

Book examines commodification of feelings, love in Tokyo's host clubs

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Centuries ago, the original Japanese geishas were male and would advise feudal lords as well as entertain the court.

Today, the Geisha role still revolves around entertainment, but a new type of male host in Tokyo has emerged. In Kabuki-chō red-light district, these hosts attempt to gain wealth and fame by selling their companionship and attention to female consumers.

In the decades after Japan's prosperous Bubble economy burst, the male hosting phenomenon has taken off. Host clubs have created an avenue for young men to get rich relatively quickly, said Akiko Takeyama, a University of Kansas researcher. Over the past ten years, Takeyama has gone underground in Tokyo's red-light districts to study the dynamics of

Japanese hosting as part of her new book, *Staged Seduction: Selling Dreams in a Tokyo Host Club*, released March 9, 2016 by Stanford University Press.

"Most of the men who work in host clubs have not received a good education, nor do they come from wealthy families. Their prospects for salaried corporate jobs are low. They think these clubs are sites for them to become successful entrepreneurs," said Takeyama, a KU associate professor of Anthropology and Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies. "Their dream is to become a big name in business and to use their work in the clubs as a means to get there."

Takeyama, whose research interests include the commercialization of feelings, emotions and romantic relationships, said the dynamic surrounding the popularity of host clubs in Japan is partially a product of changing gender roles. More [women](#) have the financial means to visit these clubs and young, working-class men have few other options for well-paid work. However, the motives, relationships and transactions themselves can complicate things, she said.

"It's not just about changing forms of masculinity, labor and social status," she said. "This particular kind of commodified romance in the club blurs the line between real love and commercial transactions. People's emotions really confuse what is real and what is commercial. This is especially the case when men and women are also attempting to present themselves as attractive and desirable to each other.

If these men's performances of romance are tied with their plans to achieve financial success, women also have their own reasons for pursuing hosts.

"Women's desires are also distinctly gendered. Many of the women I met have self-esteem issues. In this society, women still feel like they are

treated as secondary citizens. They get paid less than their male counterparts for the same work and their housework is neither compensated nor respected," she said. "They feel valued when men find them attractive."

Women are invited to experience what it is like to be a celebrity through relationships with hosts, she said.

True love does not matter much to these women in the clubs. They are more afraid of aging. Takeyama said.

"Hosts' attention and even their feigned attraction make them feel confident that they are not losing their femininity," she said. "Even though they know this romance is not real, they still see value in it."

The women often pay for all of the hosts' drinks and food at their tables. This can include exorbitant amounts of alcohol, such as "champagne towers." They may spend anywhere from \$200-\$300 per night to \$10,000 or even more. The revenue the Japanese sex industry generates is believed to be 0.5% of Japan's GDP. This would cover half of the island nation's defense budget, she said.

Despite the growth of this market for sexual entertainment, there is still prejudice against both the male hosts and female clients.

"Women may be celebrated as Japan's new consumer class, but at the same time, they are stigmatized for purchasing these erotic fantasies," she said.

Men, who cater to these fantasies instead of pursuing salaried corporate jobs, are largely looked down by those of older generations.

"Along with the shift to a less conformist and more individualistic

society, people now want to be more mobile and more flexible. All of these men's and women's desires are tied up in hopeful pursuits of liberation and satisfaction," Takeyama said. "Freedom is used as a trope to seduce people, especially those who are socially and economically marginalized, into risky and itinerant jobs, as well as excessive consumer debt."

She found that even though the economic future appears to be fraught, individuals constantly strive for better and more prosperous lives.

"In Japan, my research has shown how even hope itself becomes an object to be bought and sold. This speculative, consumer-driven 'love business' goes hand-in-hand with the financialization of the economy. This is the moment we live in," Takeyama said.

Provided by University of Kansas

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