentic, ‘bounded authenticity’ enacted by this performance can be. Could this open more possibilities for agency and different imaginations of gender? *The Work of Gender* is a thought-provoking collection of essays that examine gender performance and relations in varied subcultures and in the everyday, heteronormative society in contemporary Japan. For me, the authors’ ethnographic reflections evoke important critiques of researchers’ positionality, including how and from what perspectives we are viewing. Gender work in Japan is, thus, not ‘full of contradictions’, but consisting of varied and constant negotiations within a changing society.

REFERENCES

Jackson, S., Liu, J. and Woo, J. (eds). (2008). *East Asian Sexualities: Modernity, gender and new sexual cultures*. London: Zed Books. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350219762>

Citation: Tsao, K. E. (2022). [Review of the book *The Work of Gender: Service, Performance and Fantasy in Contemporary Japan*, edited by Gitte Marianne Hansen and Fabio Gygi]. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 7(2), 35. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/13563>

Copyright © 2022 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.