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Constructing Sexual Risk: 'Chikan', Collapsing Male Authority and the Emergence of Women-Only Train Carriages in Japan

Abstract

This article considers the introduction of women-only carriages on Japanese trains to combat the groping (chikan) of female passengers, in the sociological contexts of body, touch and smell and in relation to contemporary socio-economic developments in Japan. It is striking that white-collar men are distinctively associated with the crime yet evidence suggests it cannot be confined to this group. The blaming of white collar men may be related to the challenge posed by the heightened concern of gender equality, and the crisis of white-collar masculinity since the 1990s. Surveys carried out in Tokyo with women in their 20s and younger indicate that the use of women-only carriages is pragmatic. Some responses also suggest deep-seated alienation from an older man from whom they do seek physical distance. Gender separated services appear to affirm the sense of distinctively aggravated generational/gender inter-relations in Japan.

Key words: gender, risk, sexual harassment, Japan, generation gap

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Public Gender Separation

In late 2000 women-only carriages (WOCs) were introduced on late night services in Tokyo by the Keio Railway Company because of male groping of female passengers, a longstanding complaint on Japan's crowded commuter trains. The Japanese translation for 'groping' – uninvited sexual touching – and for a groper is chikan. In both official and popular discourse, the term denotes both action and perpetrator of groping. This paper adds to a small literature on the sexual harassment of women in public places (e.g. Gardner 1995; Lenton et al. 1999; Chui and Ong 2008). Unlike other studies it is primarily concerned with the ways in which harassment has come to public attention, and the impact of proposed solutions.

The immediate impetus for the Keio company's initiative were increasing complaints from female passengers; they received 351 chikan-related complaints in the year up to March 2000, an increase of nearly 100 over the previous 12 months. In train company surveys, a large percentage, often a majority, of women indicate they have been groped; most incidents have occurred on commuter trains. It is young women, especially school and university students, who appear to be the most likely victims. According to the Gender Equality Bureau's survey (2000), 48.7 per cent of women over 20 years old had at least one experience of being groped. Other surveys vary with between 28.4 per cent (Okabe 2004) and around 70 per cent of young women indicating they have experienced chikan (Ishibashi 2003; Anka et al. 2001).

Other train operators followed Keio's initiative. In 2001, the East Japan Railway began services and the West Japan Railway became the first to offer them during morning rush hour, in Osaka. Two other train operators in Osaka then introduced WOCs, with the Hankyu Railway becoming the first to run them all day long. By May 2005, 15 Tokyo operators, including the subway system, joined the trend and introduced services outside of rush hours. WOCs are not available on all trains and at all times, however, and segregation remains ultimately voluntary without any legal sanction for those who do not use carriages as directed.

WOCs are not a phenomenon unique to Japan but part of the wider emergence of gender-separated services in other, especially large developing, nations including: India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Iran, Egypt, Korea, Thailand, South Africa, Taiwan, Brazil, Russia, Mexico, and the Philippines. Women-only buses were introduced in Bangkok and Delhi in 2000 and 2002 respectively and women-only taxis in cities including London, Mumbai, Moscow and Teheran.

There is also a wider trend for gender-separated services within Japan, where it is relatively common to find women-only offers and services at restaurants, cinemas, hotels, spas and even entertainment outlets. These services are usually promoted as commercial initiatives for attracting female customers, not necessarily for female safety. However, the establishment of women-only carriages is closely related to anxieties over the crime of groping. Women-only carriages are employed as a safety measure against a specific type of crime rather than as general commercial initiatives.

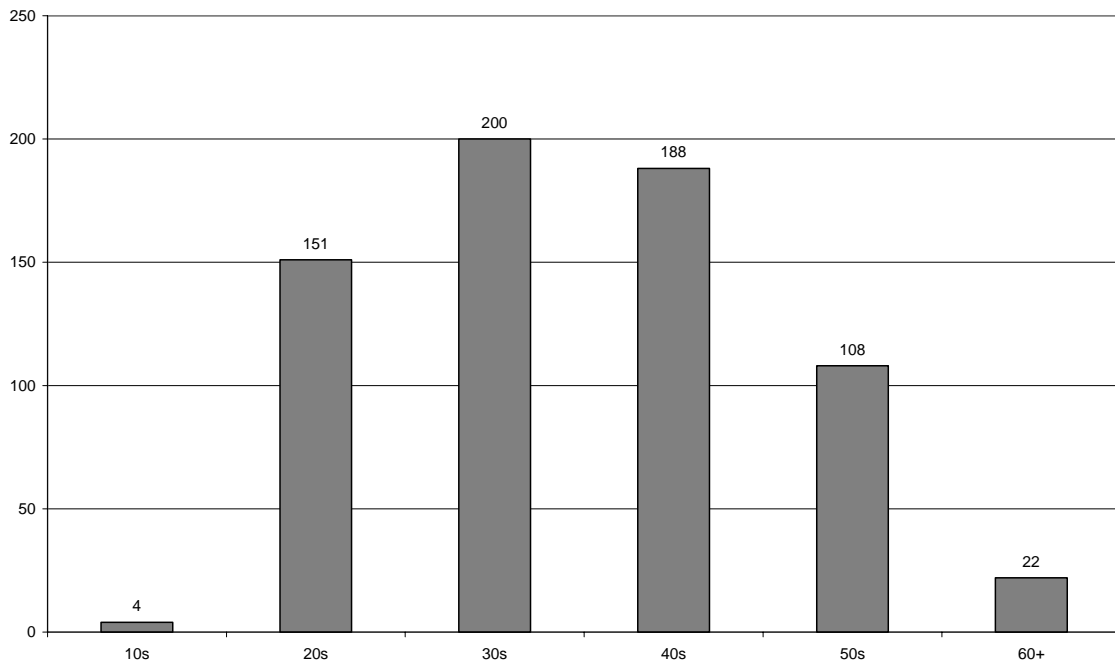
There are suggestions that WOCs make those choosing not to use them more vulnerable to attack (Japan Probe 2006). Media debate indicates public feeling that an originally justifiable measure of introducing WOCs has now gone too far (Japan Today 2005; Sugiyama 2006; Valenti 2007). Further, WOCs can be seen to affirm a passive, victim-centred stereotype; in her discussion of the first WOCs, Freedman (2002: 31) presents them as a manifestation of the cultural belief in female vulnerability.

Despite problematic implications, in practical terms some forms of women-only services are regarded positively and feminists call for their extension (WRC 2007). Train company surveys indicate a majority think that WOCs should be made available (MLIT 2003; Sagami Railway 2005; Seibu Railway 2005). According to supporters, women-only transport can give women a greater sense of safety, empowering them to travel to work or schools. Spain (2005: 1) argues that voluntary segregation in urban settings can enhance women's access to the public realm. By providing safe public space, it is argued, voluntary segregation can provide women with opportunities and identity beyond the home and thereby greater independence. Kawase (2004: 253) found that unmarried women in the Tokyo suburbs spend longer commuting than unmarried men, 'because of the traditional Japanese idea that parents do not allow their daughters to live alone'. Some of them 'quit or changed jobs because they could not bear long distance commuting'. In such a context, the availability of specially designated carriages might be seen as significant in making commuting bearable and thereby fuller participation in social life possible.

Beyond normative issues, an analytical question is posed by WOCs in Japan. Their introduction is intimately bound up with concern about *chikan* and, in turn, with the image of the lecherous, if rather pathetic, male office worker. With changing cultural associations, representation of *chikan* focuses consistently on the male white collar worker. To understand the attribution of *chikan* to one particular group we traced *chikan*'s appearance in media discourse and the organizational attentions of bodies such as the police local councils.

The Tokyo Police's website shows an iconographic image of a middle-aged man in a suit groping a young woman on its front page (MPD 2006). Similar but slightly younger images of white collar men have appeared on anti-groping campaign posters published by the police and train operators and safety manual books against sexual crimes (NOR 1995; Mitsui 2005: 91; Yamamoto 1998; CJMK 2007). These books claim that the crime of *chikan* is most likely to be committed by white collar men in 30s and 40s. Female students make similar generational associations with *chikan* (Anka et al. 2001: 35-54). A majority of those accused of 'indecent behaviour' on trains are indeed in their 30s and 40s (Saeki 2005). Moreover, content analysis of articles in one of the largest circulation newspapers, *Yomiuri*, suggests a spread of age attribution for *chikan* peaked at 30s and 40s (see Table I).

FIGURE I: Reported ages of men accused of ‘chikan’ in *Yomiouri Shinbun* newspaper between 1998 and 2007



Source: *Yomiuri Database* (<http://www.nifty.com/yomidas/>)

This image of chikan seems to be a relatively recent construction, however. For example, a survey published in the 1950s demonstrated that in the central Tokyo over half of 1,031 women in their 20s and younger identified those who have groped them as men in their 20s or younger (Chisei July 1957). This indicates that it is in the last 50 years in which the image of chikan has somehow become associated with men in their 30s and 40s.

The overrepresentation of men in their 30s and 40s in contemporary Japan does not seem to be related to the age distribution of train passengers, either. For example, two different national censuses carried out in 1998 and 2000 both indicate that out of the train commuters in Tokyo, the ratio of men aged 15-25 is higher than that for men in their 30s and 40s (MLIT 2003b: 70). While men aged 15-25 are most likely to have frotterism and consist of a greater proportion of train commuters than men in their 30s and 40s, the latter groups are more likely to be identified as a groper.

Other evidence does not easily confirm the popular association between chikan and white collar men in their 30s and 40s. According to Uchiyama (2000), molestation is most likely to be committed by men aged 34 or younger; her analysis of sexual offences recorded by the police demonstrates that younger men are more likely to molest women. The criminal psychologist Sakuta (2006) claims that chikan is most likely to be committed by the age group of 15 to 25 and its likelihood declines as men get older. In psychiatric studies of sexual deviance the act which ‘involves touching and rubbing against a non-consenting person’ is termed as ‘frotteurism’, and it is established that: ‘Most acts of frottage occur when the person is aged 15-25 years, after which there is a

gradual decline in frequency' (APA 2000: 570). Abel, Osborn, and Twigg (1993) found that the average age for committing acts of frotteurism was 20 years old.

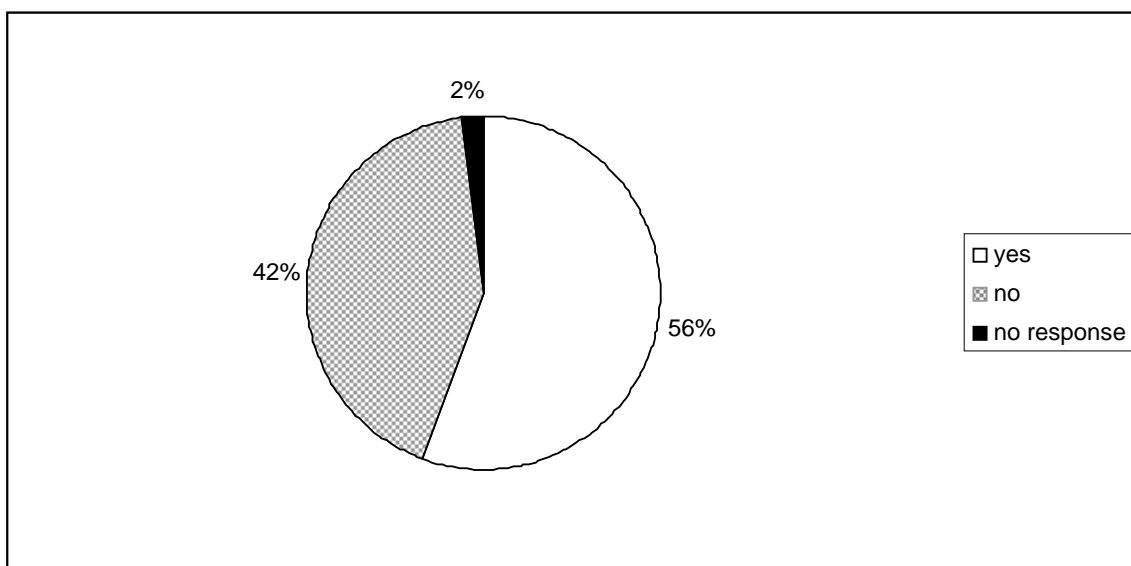
There remains uncertainty about which particular cohort is more likely to commit chikan, not least because of the interpretative difficulties of crime statistics for such incidents. This uncertainty stands in contrast to the very clear-cut way in which chikan has been represented as a problem confined to white collar men in their 30s and 40s. There may be a process of amplifying risk (Pidgeon, Kasperson and Slovic 2003), but more distinctive is the exclusive identification of risk with a particular group.

Survey Responses to WOCs

In August 2007, 155 young women completed a survey at a variety of locations in central Tokyo, conducted face-to-face by women of similar age. The numbers involved are insufficient for rigorous statistical analysis and in this pilot study we were principally interested in further refining ideas and hypotheses for further investigation by considering results in the context of significant contemporary social trends.

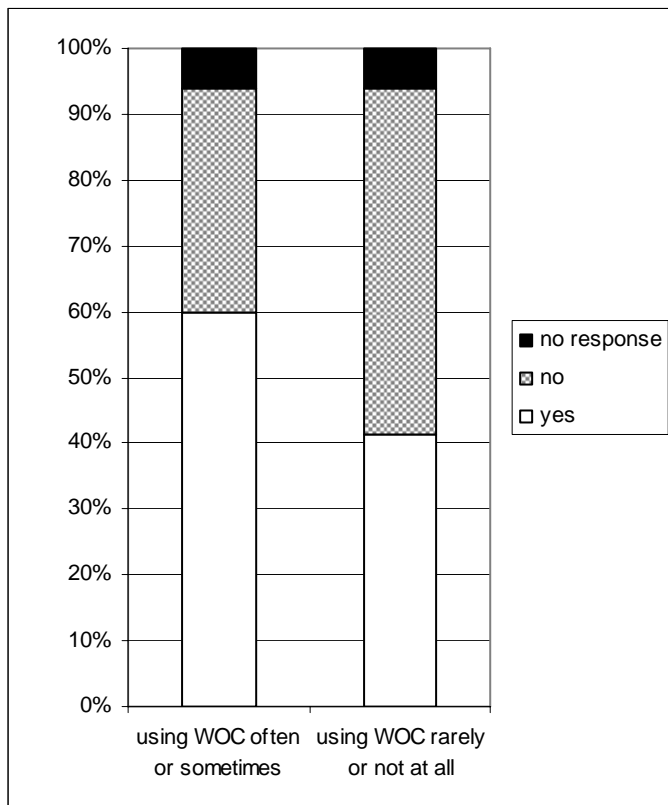
Survey responses confirmed earlier findings of a wide discrepancy between generally high support for the idea of WOCs but much more limited actual usage (MLIT 2002: 24; Okabe 2004: 58-9). Figure II shows that 56 per cent of young women would like to see a more extensive WOC service. Yet, of the young women who were surveyed, only seven per cent claimed that they were using the WOCs 'very often'. A majority claimed they were using the WOCs 'rarely' (27 per cent) or 'not at all' (39 per cent).

FIGURE II Responses from August 2007 Tokyo survey to question: 'Would you like to see more extensive WOC services?'



Much of the ‘approval but non-use’ is explained by the limitations of the service available and individuals’ use of relevant train services. More significantly, it indicates that chikan has not become the sole determinant of individuals’ choices of how and where to travel. This is consistent with evidence indicating precautionary behaviour remains consistently tempered by pragmatism and convenience even in relation to as dramatic a threat as terrorism (Sheppard et al. 2006). Such discrepancies between expressed preferences and actual behaviour are at central to the economic approach to risk (Tversky and Kahneman 1992).

FIGURE III Responses from August 2007 Tokyo survey to question: ‘Have you ever been groped on a train?’



Responses are shaped and modified by previous experience of chikan. Table III shows that about 60 per cent of frequent WOC users claimed that they had been groped on the train, while the figure is just over 40 per cent for less frequent users. For the less frequent users who have been groped (41 individuals), about half of the group (21 individuals) claimed that they ‘cannot be bothered to use’ the service, mainly because of the location of the WOCs, which are generally the last carriage. They claimed that it is too far to walk and inconvenient to use. Four others claimed that they ‘do not mind using mixed-sex carriages’. Some consciously reject WOCs, with responses such as: ‘it is more crowded’; ‘it smells strongly of perfume’; and ‘it cannot be used with my partner’.

Respondents' support for WOCs can be divided into three main groups: 'personal safety concerns' (61 comments), 'practical concerns' (11 comments), and 'hygienic concerns' (26 comments), although all tend to elide into one another. Supporters of WOCs consist of 'frequent users' (45 comments from 50 individuals) and 'supporters for more extensive services' (71 comments from 84 individuals). Chikan is mentioned explicitly in 65 comments overall. There are also 38 possibly related mentions, such as 'feeling more secure', 'for safety', and 'because I wear less in the summer'. More pragmatically, 11 others cite less crowding as their reason for using WOCs. In addition, comments like 'it's more comfortable' and 'I can be more relaxed' imply avoidance of both groping and overcrowded mixed-sex carriages.

Hygiene related comments highlight female 'cleanliness' and complain about the physical presence of men and their smell. There are comments such as: 'I feel disgusted just by being near to a man'; 'I do not want to be next to men because they are smelly and dirty'; 'women are generally cleaner' and 'I do not like men's sweat'. One survey indicates that women in their 20s are likely to mention 'men's smell' more than 'chikan' as a reason to use or support WOCs (COBS Online 2005). Others indicate a significant minority of women prepared to explicitly cite the smell of men and simply wanting to be away from them as their reason for using WOCs, with a majority suggesting more generally that they are safer, more spacious or they have 'no particular reason' for their use (What Japan Thinks 2006). A small minority commented that they simply felt more comfortable away from the male gaze: 'I can feel freer to do things without men' and 'I feel easier'. These responses suggest male presence demands behavioural regulation and control, and its absence is experienced as liberating.

There are a variety of negative associations to men, including drunkenness (13 mentions). Respondents were not asked to elaborate on any particular associations in this pilot survey to minimise interviewer suggestion. Yet, another 10 respondents explicitly identified 'oyaji' or 'ojisan' as the problem, making comments such as: 'I do not want to be near to oyaji'; and 'ojisan smells bad'. Oyaji (often with a sense of disgust) or ojisan (in a more friendly manner) is a derogatory term which denotes the 'middle-aged men'. Those who are in their 40s and 50s are generally called as middle-aged. However, in some of empirical studies on Japanese subculture, especially those of the 'compensated dating' (enjo kosai) phenomenon and the burusera shop selling schoolgirls' clothing and used underwear (e.g. Maruta 2001; Miyadai 2000), it can be found that when female interviewees in their 20s and younger employ the term 'oyaji' or 'ojisan', they are likely to denote men in their 30s and 40s.

Overall what is striking is that despite widespread experience of chikan, fear of groping appears not to be overwhelming, becoming the principal determinant of travelling behaviour. Yet there is a more generalised and ideological anti-male feeling that does not appear to be confined to negative associations with chikan and may also explain high support for the idea of WOCs. There is some spontaneous identification of oyaji/ojisan consistent both with chikan discourse and imagery, and the generational associations previously found among female students (Anka et al. 2001: 35-54).

Emergence of 'Chikan' and WOCs in Japan

WOCs are not a new phenomenon in Japan, but the motivation behind them and the context within they operate has changed. Their earlier appearance was founded more clearly on the basis of 'delicate' females who needed protection from having their 'beautiful figures looked at and enjoyed' by men, making no reference to the wishes of still largely voiceless women (Freedman 2002: 31). Further, there appears to have been no distinctive association with white collar men in their 30s and 40s.

Public nuisances were reported on crowded commuter trains in early twentieth century Tokyo. Tokyo's main newspaper, *Yomiuri Shinbun*, for example, reported in 1912 that female students were receiving 'love letters' from males and even being touched by them. WOCs began operation in Tokyo in 1912 on a commuter service nicknamed the 'Flower Train' which remained in service until the Second World War. Trains with carriages reserved for female school students reappeared in 1947 (Seda 2002: 44). One of the main commuting lines in Tokyo offered trains with WOCs until 1973, when they were replaced with 'priority seats'. Importantly, these earlier cases were not directly associated with the fear of sexual touch, but more to do with social values of the time which did not tolerate sexual promiscuity and with general overcrowded condition of the commuting train which was believed to be unbearable for women and the elderly (Inaga et al. 2008).

Beyond the rationale of traditional gentility informing early WOCs, gendered facilities appeared more recently in Japan on commercial grounds, appealing to a perceived emerging market for female space and comfort. Midnight Express train services experienced economic difficulties from the 1980s, as they became less attractive than both the airplane and bullet train in terms of speed and time, and highway buses were proving more competitive for economy travel. In the early 1990s both the East and West Japan Railway introduced women-only seats and carriages on their express lines, but they were not successful. Issues of sexual touch or gaze do not appear to have been distinguished from smell and noise, factors which actually appear more predominant in the limited reference made to these services. In 1988, for example, a late-night women-only express bus service was introduced between Sapporo and Kushiro in Hokkaido during the late night hours, following female complaints about snoring and (male) foot odour. Up until the 1990s, concern about groping was not central to the female transportation services that became sporadically available nor was there an exclusive attribution of such a problem to a particular (male) generation.

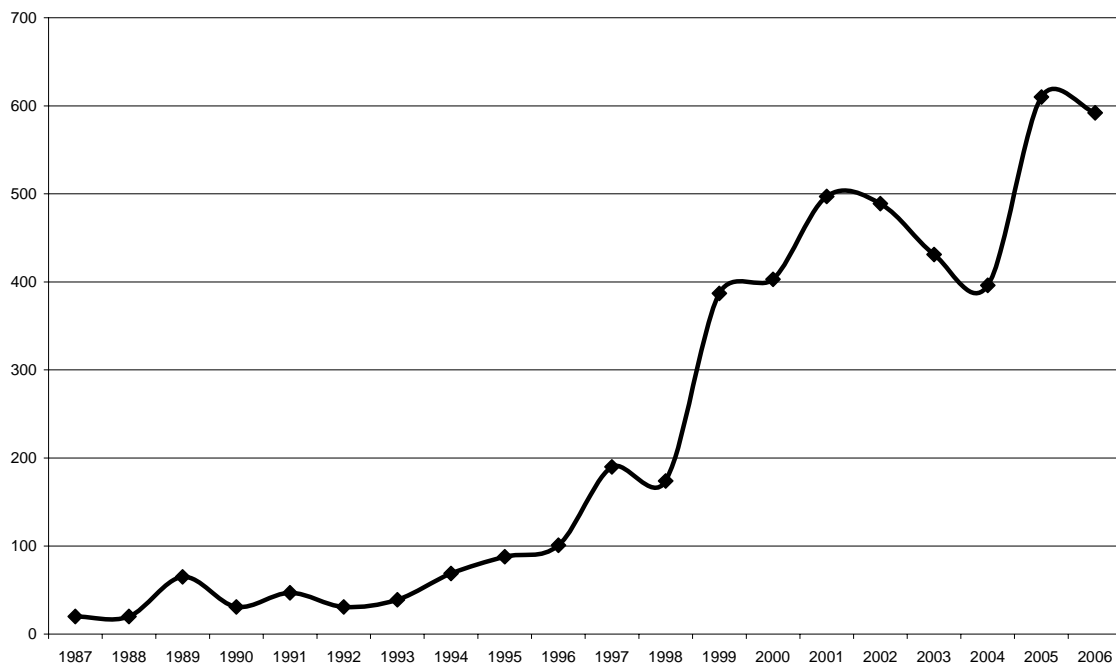
Before the introduction of WOCs, the issue of groping was not connected with the idea of gender segregation, even when it attracted attention from the public. For example, in November 1988, when a woman told off two men who were groping someone on one of Osaka's commuting train, this woman was later raped by the same men. Although this incident attracted public attention, the debate was not led to the idea of gender segregation. In contrast, when a woman was raped on one of West Japan Railway's express train in 2006, the train operator introduced women-only seats on five of its express lines in 14 months after the incident.

Chikan, as it is now understood, is bodily contact of a sexual nature carried out against the victim's will, or the person who commits such an act. Chikan has not always been such a clear notion, however, and its meaning has changed over time. The term probably first appeared in the late sixteenth century comedy writings known as sharebon. In these early appearances, chikan meant 'a foolish man'. Another appearance can be found in the playful eighteenth century literature called gesaku. An example of this genre, the combination of Chinese characters equivalent to chikan (痴漢) appears in the Story of Three Foolish Men by Kanwatei (1891 [1806]).

In some translated works chikan continued to denote a 'foolish man' until the early twentieth century (Niwa 1968 [1878]; Mori 1968 [1890]). However, through the course of the twentieth century, chikan acquired increasingly clear negative sexual connotations. According to Seda (2002), the contemporary meaning of chikan was established in the late 1950s. In August 1957, a survey on chikan was published in the journal Chisei, where the term refers to the act of groping, and in August 1958 the magazine Fujin Koron published an essay on chikan, where it has the same meaning (Seda 2002: 45). On this basis, references began to consider chikan as a practical problem. In February 1975, the popular magazine 'Josei Seven' instructed readers on chikan prevention methods, introduced by a female professional wrestler. Later, the magazine Widenes (10 February 1980) published the story of how a group of women caught a groping man using martial arts (Seda 2002: 46). This specific meaning was not yet completely consolidated however. In Sugiura's story (1956), chikan refers to attempted rape, and in Oe's novel (1968 [1963]) to a team of three gropers claiming to be a sexual minority.

The contemporary usage of chikan appears to have been consolidated in the later 1990s. Appearances of the term in the two most popular newspapers, Asahi and Yomouri, increased gradually from 1996, rising to a peak in 2005 (see Table IV). The early phase in the post-1996 increase is coincident with rising institutional interest in sexual crime by the police and, more broadly, the recession after the collapse of the 'bubble' economy. In the 1990s there were also occasional, but never sustained, discussions in newspapers around the introduction of WOCs. Opinions from readers of Asahi Shinbun, for and against the idea of WOCs, appeared in 1991, 1993 and 1998 (Asahi Shinbun 1991, 1993, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c). The first peak of references to chikan, in 2001 and 2002, happens at the same time as the introduction of WOCs and the inevitable public discussion of the issues involved, and the second peak corresponds to the expansion of WOCs in Tokyo in 2005.

FIGURE IV: Number of articles citing the term 'chikan' published in *Asahi Shinbun* and *Yomiuri Shinbun* between 1987 and 2006



Source: *Asahi.com Perfect* (<https://contents.nifty.com/member/service/g-way/asahicom-full/asahi/perfect/full/home.html>), and *Yomiuri Database* (<http://www.nifty.com/yomidas/>).

Beyond references generated by WOCs, chikan now appears in a predominantly pornographic context. A keyword search of chikan at amazon.co.jp in 2007 (17 November 2007), for example, produced reference to 2,112 videos, 1,148 DVDs, and 652 books, almost all of which were pornographic. Chikan as unwanted sexual touching on a train might now be regarded as the acting out of pornographic fantasies (see Japan for the Uninvited 2004), as: ‘In public places, the harassment of women can still be romanticized, eroticized, or erased’ (Gardner 1995: 12).

The public profile of chikan was raised by anti-groping campaigns and their motto: ‘Chikan is a crime’. Positive official responses to such pressures can be seen as evidence of the new government approach to gender equality stimulated by international pressure (Inaga et al 2008). The barriers identified by Osawa (2000) to acting upon this agenda may be weaker in this case, as ‘protecting’ women from uncontrolled male touching is not inconsistent with a dominant moral agenda. The police and local government put pressure on both the responsible ministry and the train operators to respond, and more severe penalties were introduced.

The Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG) tightened its anti-groping measures in 1992. Fines for first-time offenders were increased from 10,000 to 50,000 yen, and for habitual offenders from 50,000 yen to 200,000 yen. In 1996, the National Police Agency (NPA) issued three interrelated notifications to the local police departments, the

MPD appointed 76 female investigators for sexual crime and ‘molestation complaint offices’ were set up at some railway stations.

The introduction of WOCs created new institutional pressures, leading the TMG to organise a council with representatives of train companies to discuss anti-groping measures. In 2001, this led to a revised anti-groping ordinance to make first-time offenders subject to imprisonment, and to a poster campaign and publicising of molestation complaint offices. Initiatives developed further as women-only services increased after 2003. The TMG established the ‘Emergency Public Safety Section’, a core objective of which was to deal with chikan (TMG 2004: 32). Legal penalties have subsequently been further strengthened; since 2005 the maximum sentence for habitual molestation is 10 years imprisonment, for example. There has been no decrease in reported incidents of chikan, however; on the contrary, there has been a three-fold increase between 1996 and 2004, from 778 to 2,201 (MPD 2005). It is likely that this is principally an increase in reporting of incidents reflecting greater awareness and preparedness to at register official complaints.

Modernity, Space, Body and Smell

Other issues beyond unwanted sexual touching are also involved in the modern experience of mass, public transportation that further question the certainty that reintroducing WOCs is only a response to chikan. Firstly, some relatively general issues of physical proximity play a role. Freedman (2002: 36) suggests that the reintroduction of WOCs was simply: ‘...to give female passengers a more “comfortable” ride, apart from drunken salary men during the end-of-the-year party season’, and that comfort primarily concerns more space. The issue of crowded space is not only gendered, but also has a more general character. Leheny (2006:1) reflects on his obsession with avoiding being coughed on amidst ‘nearly crippling’ discomfort on public transport, for example.

Also beyond specific sexual concerns, the unique public space of mass transportation has always been a focus for problems of modern living. A recent survey indicates most Japanese believe that the manners that were traditionally closely observed on trains have deteriorated to critical levels; here also there are new organizational responses, with the creation of ‘etiquette police’ in Yokohama who embarrass train passengers into giving up their seats for the less able (Matsuda et al 2008). Historically, trains are an important symbol of urban mass modernity, and a sphere where it has had to be negotiated most publicly and intimately. The train could capture the excitement but also the ambivalence felt towards modernity; thus: ‘Writers saw something captivating about trains and the potentially liberating but traumatising experience of riding in them’ (Freedman 2002: 24).

Sexualised fantasy has actually long been associated with the train in Japan. The train both transports the commuter to their daily routine and, teasingly, allows a glimpse of a different world that is, in the imagination at least, more liberated. Historically, it was generally upper class girls, otherwise not seen in public, who used commuter trains for travelling to school. At the beginning of the Twentieth Century these girls were both

‘idealised as model modern women and eroticised as sexual objects’ (Freedman 2002:30). Some early literature anticipates the more negative contemporary account of the alienated urban commuter. A widely-read 1904 story introduced the term ‘girl-fetish’, describing men enjoying gazing at younger women; their fantasies allowing a temporary mental escape from the everyday drudgery of work and family (Tayama 1968). The commuter train also became sexualised in more direct ways; it was a place where prostitutes sought customers, and young men and women romantic escape (Tanaka 2007).

Sexual fantasy on trains was encouraged by the fleeting and silently endured physical proximity of the sexes. Urban commuting forces the experience of not only prolonged gaze without verbal interaction, as Simmel (1994 [1908]: 247-266) noted, but strangers are also forced to negotiate inevitable physical contact. Mass commuter travel compels a new disciplining of the body, creating physical boundaries and taboos which invite the thought, and even act of transgression. This negotiation can be described as creating a ‘civilised’ or ‘mindful’ body which is ‘strongly demarcated from its social and natural environments’ and ‘has the ability to rationalize and exert a high degree of control over its emotions, to monitor its own actions and those of others, and to internalize a finely demarcated set of rules about what constitutes appropriate behaviour in various situations’ (Shilling 1993: 131). At the same time, in the overcrowded commuting train, what Goffman (1971) termed ‘territories of the self’ can easily be invaded, resulting in heightened self-consciousness and potential discomfort. Policing this tension are authorities - train operators, local government and police – who come to ‘own’ this boundary and define what constitutes criminal behaviour (Gusfield 1981).

In modern Japanese history, attempts to regulate the public body emerged around the turn of the Twentieth century. Public displays of bodily functions became a focus for disgust. These were to be made private, hidden away and internalized, as in the classical civilizing process (Elias 2000). Tanaka (2007) highlights the early twentieth century call for the elimination of behaviours including: eating packed lunches, scattering earwax and nose picking. Explicit behavioural codes also came into force. The Railway Management Law of 1900 prohibited violence against railway staff and throwing stones at the train, as well as smoking in non-smoking areas and barring those intoxicated from getting on board. Projected through the protection of individual ‘territories of the self’ (Goffman 1971: 47), legal sanction has become more extensive and intimate in recent years. Since 2005, the police and train operators are increasingly interested in policing ‘antisocial behaviours’ on the train, from the use of mobile phones and reading of ‘indecent’ materials, to putting on make-up and wearing ‘vulgar’ clothing (Department of Public Order 2006).

‘Sound interference’ (Goffman 1971: 46) was also controlled through new social codes, as talking aloud became increasingly unacceptable on the train. Similarly, gaze became subject to both self-policing and external attempts to discipline it. According to Tanaka (2007), advertising posters and books were utilised to divert one’s gaze from fellow passengers on the commuting train in early twentieth century Japan, and these new distractions were to be enjoyed silently. In the early twentieth century people had normally read aloud regardless of being in public, but commuters increasingly internalised a new norm to read only silently. Glimpses of other people could become

surreptitious, fleeting, even exciting under these new circumstances of the determined distraction of gaze.

Prolonged gaze might be avoided on trains, albeit sometimes awkwardly. Touch could often not to be so easily prevented, however, and instead commuting compelled a new acceptance and redefinition of the experience. The extent to which it may have been encouraged by the necessities of commuting is unclear, but it is argued that there is a specific 'touching culture' in Japanese society (Montague 1981). According to Sakuta (2006), this gave Japanese commuters more tolerant attitudes towards physical contact on commuter trains.

As well as touch and gaze, smell is also involved in the commuting experience. Smell, 'whether real or alleged, is often used as a basis for conferring a moral identity upon an individual or group' (Largey and Watson 1972: 1024). Notions of racial odour have a long history, indicated by Weber's rejection of there being a 'Negro odour' (Turner 1999: 215). Japan has not been immune from the racializing of body odour. For example, in a popular interwar collection of essays, the body smell of Caucasians and Negroes was equated with animalistic sexual desires (Weiner 2004: 53-4). Until recently, by contrast, there is an apparently widely-held belief among Japanese men that they do not smell and certainly do not want to use heavily scented 'Western-style' deodorants (indicated by the historically much more limited market for deodorants in Japan).²

The 'otherness' of smell may have acquired a more important gender and age dimension within Japan. Older men became scientifically 'smelly' in 1999, as the term 'aging odour' first appeared in the media (Asahi Shinbun 1999). 'Discovered' by scientists at the Shiseido cosmetic company, the claim that a distinctive odour is found among those over 40 years old has led to increased sales for male deodorants. The objective basis for the claim is perhaps less important than that it was culturally resonant. There is some evidence to suggest a longer established sensitivity towards sex and odour. In a cross cultural study the Japanese show a far greater discrimination between male and female odour than other nationalities, and regard the smells more judgementally (Schleidt, Hold and Attili 1981). International commentary reflects these sensibilities; for example, a BBC news report suggests that 90 per cent of Japanese women think men smell and should do something about their odour, whilst the New York Times describes young women holding their noses and laughing as a middle-aged man sought a train seat (BBC News 2000; Sims 2000). Body smell has acquired a distinctive association with specifically men over 40 years old and is now often called 'oyaji odour' (Sato 1999). When we consider the fact that young women in their 20s and younger are likely to employ the term *oyaji* with a sense of disgust to indicate men in their 30s and 40s, it can be assumed 'ageing odour' is no longer confined into the original group, but the discourse of 'oyaji odour' constructed by young women expresses a sense of disgust towards older men in general.

Japanese men have historically used deodorant less than in European societies, perhaps reflecting insensitivity towards others that was, in turn, the product of a very secure social standing. That male odour now attracts comment and even open expressions of revulsion may be as culturally significant as the (female) silence before the 1990s. What

is especially notable is the attempt to insist that the smell of oyaji is distinctly worse than that of other groups. In socio-cultural terms it can be suggested that the smell of 'male ageing' is experienced as distinct and unpleasant because of a particular cultural image associated with the group levelled as oyaji (Suzuki 2000: 63). It implies that oyaji somehow stand in the popular imagination as a potential focus for ridicule. This is only comprehensible in the context of more recent economic and social developments in Japan.

End of the Bubble, Emasculated Men, Liberated Women?

Japan has witnessed a gender transformation over the last two decades. Official statistics confirm that marriage and the birth rate have declined dramatically, whilst divorce and the number of one-person households have risen, as have mean ages of first marriage for both sexes and the average age at which women bear their first child. Far more women are remaining unmarried, with 54 per cent of Japanese women in their late 20s being single, up from 30.6 per cent in 1985 (MIAC 2008). These developments, in themselves, pose a challenge to the post-war Japanese social order, economy, and the male authority around which they have been organised.

Arguments about women not marrying and the associated declining birth rate have been at the centre of social debate, indicated by the impact of popular terms and books on the subject (Yamaguchi 2006). Women's expectations of more equal and rewarding partnerships are central to understanding the fall and delay in marriage (Matthews 2002; Jolivet 2004). These clash with male expectations of marriage as almost a personal service, where they are not obliged to even communicate in an open way. Unable to find a means of compromise, this gender 'stand-off' is arguably at the heart of Japanese social problems, and informs and aggravates the issue of chikan. Despite this focus, the rejection of marriage is by no means confined to women but is more generational (Jolivet 2004: 169).

The Japanese 'family nation' was underpinned by economic success that prevented questions being asked about what it stood for in the modern world, or at least limited any impact such questioning might have. The Japan of the 1980s was so economically dynamic that America sought to emulate its methods. From 1989, Japan entered a prolonged recession that persisted and intensified into the late 1990s and which was not seen elsewhere in the developed world, turning Japan from being apparently uniquely well-organised to uniquely dysfunctional. Other developments contributed to a perception that the very foundations of contemporary Japanese authority were outmoded, notably the Hanshin earthquake and the gas attack on the Tokyo subway. Such events, '...seemed not to occur individually but to have cascaded, feeding on one another in the public imagination' (Leheny 2006: 28). What were seen as inadequate responses to these events developed into a perceived failure of a dysfunctional state (Leheny 2006: 37).

In direct terms, the economic and political crisis has undermined the position of Japanese men, for whom, 'changes in employment relations have been nearly catastrophic' (Leheny 2006: 34). The suicide rate rose dramatically in the later 1990s, particularly amongst men in their 40s and 50s, now the most suicidal group in Japan (National Institute of Public Health 2003). When we look at the state of men in their 30s and 40s, who are most likely to be associated with the image of *chikan*, they are most likely to be suffering from work-related mental illness and to be forced into the longest hours of unpaid overwork at their work (Yuki 2006). But the contemporary Japanese crisis is much more thoroughgoing than narrowly economic, impacting not just upon traditional men themselves, but traditional masculinity, and not just questioning their role, but reacting against their physical being.

The combined crisis of economy and authority helps explain the peculiarly pronounced social reaction that rejected not only the values of dominant social order, but very essence of those now seen as incompetent. It has meant that what is ostensibly an economic crisis has manifested itself in all manner of socio-cultural terms. Leheny (2006: 50) suggests that 'the increasingly ostentatious sexuality of Japanese teenagers' that began to be flaunted from this time, 'epitomized Japan's hazily defined crisis of the 90s at least as well as did layoffs at Japanese firms'. Particularly in the absence of a new political challenge, the collapse of the 'old Japan' of white collar men is manifest among women and the younger generation through new consumer choices and new ways of thinking about their bodies, which are counter-posed to the old. In the 1990s, young Japanese men began to be highly conscious about not only what they wear but also what kind of bodies they have, in a rejection of the 'bread winner' masculinity associated with an older generation of white collar men (Roberson and Suzuki 2003).

The generational gap may not be politically substantial but it is all the more keenly felt in matters of style and taste and, accelerated and aggravated by the crisis of the old order in the 1990s, there is a sense in which those in their twenties and younger have resolutely turned their backs on the mores of their elders. Scholarship on the Japanese 'generation gap' argues that it represents something more profound than typically found in modern societies, and is driving a reshaping of Japan (Matthews and White 2004). Modernised social inter-relations have not yet been consolidated, and remain fractured and often fractious, characterised by a 'stand-off' between genders and generations who remain apart in some important dimensions, even eating and travelling separately.

This lack of interaction and understanding is indicated by the resort to caricature and hostility captured by the epithets for single women: 'loser dogs' and 'demon hags'. Beneath its rage, this new language suggests a baffled, bemused male order as yet unable and unwilling to accept that it is their own behaviour that will firstly have to change. But it may be that such caricatures exist not only on the female side of the Japanese gender divide. The image of the white collar men in their 30s and 40s and their relation to *chikan* is not simply self-evident, but has been socially and politically constructed. This research tentatively suggests they are so readily identified with the problem because of a generational gender divide that casts them as the embodiment of all that is wrong with Japan. The process is comparable to the classic image of the American 'drunk driver' as an uncontrollable alcoholic (Gusfield 1981). Arguably these stereotypical drunks have contributed towards the persistence of a peculiarly

fetishized attitude towards alcohol in the US. In Japan, promoting the problem of chikan only through white collar men may also be unhelpful.

Confronting the assumption that men can routinely touch women without sanction is part of challenging the sexual culture of Japan. But it is not clear that an exclusive focus on a particular generation is necessarily welcome in the context of already strained gender inter-relations, and an already discredited old order of male office workers. Japan's gender relations appear delicately poised with some signs of more modern compromise, and other indications of genders becoming further entrenched in their own worlds. In this context it is worth paying attention to any stereotyping of men in their 30s and 40s as sexual molesters, defined by their unpleasant smell. And there may be other means of dealing with chikan than WOCs, such as encouraging the sense of inter-gender civic responsibility that saw male passengers chase and capture a man accused of groping (BBC News Online 2005). Academically, further research will further explore perceptions of responsibility for social problems in the context of evolving gender relations, and whether there is indeed a Japanese gender/generation gap that should be recognised as being distinctively polarised.

Notes

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2. See, for example, Japanese market intelligence where the still small market for deodorants is used as an example of significant cultural difference, available at: <http://www.jmintelligence.com/consumer.html> (accessed 29 March 2008)

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