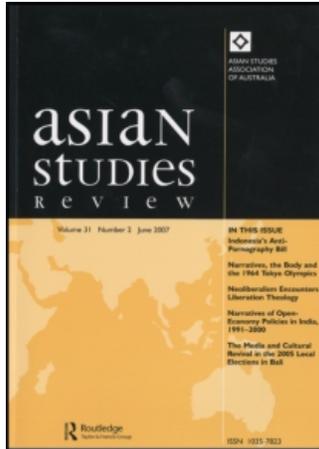


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Private Love in Public Space: Love Hotels and the Transformation of Intimacy in Contemporary Japan

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Introduction

It was a warm Friday night in May 2007 at around midnight, and I was standing on a street named *dôgenzaka* in Tokyo's Shibuya district. It was filled with strings of young couples standing in short queues outside many of the highly walled buildings flanking the street, waiting for the next available room to spend the night. I then went to Shinjuku's Kabukicho the following Friday and to Ikebukuro on Saturday at around the same time, and again saw small crowds lining the streets where similar-looking buildings are clustered. The scene on the same streets was quite different during the day and on weeknights: a regular flow of couples – young adults in work clothes – entering and leaving these establishments. One thing is certain: business is brisk. These facilities, commonly known as *rabu hoteru* [love hotels], or simply *rabuho*, are popular places offering rooms for rent for one main activity: sex. One can hire a room for *kyûkei* [rest for a duration of two-three hours] or *shukkuhaku* [an overnight stay] simply from a panel of buttons in a minimally furnished lobby where no face-to-face contact with a staff member or identification check is required. If a reservation is made through the Internet, only the reservation number is required upon arrival. The preservation of anonymity and the privacy of patrons is absolute. It is estimated that Japanese couples make more than half a billion trips to love hotels each year, and that 1.26 billion acts of sexual intercourse occur in Japan each year,¹ more than half of which take place in love hotels (West, 2005, p. 145).

Using these commercial facilities in public space for sexual intimacy appears to form a part of everyday life in urban Japan. The sheer number of love hotels attests to this: an estimated 38,000 or more across the country (West, 2005, pp. 176–79). In Tokyo, for example, one can find more than 70 love hotels in Shibuya, 50 in

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Ikebukuro, 70 in Kabukicho and 60 in Uguisudani (*LovehoMap*). It is not difficult to spot a love hotel from afar, since most have huge, neon-lit rooftop displays, and in urban areas are conveniently located within several minutes' walk from a train or subway station. Though very little data is available on the clientele, some studies and media reports suggest it is comprised mostly of married couples and single adults, due to the lack of space for sexual intimacy at home (e.g. Bornoff, 1991; Inoue, 1999). Many Japanese homes are indeed rather small and have thin, flimsy walls. Married couples with children and elderly parents, as well as unmarried adults living with parents and siblings, have very little private space to themselves, and so love hotels are said to be "just a purely pragmatic answer to a basic physical need" because it is for many Japanese "virtually the only haven of sexual intimacy there is" (Bornoff, 1991, pp. 44–45).

There is evidence that the reality has not always been as depicted, even if the true profiles of customers are difficult to determine because of the lack of record keeping by love hotel operators. Even thirty years ago, at the pinnacle of Japan's economic success, when love hotels were constantly grabbing media headlines, they were associated with prostitution and criminal activities. Nonetheless, as many studies have shown, sex in the public sphere in Japan has historically been the realm of the heterosexual couple, single and married, and in particular male adults (e.g. Allison, 1994; Inoue, 1999). The situation today, however, may be rather different, particularly in terms of the way in which love hotels are being used. Social changes brought about by economic and political developments since the collapse of Japan's economic bubble in the 1980s have effected changes to people's sexual attitudes and behaviours. Japan's love hotels play a central role in facilitating some of these transformations by providing the main available private spaces in the public sphere for individuals to experiment with and develop different sexual experiences.

One social sphere that has experienced drastic change is the heterosexual, nuclear family. The number of one-person and two-person households rose between 1985 and 2005, while the number of nuclear family and three-generation households declined.² More Japanese are marrying late or not marrying at all, suggesting that getting married and starting a family are less important as sites for providing emotional security and fulfilment. The age of first marriage has also increased,³ which means that many individuals will have had several sex partners by the time they marry. Those who marry are having fewer or no children,⁴ giving them more free time to concentrate on activities other than child-rearing, which also suggests that individuals are increasingly de-linking sex in marriage from reproduction. These trends suggest a greater focus on sex as pleasure, rather than sex as procreation.

The collapse of Japan's bubble economy has thus also affected one category of individuals: women. The male breadwinner family model has given way to that of the dual-income family. There has also been a significant shift in the work patterns of women: many are moving out of self-employment and family businesses towards paid employment.⁵ Divorce rates have also continued to rise, mostly initiated by women, which has led to an increase in the number of single-parent households headed by divorced women.⁶ Yoda (2006b, p. 267) aptly encapsulates these trends as the dual processes of "de-paternalisation of work" and the "de-maternalisation of the home", which gives an overall "redoubled impression of

maternalisation/feminisation of society". With more women becoming more openly sexually active, there may indeed be a feminisation of the public sphere.

Meanwhile, the expansion of the global media and the medical industry in Japan and elsewhere have led to a greater focus on the body: on pleasure, health and beauty. Household incomes are rising at a slower rate than twenty years ago, and the savings rate has declined. Despite increasing anxiety about employment security, however, private consumption has risen, with a greater emphasis on pleasure and recreation.⁷ The global media and the consumer market have also shifted their marketing strategies: focusing less on mass consumption and more on individuated consumption. Consumption patterns have thus tended towards the body – not just in pursuing the gratification of physical and emotional needs and desires, but also in seeking immediacy of fulfilment. Ideas about sexual intimacy, in particular, are rapidly being associated with personal pleasure, self-reflexivity and self-identity (Giddens, 1992, p. 34), as well as being sought after as desirable and necessary (Foucault, 1980, pp. 215–16). Although increasing commercialisation may have the potential to commodify various aspects of intimate life, the pleasures of the body are never wholly incorporated by consumerism since they may become “features of individualistic protest and opposition” (Turner, 1996, p. 234). As Appadurai (1990, p. 7) stated, “where there is consumption there is pleasure, and where there is pleasure there is agency”.

Agentic development can be witnessed by the increase in the process of individuation since the 1980s, which is rapidly transforming Japan from a family-centred to an individual-based society. This process – which Japanese scholars describe as *kokujinka* (e.g. Saito, 2005) – is said to have begun in the 1980s, when the government started looking into educational reform measures to promote creativity by *kosei jūshi* [stressing individuality]. There has been a surge in public debates in the media since then, spawning an array of related discourses – such as *jibun rashisa* [being like me; of my own choosing], *jiko jitsugen* [self-actualisation] and *jibun sagashi* [search for self] – which are causing a shift in values and promote a greater understanding of the self as individual (Cave, 2001; Kaneko, 2006). These discourses have come to apply to many Japanese today who have chosen alternative ways of life, work and play. Many are taking up lower-paying part-time and/or freelance work that relates more to their personal interests, rather than becoming full-time white-collar workers, and choosing single-hood over marriage in order to spend more time on matters of personal interest (e.g. Atsushi, 2005). This suggests a trend towards greater experimentation with self-identity and pursuit of fulfilment.

Moreover, there has also been a proliferation in public discourse on sex: from commercials, television chat shows, dramas and movies to magazines, self-help guides and popular literature, as well as the Internet. The popular media, for example, has been constantly churning out reports and programs on the rising trend of sexlessness in marriage since the 1980s; young Japanese women becoming sexually more active; and more married women turning to extramarital affairs for gratification. Once a matter that was confined to the privacy of the home, sex has entered the public arena. Consumer marketing too has jumped on the bandwagon, endlessly fanning new ideas about sexual and emotional desires and promising fulfilment of these desires. All this suggests that major changes are taking place in

Japan today, especially in terms of the meanings and values associated with sex, and the sexual attitudes and practices of individuals.

How do love hotels fit among all these changes? As the dominant place for sex in public, love hotels play a central role in providing the much needed space that helps to facilitate some of these changes that are taking place in Japanese society. Love hotels are as much a part of Japan's cultural landscape as they are a part of the country's physical landscape. Unlike the countless convenience stores across the country, the love hotel does not symbolise neutral space. Rather, as a commercialised, private space in the public arena for sexual activities that has been historically designated as male space, it represents a social space that I consider to be gendered, contested and hence problematic.

This paper aims to examine the integral role that Japan's love hotels play in the changes in people's sexual perceptions and practices; how they are linked to the processes of individuation in Japanese society; how they facilitate the growing link between sex and self-identity brought about by the increasing commercialisation of intimacy; and finally how they contribute to the feminisation of the public sphere. I use the word "sex" in this paper to refer to both "the domain of sexual difference" between men and women, and the erotic activity of sexual intercourse (Grosz, 1995, p. 213). Following Jackson and Scott (2007), I take "sexuality" as "a sphere of social life" in which "sex" is an activity – along with erotic desires, pleasures and practices – and "sexual" "qualifies the activities, practices, emotions, sensations and representations" of that sphere. I use "intimacy" interchangeably with "sexual intimacy" to refer to the experience of closeness of a sexual and sensual nature. Given these definitions, sexual relations are thus seen as social, embodied and gendered activities occurring in a given place that is often fused with webs of power. By "individuation", I mean the process of perceiving oneself as distinct in a relational context, for example from the family. Finally, I use "agency" not to refer to absolute autonomy of the individual in opposition to the collective, but to refer to the ability of individuals to exercise varying degrees of independent choice and action within and outside normative parameters of expected behaviours. Social expectations and norms certainly exist everywhere, but individuals are not passive. Individuals are active participants who constantly interpret, re-interpret and even challenge the meanings and capacities that have been constructed for the spaces that they use, subject to their positions in society. As Ortner (2005, p. 37) has argued, "subjectivity" is a "complex structure[s] of thought, feeling, reflection, and the like, that make social beings always more than the occupants of particular positions and the holders of particular identities".

Methodology

This paper relies mainly on personal interviews conducted with adults who have used love hotels in Japan for sex. The data gathered for this paper came from unstructured interviews with more than 36 Japanese adults who have used a love hotel in Japan at least once, and was collected between February 2002 and June 2007. To protect the identities of my respondents, I have used fictitious first names. The interviews, most of which were conducted and recorded in Japanese and later

transcribed into English, were conducted mainly in Tokyo and its outlying areas of Yokohama, Kawasaki, Atami, Chiba and Saitama, as well as in Osaka, Kyoto, Kobe, Sendai, Hiroshima and Akita. The respondents' ages range from 20 to 55 years; 16 are men and 20 are women. One-third of my sample comprises those who are single or never married (12 respondents), while 17 are married and 7 divorced. In terms of occupation, 5 are students, 6 are full-time housewives, 5 women have part-time jobs, and the remaining 20 are in full-time employment. The methodology I adopted was that of snowball and random sampling. The random interviews were conducted with total strangers in cafes, restaurants and parks, as well as on trains and on the street. I began to interview them after we had started talking generally about living in Japan. Their expression of interest in my research on love hotels and their willingness to discuss private, sexual matters did not surprise me, although I had expected a few rejections. However, I was only declined an interview once. The snowball sample comprised people who were introduced to me by a mutual friend or acquaintance, and who had had at least one extramarital experience. Many of my informants appeared to be knowledgeable about which love hotels to go to for certain features or facilities, and said they owned love hotel guides to help them choose. However, several said they would simply enter any love hotel that was reasonably priced and available when they wanted one.

I also spent a total of approximately 30 hours – 8 three-hour observations – outside love hotels in six locations in Tokyo (Shibuya, Shinjuku, Ikebukuro, Sugamo, Ebisu and Uguisudani), Osaka and Kobe to watch people entering and exiting love hotels. More than 200 love hotels were observed from the outside, although I rented 6 love hotel rooms on separate occasions across Tokyo to collate first-hand information. On several occasions, I had the opportunity to speak on an informal basis to cleaning ladies who worked in love hotels, to gather some background information on the profile of the clientele.

Transforming Intimate Space

Confined Pleasure in Yoshiwara

The history of love hotels is imbued with as many contradictions as the socio-historical constructions of sexuality in Japan, both being inextricably bound up with the patriarchal structure of the society and governed by its paternalistic values and ethical system following the introduction of Confucian morality⁸ during the feudal periods⁹ (twelfth to nineteenth centuries) and later implemented more systematically during the Meiji period (1868–1912) through the various ideological and institutional means utilised by the authorities.¹⁰ Men and women were said to enjoy the free exchange of love and sex during the Nara period (710–84), since Japan was an agrarian society and sex was encouraged as a shamanistic symbol of agricultural fertility and productivity (Seigle, 1991, p. 1). The systematic control by the authorities of sexuality in public is said to have begun in 1618, following the establishment of Japan's first walled-in quarter for prostitution in the old capital of Kyoto (Seigle, 1991, p. 8). This was said to be the prototype of the *Yoshiwara*, the only government-approved quarters with facilities available to people for entertainment and sexual

liaisons that flourished during the Edo period (1600–1868) (see Shoichi, 1999; Suzuki, 2002). However, the strict code of behaviour that was introduced during the Edo period applied only to the *samurai* [warrior] class, whereas commoners were allowed to freely enjoy romantic love and even have illegitimate children (Bornoff, 1991, pp. 83–149).

Some studies have speculated that love hotels might have evolved through various manifestations from similar types of establishments that existed within or near the *Yoshiwara*, the walled-in entertainment quarter that the Tokugawa authorities had turned to its advantage to boost tax revenues. Within the *Yoshiwara* came the *deichaya* [meeting tea-houses], which were replaced by *machiai* [meeting places] and *sobaya* [noodle shops] in the early part of the twentieth century (Inoue, 1999, pp. 68–190). These *machiai* and *sobaya*, however, were widely used as prostitution centres, for male clientele to meet *geisha* [female entertainers who at times also worked as prostitutes] and other paid companions for sexual services. It was not until the 1920s that other forms of indoor facilities began to emerge and cater to the needs of adult men and married couples. Nonetheless, sex-related facilities in the public domain were mostly associated with masculine values and represented male sexual space, following the Meiji government's promulgation of the *ie* [household] system and the related gender ideology *ryōsai kenbo* ["Good Wives Wise Mothers"] as part of its effort to modernise Japan.¹¹ Thus began the division of labour – men worked outside in public space while women's work was confined to the privacy of the domestic realm – a practice that was pervasively implemented through the socialisation of men and women, and hence persisted through World War II until after the collapse of Japan's economic bubble.

Meanwhile, small American-style motels were said to emerge in Kanagawa prefecture near Tokyo in the mid-1920s, although unlike those in the United States, these motels were intended for heterosexual couples and were relatively "clean" (Suzuki, 2002, pp. 118–21). At the same time, places known as *enshuku* [one-yen dwellings] – because customers literally paid one yen per person to rent a room by the hour – also began to appear in various Japanese cities. These were said to be the first true predecessors of the modern love hotels because, unlike ordinary hotels and other facilities, *enshuku* had exotic rooms with Western furnishings, double beds and locking doors. The *enshuku*, and to a lesser extent bathhouses, thus became the primary locations for sex outside the home until the late 1960s (Inoue, 1999, pp. 193–249), although some sources have suggested that it was not uncommon to see young adults having sex in public parks including the outer grounds of the Imperial Palace in Tokyo after Japan's defeat in World War II (Inoue, 1999, pp. 10–11).

Big and Plentiful

Japan's love hotels, however, were said to have acquired their names in the 1970s when Japan's rapid economic expansion fuelled a growing interest in things Western, as well as an increase in consumption and leisure (Suzuki, 2002, p. 1). The banning of prostitution by the American Occupation in 1956 apparently did little to impede the growth of prostitution and sex-related establishments in postwar Japan (Seigle, 1991, pp. 12–13). Instead, postwar reconstruction programs fuelled demands for the infrastructure and public facilities for entertainment. The opening

of the “outlandish Disneyland castle-like” love hotel called “Meguro Emperor” in Tokyo in 1973, as well as several others that mimicked themes from Western fairy-tales, spawned a spate of media articles that began to coin new names for these establishments, including “companions’ hotels”, “partners’ hotels”, “lust hotels” and “love hotels” (Bornoff, 1991, p. 20; Inoue, 1999, p. 303). Many others soon followed, with one in Shibuya naming itself “Passion”; others were named “Woo”, “Casablanca” and “Sky Love” (in Ikebukuro); “C-Heaven” and “New Seeds” (in Uguisudani); “Love” (in Shin-Okubo); “Venus” and “Paradiso” (in Kabukicho); and “Aphrodite” and “Hotel Eros” in other places; or simply identifying themselves by a pink heart (in Asagaya). Thus began the era of Japan’s earliest love hotels, which grew larger in number during the period of Japan’s rapid economic growth in the 1980s. Love hotels were by then very different from their historical predecessors in the Edo period (Seigle, 1991, p. 9). Subjected to very limited zoning regulations (see West, 2005), love hotels were springing up everywhere across the country, with many clustered together around highway junctions, while others were within several minutes’ walk of a train station, and a few were even located near schools and residential areas.

The 1980s marked an era of enormous wealth and prosperity as the country’s economic growth soared to new heights in a period still referred to by many as “Japan Inc.” (Yoda, 2006a, p. 29). The period also witnessed the heightening of the ideologically and institutionally imposed sexual division of labour that assigned men to the realm of work and channelled male sexuality outwards into the public sphere, while confining women to the home and female sexuality to the private realm of domesticity. At the pinnacle of Japan’s economic success, large corporations were said to be so flush with funds that many even had specific budgets to splurge on a range of entertainment activities away from work in restaurants, bars, golf courses, hostess clubs and nightclubs – all of which were endorsed by the Japanese government as tax deductible expenses (Allison, 1994, p. 9). In *Nightwork*, Allison (1994) documented the ways in which many *sarariman* [white-collar male office workers] utilised company funds to frequent hostess clubs after work during that period as a form of male corporate bonding. Activities outside the home in the public sphere, including male sexual play, symbolised maleness, thereby legitimising the links between work and play, and between business and entertainment. As part of Japan’s entertainment industry, generally known as *mizushôbai* (this literally means “water business” and refers to the lightness or casualness of sex-related activities outside the home that were thought to not disrupt the social order), love hotels too benefited tremendously from the economic boom, although they also acquired a negative image following a spate of media reports on prostitution, criminal activities and *enjokô sai* [compensated dating], a term used to refer to high-school girls exchanging sex for money in love hotels (Suzuki, 2002, p. 148). This prompted some love hotel operators to clean up their image by referring to themselves as “leisure hotels” instead.

Meanwhile, the media’s attention to love hotels was mostly focused on their ostentatious architecture, particularly in the case of those with rooms designed with fancy Disneyland, gothic, jungle and undersea-world themes, or filled with the paraphernalia of erotic equipment such as vibrating, rotating or water beds; fully-mirrored walls, ceiling and floor; whirlpool bathtubs; sado-masochistic tools; and

pornographic videos; or state-of-the-art multimedia entertainment consoles offering laser shows, movies, karaoke, computer games and Internet access. Many love hotels today are much plainer, thanks perhaps to the revision of the Entertainment Law in 1985¹² by the Japanese government in an effort to “clean up” Japan’s reputation for sleaze as represented in the foreign media during the 1980s (West, 2005, p. 166). Some say that the actual number of love hotels has not dwindled, contrary to official records, as the new legislation only led to the re-categorisation of love hotels under non-sex-related industries, and a restructuring that “ushered in a new era of prosperity and growth”¹³ (West, 2005, p. 170).

Diverse and Democratising

And grow they did, though not immediately after the collapse of the bubble economy. Post-bubble recession pushed many love hotels to the verge of bankruptcy, especially the small, family-run operations. Many were later rescued by conglomerates and private capital investment groups, thus shifting the ownership structures from sole proprietorship to corporate-style management. Well-organised and heavily funded, many love hotels today have become part of large and sophisticated commercial operations that are geared much more towards mass marketing and profitability. Japan’s love hotels are indeed big business, and their profits are staggering. The industry’s annual revenues are estimated at approximately 4.32 trillion yen (US\$ 4.3 billion) (West, 2005, p. 172 citing Futabasha, 1999, pp. 104–5; *J@pan Inc.*, July 2004), accounting for nearly 1 per cent of Japan’s GDP for 2004 of US\$ 4.9 trillion (Central Intelligence Agency, 19 June 2007). The industry’s annual returns are said to exceed most savings accounts in Japan, which lured MHS Capital Partners to launch a love hotel fund and raise US\$10 million from foreign institutional investors several years ago, while Global Financial Support Company is reportedly preparing to launch its eleventh love hotel fund to add to its love hotel portfolio, worth 11.6 billion yen in June 2007 (Wakao, 2007).

The arrival of major companies and their marketing budgets soon led to the emergence of a plethora of magazines, guide books and popular literature referring to these establishments not as love hotels but as “fashion hotels”, “boutique hotels” and “trendy hotels”, with others describing them as *ai no kūkan* [space for love], *etsuraku* [space for forbidden pleasure], *yume no kūkan* [dream space] and *otona no kūkan* [space for adults], all of which appear to target women and young adults. Some popular literature heralded them as a democratising process that no longer discriminated against non-heterosexual customers. All these descriptions aimed to shed the sleazy image and negative associations that love hotels had had in the past, by promoting them as commercial places that offered sexual intimacy associated with fun, pleasure and leisure to a diversity of people.

A survey of more than thirty love hotels that I conducted across Tokyo tells a different story. The fancy ones with sensational themes from Western movies, architectural designs and theme parks that are depicted in the media appear to be in the minority. From the reasonably priced to the above average (2-hour rental charges of between US\$30 and US\$80), the 6 love hotel rooms I rented were plain-looking and offered basic facilities. Unlike many of their foreign counterparts – though many in Seoul and Taipei are said to be similar to those in Japan – love

hotels in Japan are not run-down, cheap facilities located in marginal areas, like the “seedy, low-rent joints in the wrong parts of town” in the US (West, 2005, p. 146). Most offer basic rooms with a bed, a shower room and a television set, although they seem to come with at least a feature or two that are not usually found in most homes, such as a transparent, glass bathtub, coloured lighting, condom-dispensing machine and a range of cosmetics, beauty and bath products for women. Their entrances are extremely discreet, and interaction with staff is minimal, with rooms often selected from a panel of buttons and the bill settled by pneumatic tube, automatic cash machines, or a pair of hands behind a pane of frosted glass. While the cheaper love hotels are rather utilitarian, higher-end hotels still have fanciful features such as rooms decorated with cartoon characters, equipped with vibrating beds, or decked out like dungeons, complete with sado-masochistic gear.

Nonetheless, the media, as always, prefer to focus on the sensational and sleazy features and facilities of some love hotels. The Internet website *Quirky Japan* described the love hotel in Japan as a spot for “off-the-wall escape from conformity, a monument to hedonism, and a libertine’s paradise”. In February 2005, a different Internet website, *Asian Sex Gazette*, wrote:

Japan’s “love hotels” are hard to miss. Clustered around freeway ramps and dotting the suburbs, the neon-lit hotels often look like faux castles or garish villages from the Arabian nights... Modern love hotels look like European rooming houses, jungle-draped lodges or windowless office towers. The rooms often have themes, such as tropical resort, watery grotto or Asian getaway. Huge bathrooms contain scents and dried flowers, ready to throw in the whirlpool tub (*Asian Sex Gazette*, 20 February 2005).

After spending 12 nights in 10 hotels in Japan, including several love hotels, American anthropologist Gloria Levitas was quoted as saying that: “[f]antasy is considered the hallmark of love hotels... which are looked on as reasonably respectable in a country where the commercialization of sex startles many Americans” (Levitas, 1987).

That love hotels are an integral part of the cultural, physical, and economic landscape in urban Japan is undeniable, but it would be misleading to assume that ideological and institutional pressures no longer intervene in the sexual lives of individuals. From the government to civilians, many conservatives still consider it necessary to regulate and monitor the sexual behaviour of individuals, particularly female sexuality. Demographic concerns still prompt many conservative bureaucrats and policymakers to continue to push for tighter control over the reproductive health and functions of women’s bodies. The Japanese authorities, for example, have repeatedly thwarted some investment activities planned by a few love hotel chains. Aine, a Shizuoka-based network of 150 hotels, and Kato Pleasure Group, an Osaka network of 50 hotels, were on several occasions prevented from obtaining public listing on the Tokyo Stock Exchange or on other stock exchanges in the country (*J@pan Inc.*, July 2004). Many Japanese people have also protested against the development of new love hotels near their homes, some even demanding that existing ones be demolished or moved elsewhere, on the basis that they threaten to erode sexual morality and destroy families. Sex, regardless of the normalising

discourse in the media, is a topic that still creates discomfort and incites social dissent and moral indignation in Japan.

Caught between the liberalising ideas in popular discourse and the conservatism in aspects of society, how do many Japanese today perceive and experience sex? Using love hotels as the in-public space as the dominant place for sex, how do individuals construct the meanings of this space? How do these vary according to age, gender and social position? How are these being contested? How have the processes of modernisation and globalisation that have brought about increasing commercialisation of intimacy and individuation shaped people's sexual attitudes and practices? How do they affect gender relations in the contests about meanings and identities? How are people in Japan, to borrow Stivens's (1998, p. 1) words, reworking the symbolic meanings and use of the "public" and "private" in their agentic pursuit of self-actualisation in order to make sense of their lives?

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

My findings revealed a wide range of responses from my informants on their attitudes towards sex and love hotels. Despite the small size of the sample, which can hardly be assumed to be representative of the entire population in Japan, there are certain degrees of consistency observed within specific groups of people, in terms of age, gender and social status. Given that marriage appears to be the key determinant that shapes ideas about what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate sexual behaviours, I have organised their narratives in a way that will best reflect the developments in their attitudes towards sex, based on age and marital status – that is, by intersecting the narratives from men and women from the youngest to the oldest, and from single adults to those who are married. Their narratives demonstrate very clear distinctions based on gender, with the young, unmarried Japanese revealing feelings of anxiety and frustration over a lack of recognition by society of their adulthood and need for sexual intimacy, while older Japanese expressed varying degrees of discontent with the gender roles expected of them and consequently the gendered sexualities assigned to them in Japanese society. For the purposes of illuminating how sexual attitudes and behaviours are changing in post-bubble Japan, I have deliberately selected narratives from people with conflicted desires and experiences. This is not to say that all my informants encounter problems in their sexual relations, or are protesting against expectations of their sexual conduct. Nonetheless, all of my informants agreed that love hotels are not merely convenient facilities but also among the necessities in their everyday lives. Despite being described as a necessity, as these narratives will show, love hotel space remains ambiguous, since it symbolises different things to different people.

The narratives of younger men and women tended to focus on their desire to be free from family expectations and break away from the constraints placed on them, as well as their demand to be recognised as adults. Their perception of sex appears to be situated in the personal and private realm – of *jibun* [self] or *kokujin* [individual] – that is pitched against the wider social system – i.e. the family and Japanese society. However, their understanding of sex is largely informed by the popular media, which itself is situated within a specific socio-historical milieu, so their struggle for

recognition of their adulthood in terms of their sexuality in the public sphere is ultimately dictated by the prevailing sexual norms in Japan, which are dominated by the sexuality of the male adult. Ken, a 25 year-old single male, says he learned everything about sex from his friends in elementary school and from pornographic *manga* and movies, which encouraged him to act out some of the sexual fantasies he had developed when he was younger. Several attempts at re-enacting some violent sex scenes with his first girlfriend earned him a mouthful of insults and a slap in the face instead:

I still feel a little guilty every time I take my (current) girlfriend to a love hotel... I feel as if I am doing something really bad to her... It is normal to want sex, right? Why do people make you feel it is wrong? If only I had learned about sex properly, I mean, not from *manga* and movies... I really didn't know. Nobody told me that it was wrong or bad... my friends and I simply thought that girls liked it when men were rough... my (previous) girlfriends didn't like them at all... one said that I was a sex maniac... another threatened to call the police because she thought I was mentally sick... (*laughs and shakes his head*)

... a love hotel is the only place where I can feel like an adult... At home I am still being treated like a child, even though I have a full-time job and a girlfriend... my family still thinks that I am immature and incapable of managing my own life.

When he was an adolescent, Ken saw sex as marking his transition into adulthood, a process that was facilitated by love hotels, which provided him with the space for its realisation, albeit as a series of brief moments over a prolonged period of time. The media's influence on his sexual knowledge and attitudes during those formative years instilled in him a strong male bias in his understanding of the difference between male sexuality and female sexuality, given that the kinds of magazine he read were intended specifically for teenage men and often depicted men as sexually aggressive and women as passive (see Allison, 2000). The way in which many teenagers like Ken are exposed to popular teenage magazines that are often explicit and non-judgmental in presenting themselves as sex manuals caused him to learn that the reality can sometimes be rather harsh (White, 2002, p. 148). Ken may thus not be alone in experiencing this kind of emotional and psychological stress in trying to affirm his adulthood, albeit only within a certain permitted private space in the public arena.

Keiko shares Ken's frustration about not being treated as an adult, even today, at 26 years of age, although her reactions were more negative. Despite having all the "things to play with" in love hotels, she says "fun" and "comfort" are not words she would use to describe her experiences:

Love hotels make me feel dirty... we have to rush every time we are there... we get to be alone together and do things without worrying about whether people are watching us... these rooms are used by so many people... every two hours... that makes me feel very cheap... like a woman in the *mizushōbai*...

Sayuri, a 28 year-old office worker who still lives with her parents, also recounted her “difficult” and “terrible” first sexual experience in a love hotel when she was 16. She and her then boyfriend had walked around the love hotel area in Tokyo’s Shibuya district for nearly an hour because they were both overwhelmed with “embarrassment and fear” to finally enter one:

If only we had our own place, we would not be as tormented . . . I wish my parents were more open about sex and understanding towards our need to have our own space for such things (sex, I mean) . . . it would be very comfortable if we could have sex in our own bedrooms . . . I am already an adult; not a child any longer.

Sayuri said she first learned about sex when she was 12 years old – from her peers, who introduced her to pornographic magazines for teenage women. She described the sex education she received in school as being “all about contraception, pregnancy and childbirth in marriage”. Her parents never discussed the topic at home, leaving her to romanticise about sex and love through Western movies and fiction. She soon became disillusioned and frustrated after she started going to love hotels:

My boyfriend and I had nowhere to go to . . . (have sex) . . . I started hating love hotels . . . these places are not clean . . . and we had to rush every time we went there . . . I just stopped enjoying sex after a few times . . . Having sex in love hotels killed whatever feelings of love and romance I had . . . It was always so rushed . . . that I felt like I was one of those women (that is, prostitutes) who goes to a love hotel to do a job and then it’s over.

For these young adults, sex is an important site for constructing self-identity and agency; it involves a difficult process of negotiation and empowerment. Although it is perceived as a necessary part of growing up, of becoming *otona* [adult] and attaining *jiritsu* [independence], their efforts and desires are frustrated by their parents’ different interpretations of *jiritsu* and *otona* for young, unmarried adults. Despite the various pressures for change, many Japanese today still subscribe to the conservative, patriarchal view that women’s “proper” place in society is in the home (Yoda, 2006b, p. 267). As in the past, marriage is still seen as marking the transition to becoming *otona* or *ichininmae* [coming of age], even though it is the man who becomes *shakaijin* [a full member of society] when he marries and assumes the duty and responsibility of financially supporting a family, while a woman is still expected to find fulfilment in her role as wife and mother (see Hendry, 1987; Iwao, 1993; Lebra, 1976). This explains the hesitancy on the part of many parents and educators to recognise, let alone permit, the sexual activities of the young and unmarried.

Such conservatism is related to the ideological and institutional control the state still has, even though policies are often ambiguous and contradictory. Japan’s education system today, for example, is often pulled in various directions (Goodman, 1990, pp. 91–94), with right-wing educators and policymakers demanding a stronger focus on patriotism, “Japanese tradition” and moral education, while business leaders insist on creativity. Educational reform policies produced during the late 1980s and 1990s had begun to focus on *kosei jishu* [stressing individuality] to encourage creativity by introducing more freedom and choice into

the education system, efforts that some critics said were driven by business demands to be more competitive in the new world economy in the information age (Cave, 2001). Meanwhile, the sex education curriculum remains very much focused on reproduction within marriage and ignores the various issues relating to sexual health. Since many sex educators still believe that excessive talk will encourage teenagers to be more sexually active, sex as a subject is largely avoided. Instead, family planning and abortion are discussed in the context of the processes of reproduction, pregnancy and childbirth; the use of contraceptives – mainly condoms – is discussed in the context of family planning; and little mention is made of sexual violence against women and sexual deviance, either in the textbooks or during lessons (Yamamoto, 2004, p. 19). Teenage women typically resort to abortion in the event of unexpected pregnancy, and adult women marry (see Ezawa, 2002).¹⁴ Maintaining the boundary between private desires and gender role expectations can indeed be problematic for many young Japanese (White, 2002, p. 4).

Given that the construction of young people's sexuality by education and family is inadequate to provide them with a stable, emotional anchor, the popular media and the consumer market have come to shape their values and even dominate their lives to a greater extent than the family. The widening gulf between young Japanese and their parents increasingly opens up the space for developing and experimenting with new ideas about self-identity and fulfilment. Some surveys show that young Japanese today are spending more time on the Internet and mobile telephones, and thus becoming more dependent on and attached to social networks established via these technological means.¹⁵ Ironically, this has the effect of encouraging young adults to develop less inhibited and more liberal sexual attitudes and behaviours in the public sphere. With a proliferation of Internet chatrooms and forums for viewing pornographic materials, discussing sex and arranging dates, many young adults' activities become difficult to monitor. However, neither the mass media nor commercial industry is homogeneous in its representations, which can often be misleading. Encouraged to associate sex with pleasure, more young adults also risk turning their understanding and experience of sexual intimacy into a commodity that seems more desirable than it may actually be (Suzuki, 2002, pp. 9–10). Having to experiment with their sexuality in the public sphere can often be emotionally trying and even lead to self-condemnation, especially for women.

Consuming Sex without Marriage

The narratives of older adults show a similar shift away from the home. The main emphasis is on the separability of sex from other aspects of one's private or intimate life. Older, unmarried adults with professional careers have the economic independence and autonomy to move away from their parents and live by themselves. Yet some seem to prefer to keep sex outside the home. 36 year-old Harumi describes herself as a "parasite single"¹⁶ who has lived alone for over 10 years and enjoys her independent lifestyle, and her committed-yet-detached relationship with her manager at work:

My close friends often tease me by calling me names... such as *makeinu*¹⁷ [loser dog] or *onibaba*¹⁸ [hag or old witch]... they say I am being selfish for not

getting married and giving birth... Marriage is no longer a necessity or a security for women like it was for my mother and women of her generation... there is no merit in marriage... working life is tough enough... I do not want the extra burden of looking after a husband and children... I want to live my life the way I want, and do the things I want...

Harumi said she kept most of her sexual encounters outside her home in order to protect her privacy:

I would go to a love hotel to have sex with my boyfriend even though I have my own apartment... it is better to keep this outside as I don't wish to have men coming into my own private space... we would each pay half of the room charges because I would feel as if I am doing him a favour if he pays for the love hotel rooms... I enjoy sex as much as he does and so it is only fair that I also pay for my share.

Independence for Harumi means the ability to control her life and to enjoy *jibunrashii seikatsu*¹⁹ [lifestyle of her choice] without unnecessary complications. She sees social relations as burdensome and hence decides to exercise *kôshi wo kubetsusuru* [maintain the distinction between the public and the private] in intimate, sexual relations to protect the purity and privacy of *jibun no kûkan* [her own space] at home. Sex for her is an activity for pleasure that belongs to the outer sphere of her life. She therefore insists on paying for her share of the rental of love hotel rooms so that she will not feel as if she has been paid to have sex with her boyfriend, as she does not want expectations or complications to develop in the sexual relationship she currently has. Even though she is willing to pay for the entire room rental, her boyfriend has repeatedly declined this offer, and acquiesced to it only once. This is no surprise perhaps, since such an arrangement has strong associations with commercialised sex, an activity in which men are typically the customers paying for sexual services.

42 year-old Reiko, whose 6-year marriage ended in divorce 9 years ago, gives a rather similar account:

My marriage was good only for the first few years before I quickly became disillusioned... Both my ex-husband and I had full-time jobs, but he still expected me to do most of the housework... he would say to me that since women are better at housework and so they should do it... I think he was actually a little resentful that I did not give up my job to be a full-time housewife... he wanted to be seen as a capable sole breadwinner... but I was not that dependent on him...

Becoming single again was liberating for Reiko, who now has an active sex life, although living with her teenage son means that her sexual activities need to be kept outside the home, mostly in love hotels:

My home is now my own private space. It is a family space I share with my son, and no one else. I do not mind having sex outside, because it makes things

more manageable that way. I also told my son not to bring his girlfriend home . . . not for sex . . . it is better in a love hotel . . .

By situating sexual intimacy outside while protecting their own private space in the home, women like Harumi and Reiko are re-defining the meanings of the two spheres. Sexual intimacy is also seen as having a fluid quality, something to be kept in the public sphere and differentiated from the intimacy or privacy of the home, but also capable of being privatised by bringing it home when the context changes. A high degree of emotional stability and autonomy are required to manage the boundaries. Reiko's *jiritsu* is manifested in her ability to admit that the choice to marry her ex-husband was "*jibun no sei dakara*" [her own fault],²⁰ and to take sole responsibility for undoing the mistake through divorce. By becoming a single mother, Reiko achieved a re-definition of motherhood and family, from one based on the heterosexual nuclear family model to one centred on a female breadwinner – a trend that is rapidly on the increase in Japan.²¹

Empowerment for women like Reiko stems from having crossed the private/public boundary when they entered the workplace, moving from the *uchi* [inside], or the private realm of domesticity, that has historically been designated for women to the *soto* [outside], or the male realm of work and play in the public sphere. It is not uncommon to hear the phrase *onna wa shakai ni detekita* [women have come out into society] or *onna wa soto ni detekita* [women have come outside] in conversations and the media in reference to the increasing trend towards women's participation in the workforce. Women are therefore able to choose to situate sexual intimacy in commercialised space in a public form of *asobi* [play], while preserving their own private space. Unless and until their sexual relations become *honki* [serious], as Harumi and Reiko said to me, they will not take them into their own private space in the home. As such, these women are not only re-drawing the public/private boundary by assigning different meanings to intimacy, including sex; they are also developing new domains of intimacy (Giddens, 1992, p. 43). Thus, in addition to work, intimate and sexual experiences also become important sites for self-identity and agency.

While some women are re-working the private/public boundary by differentiating the meaning of sex from the intimacy of private space, others are doing the same by re-drawing the marital boundary and the gendered distinction of spheres. 36 year-old Masahiko says that he often entertains thoughts of "running away from home" due to the stress he experiences in having to support a wife, two young children and an aged mother. He has changed jobs four times in the past 10 years, and sees a rather bleak future ahead. To feed his family, he works two jobs, which keep him away from home most weekdays, and this has placed a considerable amount of pressure on his marriage. Though Masahiko goes to love hotels with his wife several times a year for a "cheap holiday" since it is not convenient for them to have sex at home, his frustrations sometimes prompt him to seek gratification with a "hostess" or prostitute, despite his economic situation:

. . . I love my wife but I cannot have sex with her the way we used to . . . at least not the way I like it . . . I cannot enjoy sex with my wife in a playful way . . . I mean, erotic sex . . . but in love hotels, with another woman with whom I can be

as crazy as I like and then we go our separate ways . . . there is no stress, but play, and so I can enjoy it . . . and it does not affect my marriage . . .

Masahiko's narratives express the frustrations faced by many blue-collar male workers, who work long hours and demand their wives labour just as many hours in the home to keep the family functioning properly. Masahiko's communication with his wife is thus minimal, and when they talk it is mostly about the children. Masahiko cannot remember when he stopped having sex with his wife because he no longer perceived her as a desirable sex partner. Yet he does not think it proper for her to express desire for sex or take the initiative during intercourse. He only sees her as a wife and mother – a view that appears to be rather common among Japanese men (White, 2002, p. 149) – and thinks she is fairly content with attending to the needs of the family while he brings home the wages:

She knows how hard I work for the family . . . I think she is happy. She really enjoys being with the children, and gets along well with my mother. We may not have sex very often . . . I don't think she minds it . . . I am not a woman and so I don't really know . . . but I think sex becomes less important for a woman once she becomes a mother . . .

Masahiko's understanding of womanhood and female sexuality in marriage reflects the ways in which Japanese men have been socialised into accepting conservative, patriarchal beliefs and attitudes, which construct married women who are mothers as de-sexualised and de-eroticised, and those outside the home as objects of male desire. Male sexuality, meanwhile, straddles the two, and men are entitled to enjoy both types of women. Another informant – Takeshi, a 38 year-old electrician – also says that for some reason after a few years of marriage he no longer saw his ex-wife as a woman – *onna toshite mienai*. He vows he will remain single for as long as he can, and cherishes the independence his divorce has given him. Marital intimacy for Masahiko and Takeshi is thus constructed to still include sexual intimacy, but without the element of play or pleasure. Having relatively easy access to commercial sex, many married men are more easily able to seek physical gratification than their female counterparts. The convenience of the large number of love hotels allows them to maintain the public realm as male sexual space.

Toshi, a 46 year-old businessman, also sees sex as a necessary pastime to alleviate stress from work and life's humdrum routines:

Our society is so full of rules . . . for men, sex outside is like a medicine that can cure all the stress and tensions, and the love hotel is like a clinic . . . it is like my second home (*laughs*) . . . just like hostess clubs, karaoke bars and massage parlours . . . where I can rest, relax and have fun before going home. When I go home, I want to have family time . . . I am a family man, you see . . . but if I am stressed and unhappy at work, I don't want to take that home. I don't want my wife to worry about my work and I don't want to play with my son with an unhappy face . . .

Toshi considers that sex at home and sex outside are two completely different things. He is Toshi the businessman when he is out drinking with close friends, and Toshi

the attractive male in the company of his lovers. At home he is Toshi the family man, a father and a husband:

Japanese men have to keep everything separate. If we mix things up, we will be in trouble...and that is not good for anybody...this is sometimes very difficult to do...

Toshi's narratives show that multiple identities are permitted to him as a married man in Japanese society, so long as he does not *kôshi wo kondô suru* [confuse the boundary between the private and the public]. Toshi also explains that it is his entitlement as a Japanese man to enjoy sex both inside and outside marriage, and that this presents little or no conflict. He also knows that this entitlement is not socially available to married women. Toshi shook his head when asked if he could tolerate his wife's promiscuity:

My wife is supposed to receive sexual satisfaction from me... What kind of a wife or mother would she be if she behaves like a man? A good wife does not do these things... although many women today seem to be doing what men do... which will be fine if women do not get pregnant...

On the other hand, Toshi does not think marital infidelity makes him a bad husband or father. Rather, he respects his wife more for being able to tolerate his behaviour and for not behaving like a whore:

It cannot be helped... women's bodies are made differently from men's... we cannot change this fact, so why fight over this? If people still want to get married and have children, then someone has to give birth and look after the children and the family... if men could do all these, then perhaps I will agree to having the same set of rules for the sexual behaviours for men and women...

Toshi's views confirm those of many Japanese men who have been socialised into accepting patriarchal values and the gendered, and hence asymmetrical, interpretations of obligations and desires. Whether or not Japanese men like Toshi truly believe what they claim, the social system provides them with a legitimation for their sexual behaviours. As Jennifer Robertson (1991, p. 15) remarked, "'Good Husband, Wise Father' was never employed as a trope for social order, nor was social order ever linked to a 'man's problem'", simply because it is implicitly embedded in Japanese society's patriarchal system in which women's sexual behaviour is still placed under greater social scrutiny (Robertson, 1991, p. 15). Change is said to have been taking place recently, after the government introduced paternity leave and mobilised the media to promote men's greater participation in child-rearing in its effort to boost fertility rates. However, legal change has yet to translate into immediate social change, given that the changing of social attitudes usually takes a very long time. Current debates about care for the country's ageing population, for example, still focus on apportioning blame to women since it has historically been the woman's role to be the care-giver in Japanese society (see Fujita, 1989; Saito, 2005).

Re-Sexualising the Self

Some of the responses of married women to statements made by Japanese men such as Masahiko, Takeshi and Toshi reveal not passivity or docility, but strong protest against the norms that exist to delimit their sexual conduct and deny their sexuality. Given the construction of female sexuality in marriage, it is not surprising to see many women reacting to their inability to engage in playful sex with their husbands. Their narratives expressed the need for sexual gratification, either as relief from the monotony of household chores and domestic responsibilities, or as their entitlement as sexual beings just like men. Some said that sex ought to be *tanoshii* [fun and enjoyable], while others said they often wanted to play out their sexual fantasies, which were otherwise restrained by their husbands' expectations of how wives ought to behave. This meant that husbands often showed disapproval of their wives' blatant expression of sexual desire. Mayumi, a 37 year-old housewife said to me:

Many married couples in the West are still romantic towards each other and passionate about their relationship even after they have been married for many years... in Japan, we become 'dry land'... My husband became uncomfortable about having sex after our daughter was born... sex with him also became less fun as he often said we should not do this or that... we gradually stopped having sex for more than four years.

Mayumi said that her longing for those erotic, passionate moments she used to have with her husband had prompted her to seek gratification from a younger, unmarried man. Her sexless and loveless marriage had led her to contemplate divorce on several occasions, although having been a housewife for more than 10 years had prevented her from risking the economic security that she and her child now have. Her only "comfort" was to prolong her extramarital affair within the four walls of love hotel rooms:

What I cannot get from my husband I receive from him [her lover]... I know this is bad behaviour on my part but it keeps my marriage going... In a love hotel I feel free... I also feel like a woman again... sex is an important part of our lives and I cannot understand why some men [*referring to men like her husband*] can live without it... maybe they do have sex outside, like me...

Mayumi's expression of a desire for sex as pleasure and for love and romance in marriage made her feel justified in seeking fulfilment outside for what she believes are her entitlements in marriage. Love hotels thus represent a space for her to freely re-align the asymmetries within her marriage in order to restore her self-esteem. Unlike Harumi's discourse on *asobi*, Mayumi seeks to restore her self-identity not only as wife and mother, but also as a woman with sexual desires who is entitled to fulfilment. Yet, since Mayumi has neither a job nor personal savings, divorce is not a viable option for her. Her situation is similar to that of many married women in Japan today, who choose to become *senjyō shufu* [full-time housewives] after giving

birth, and are unable to return to full-time employment that pays high enough wages. Unfortunately, the structural difficulties that many women in Japan faced several decades ago, due to the style of long-term investment by employers in their employees whereby employers expected continuity of service that was “uninterrupted by the demands of marriage and childrearing” (Brinton, 1992, p. 100), still persist today. The risks of divorce are high, given the poor divorce settlement records and almost non-existent welfare support for single, divorced mothers in Japan who have quit their full-time jobs and become housewives after marrying or having children, becoming totally dependent on their husbands’ incomes²² (see Fuess, 2004). As Mayumi says, “*Nihon wa mada dansei no shakai*” [Japan is still a society dominated by men]. Mayumi’s feelings of entrapment and desire for relief and freedom echo those of the three young Japanese – Ken, Keiko and Sayuri – discussed earlier. Love hotel space is again seen as a site for constructing, negotiating and contesting a sense of self and identity.

The collapse of Japan’s economic bubble in the 1990s has led to changes in the structure of the Japanese family over the past two decades. The loss of guaranteed life-time employment for men has led many married couples to maintain dual incomes, rather than the women giving up their jobs and becoming full-time housewives. It is estimated that fewer than 40 per cent of families today depend on the husband’s income alone, compared to more than 50 per cent in the 1990s (Kingston, 2004, p. 284). Married women who continue to work after marriage and childbirth are thus not as vulnerable as Mayumi, so divorce does not present such a big threat to them. Yet, despite a lack of economic independence and security, Mayumi nonetheless finds a space to mitigate her sense of loss and deprivation. Other women, however, go further, even when the stakes are high. 43 year-old office worker Aya is one example.

Aya said that her decision to divorce her husband of 16 years was driven by his restraining her from pursuing a professional career after childbirth:

All he wanted me to do was to sit at home and look after him and our baby. I had received several good job offers but he refused to let me work . . . he said that since women are the only ones who could give birth, it is therefore women’s fate in life to stay in the home . . . just because only women and not men can give birth does not mean that women have to give birth . . . it is such a good excuse for men to use when they want you to do certain things they don’t want to do . . .

Their marital sex life also took a downturn four years into their marriage, so much so that Aya started planning her eventual divorce, though she first needed to confirm that she was still attractive to other men. She later found comfort in a lover, whom she would meet secretly in love hotels:

My ex-husband wanted to have sex every night but all he cared about was to penetrate . . . he didn’t care how I felt or if I enjoyed it . . . My boyfriend [*whom she describes as a gentle and considerate man*] . . . gave me love and friendship . . . my ex-husband did not care about my needs . . . all he cared about was his job and his status . . . I felt so useless and frustrated . . .

Though it took Aya three years after her divorce to regain full-time employment, after having been a full-time mother and housewife following the birth of her child, she describes her current situation as follows:

I feel so free now . . . I feel like a real woman who has the power to choose what I want for myself, the freedom to have sex with any man I like . . . and even to enjoy sex and love like I never did before . . . love hotels? What would people like me do without them?

For Aya, sexual intimacy is more than simply the act of having sexual intercourse. It symbolises the complexity of pleasure, love, fairness and freedom that gives one a sense of self-worth and self-identity. She interprets sex as *asobi* and as a right that she as an individual is entitled to. It is therefore an integral part of the self, and the lack, absence or denial of it is justification enough to breach the public/private divide in search of it. These are not lone voices, as some of the women I interviewed stated. Many women in Japan today are now bold enough to talk and even take action to redress the injustices in their lives in search of personal happiness. Indeed, *shiawase* [happiness] came up frequently during the interviews; it is a term that has also proliferated in public discourses on sex. From television dramas and movies to popular literature, magazines and self-help books, women are better informed of issues faced by other women across Japan – topics such as how to deal with domestic violence, how to get a divorce, the problem of sexlessness in marriage, and women having extramarital affairs. The narratives of Mayumi, Aya and many other women I interviewed displayed intense self-reflexivity and the desire for change. Even though the actual pathways are diverse and depend on the situations the women are in, the common conduit that provides the promise of transformation in their lives is the right to re-sexualise the self by re-defining the meaning and practice of sexual intimacy.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has established how the sexual experiences of individuals in particular locations reflect the wider trends that have emerged since the collapse of Japan's economic bubble. Although the narratives presented in this paper can hardly be taken as representative of the entire population, they do represent the voices of a small segment of the population that expresses conformity and frustrations, as well as dissent and desire for change. The recurrent themes emerging from the interviews are the desire for greater recognition as individuals though not necessarily in opposition to the collective; the importance of sex as a conduit or site for constructing self-identity and agency, with the emphasis on pleasure and liberation; and a clear disparity in attitudes between the sexes, with further differentiation by age and social status. The overall discourse is highly gendered, displaying a strong feminising process of individuation, a process in which Japan's love hotels have played a central role.

That sexual activities do take place in the public arena in Japan is not a new observation. What is new is the way in which sex has moved from the privacy of the home into the public arena much more prominently than ever. Sex in public is

important not only for the heterosexual married couple but also for people of varying social positions, particularly for women and the young. Pursuing sex – be it as an end in itself, or as a means to other ends – becomes a project of the “self”, a personal responsibility and a desirable endeavour (see Giddens, 1991). Japan’s love hotels, once the epitome of commercialised, sexual space for heterosexual men, have become the platform that enables the emergence of new and multiple possibilities for exploring a diversity of casual, pleasurable and intimate experiences and for constructing self-identities, however limited these may be in space and time. They also allow for the pursuit of sex purely for physical gratification, without being associated with reproduction or interfering with one’s other private or intimate space. While such commercialisation of sexual intimacy can potentially commodify the sexual experiences of individuals, it also enables and transforms them.

Young Japanese are appropriating sex in public as a passage to adulthood that is denied them due to a lack of recognition as adults. The ambiguities they face – being caught in the crossfire between the liberalising mass media and the conservatism of parents and educators – may confine their sexual activities to love hotel rooms in the public sphere, but this actually opens up a space for negotiations of meaning and constructions of self-identity and self-actualisation as the age boundary collapses. Love hotels thus represent a site of resistance and contestation, and challenge the private/public dichotomisation that has historically differentiated one’s sexuality based on sexual division of labour. Sex in public spheres thus becomes one public representation of self, with love hotels as its symbolic stage.

For older adults, love hotel space allows for a re-drawing of gender boundaries by enabling individuals to develop new domains of intimacy that situate sex in commercialised, public space as one form of intimacy that does not disrupt or interfere with other forms. For those who are married, this commercialised space also permits the separation of sex from other aspects of life, especially from marriage. Regardless of whether one is single, divorced or married, marriage appears to be less important as the main site for sexual and emotional fulfilment, or for securing one’s social status, social identity and emotional stability, but more important for economic and personal reasons. Women are therefore appropriating sex in public space to re-align inequities in marital relations and create new domains of intimacy by separating sex from marriage. Love hotel spaces thus become highly contested, as men are finding it necessary to re-negotiate, but on women’s terms.

Love hotels today are as much an integral part of Japanese society as the *Yoshiwara* was in its heyday in Edo society, when “not only was every Edoite aware of its existence, but many people were touched by it – directly or indirectly, happily or tragically” (Seigle, 1991, p. xi). However, a lot has changed since the days of the *Yoshiwara*. Sex today is no longer a marginal matter but has become one of the serious issues in life. It has become a way to modify one’s self-identity despite the performance of one’s expected and gendered roles in society. The processes of modernisation and globalisation that have brought about an increasing commercialisation of sexual intimacy have also led to the de-territorialisation of sex. Love hotel spaces are a symbol of that change; a change that is a mediated process of individuation that engenders the re-sexualisation of self and leads to the feminisation of public space.

Notes

1. West (2005) based his study on a global sex survey conducted in 2001 by the condom maker Durex on the frequency of sex in Japan. The company has yet to publish another report of a similar scale and detail.
2. According to the Statistical Bureau of Japan's Ministry of Information and Communication (2006), the proportion of one-person households had risen from approximately 20 per cent to 28 per cent of all households between 1985 and 2005, while the proportion of two-person households had also increased from approximately 18 per cent to 26 per cent over the same period. The National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (1998) estimated a decade ago that the average household size in Japan will decline from 3.2 persons per household in 1980 to 2.5 in 2020.
3. A report published by Japan's National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare) in March 2007 showed that the mean age at first marriage rose from 25.9 in 1985 to 29.8 in 2005 for men, and from 23.0 to 28.0 for women over the same period.
4. Japan's fertility rate had been languishing at an all-time low of 1.29 children per woman until 2006, when the figure rose slightly to 1.32, as reported by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in March 2006.
5. According to Japan's Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, the number of women in employment rose from 23 million in 1985 to 26.3 million in 2005. However, what is more important is the shift in the pattern of employment for women since 1995, from self-employment and running family businesses to becoming salaried workers. The number of women in paid employment accounted for 70.7 per cent of the total population of working women in all three categories. In 2005, that figure had risen to 83.8 per cent.
6. Ichikawa (2001) cited a report published by Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in 2001 showing that the number of single mother households had increased by 20 per cent from 1993 to 954,900 in 1998, and that 68.4 per cent of single-parent households were headed by divorced women.
7. A survey conducted by Nomura Research Institute in 2005 indicated that Japanese people today are more concerned about pleasure, consumption, health care and job security than they are about their children's education and family relations.
8. Seigle (1991) suggested, citing poetry from the anthology *Man'yōshū* (Collection of 10,000 leaves, ca. 759), that during the Nara period (710–84) men and women enjoyed the free exchange of love and sex, especially at bi-annual song festivals [*kagai* or *utagahi*] in the eastern provinces. Japan was fundamentally an agrarian society and, as in many other similar societies, sex was encouraged as a shamanistic symbol of agricultural fertility and productivity (Seigle, p. 1).
9. The feudal periods in Japan generally refer to the rules of powerful shogunates – families and warlords – including the Kamakura period (1192–1333), the Muromachi period (1336–1573), Azuchi-Momoyama period (1568–1600) and the Tokugawa or Edo period (1600–1867).
10. Pflugfelder argued in *Cartographies of Desire* (1999) that “Confucianism emphasized that the responsibility for promoting ethical conduct, including proper sexual behavior, fell not only upon individuals and households, but also upon a sage and virtuous rulership”, hence prompting the Edo authorities to act as “guardians of a pacified and stabilized social order” (Pflugfelder, 1999, p. 104). The legal regulation of sex, however, was driven by the warrior-bureaucrats for the purpose of “preserving the status quo in class and gender relations and harmony within [the] community at large” (Pflugfelder, 1999, p. 104).
11. The Meiji Restoration, which began in 1868, marked the beginning of modern Japanese nationalism, through various rigorous programs, particularly the implementation of compulsory education, rapid industrialisation, military modernisation and constitutional changes to strengthen the nation against the threat of Western imperialism. The ideology of *kazoku-kokka* [the family-state] used the family as the foundation of the state with the Meiji Emperor as the head of the nation. In the decades after 1890, as part of their efforts to introduce state-approved moral virtues for men and women to groom them as dutiful, patriotic subjects, policymakers and

- bureaucrats started promulgating the ideal of *ryōsai kenbo* as the proper roles for women, and institutionalised this ideal in the educational system (Uno, 1993, p. 296).
12. West (2005) explained that an increase in criminal acts such as prostitution, violence and organised crime that were associated with love hotels led Japanese authorities in 1984 to revise the Entertainment Law 1948 to begin regulating these establishments. Before the Entertainment Law 1985 came into effect, love hotels were not systematically regulated by the authorities or the industry, but were self-regulated by the proprietors. Although most love hotels were family-run businesses, many large, commercially-run love hotels began to emerge to tap into the profitable business. The new legislation requires all love hotels to register with the local government, which regulates advertising, hours, location and approval of new establishments. However, the revised law hardly distinguishes love hotels from ordinary business hotels – defining love hotels simply as establishments designed specifically for staying all night or for rest by customers of opposite sexes, the structure, facilities, and equipment of which are to be decided “by [government enforcement] order” (West, 2005, pp. 162–73).
 13. Instead of limiting and regulating the operations of love hotels, the new legislation called for a restructuring which many small operators could not afford, while those that did restructure became more profitable, although some only made minimal refurbishments in order to fall within categories unrelated to statutory love hotels (West, 2005, pp. 162–89).
 14. In her doctoral thesis entitled ‘Motherhood, Family, and Inequality in Contemporary Japan’, Aya Elise Ezawa (2002) stated that births outside marriage have hovered around 1 per cent of all childbirths in Japan for nearly a decade.
 15. An Internet-based consultancy group known as analyticalst reported on 19 April 2007 that more Japanese are accessing the internet via their mobile telephones. Approximately 54 per cent of users accessed the Internet from a mobile phone at least once a week in 2007, an increase from 40 per cent the previous year. The most active mobile Internet users were reported to be schoolgirls of 12–19 years of age. The report can be found at <http://analyticalst.com/analyticalst/2007/04/latest-survey-mobile-internet-usage-in.html>.
 16. Japanese sociologist Yamada Masahiro (1999) coined the term “parasite singles” to refer to unmarried people living with their parents, and preferring to be with indulgent mothers to getting married and becoming stressed parents. The media quickly latched onto Yamada’s idea and portrayed an image of young Japanese women enjoying an independent, albeit selfish, lavish and self-indulgent, lifestyle of foreign travel, shopping and dining out. Such partial reporting on unmarried women (in contrast to unmarried men), as Jeff Kingston (2004) explains, was due to social expectations of women to marry and move out of their parents’ homes, while this is not expected of men (Kingston, 2004, p. 274).
 17. The word *makeinu* was first coined by freelance Japanese writer Sakai Junko in 2004 to refer to single women in their 30s without children. Her original intention was to call for social acceptance of the diversity of lifestyles women are now adopting, but the meaning of the expression has rapidly expanded since then to become part of the common parlance for deriding single women in their 30s for their failure to find marriage partners (Yamaguchi, 2006). Sakai’s work sparked huge public debates in the media that still continue, and women are invariably divided into two categories: *kachiinu* [winner dogs], to refer to women who are married and reproduce, and are therefore socially valuable; unlike the *makeinu*’s selfish tendencies in engaging only in monetary production.
 18. The reference by Chizuru (2005) to the problems of women who are unmarried and childless adds further to the debate about women not marrying or giving birth. Although the old folk tale she refers to is of a lonely demon hag attacking a lost boy at night, the main thrust of the tale is about unmarried, post-menopausal women who sexually assault young men because they have no proper role in society and are sexually repressed (Yamaguchi, 2006).
 19. Phrases such as *jibun rashii seikatsu* and *jibun rashiku itehoshii* that describe one’s desire for the kind of life of one’s choice have become increasingly popular in Japan among those who pursue alternative lifestyles, such as working part-time or on a freelance basis instead of keeping a regular full-time job. Atsushi Miura, for example, uses these phrases in his work *Karyū Shakai* [The Lower Society] (2005) to refer to people such as those who reject marriage and those who choose jobs they like even though they receive very low wages.

20. Despite the rising trend for *renai kekkon* [love marriage] since the 1980s (Edwards, 1989, p. 17), *omiai* [arranged marriages] or *miai kekkon* are still widely practised by concerned parents seeking the assistance of a *nakôdo* [go-between] to help find suitable marital partners for their unmarried children. Several of my informants said their parents had tried more than once to arrange *miai* for them before they were married.
21. The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare reported in 2003 that around 68.4 per cent of single-parent households were headed by divorced women (see Ichikawa, 2001).
22. The abolition of the sexual double standard following the introduction of the New Civil Code in 1948 gave both men and women in Japan the ability to file for divorce on grounds of their spouse's adultery, malicious desertion, unknown whereabouts or marital breakdown (Fuess, 2004, p. 117). Still, despite changes in the legal sanctions on divorce and an increase in divorce rates in Japan, and despite some scholars' insistence that more married women in Japan may be willing to risk divorce and abandon marital security when their marriages become unsatisfactory (Iwao, 1993, p. 107), the social stigma attached to women's marital infidelity in Japan has not waned. While the popular media may be suggesting that more married women are turning to relationships outside marriage for self-fulfilment, the reality remains harsh, given that the prevailing gender role expectations still impose moral sanctions on women who "misbehave".

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