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Beauty of seduction in a Tokyo host club

'I just want to be thought of as special', says a mildly intoxicated woman in her late 20s as she is taped for an NTV special on Tokyo's host clubs. Her face fuzzed out for privacy, she leans toward her male host and looks at him, perhaps with shy, yet impish, eyes. The host returns her gaze with an ambiguous smile. Maybe he likes her....

Akiko Takeyama

It is hard to tell. As they interact, the camera slowly pulls back, bringing imported liquor bottles into view and then, gradually, the glittering interior of the host club – gold-colored chandeliers, red carpet, green leather sofas, and countless other multicolored objects in the cluttered, mirrored space. The video cuts to a group of hosts hoisting glasses of Dom Perignon and quickly downing them. As they cheer, the camera closes in on a wad of Japanese yen that a female client has pulled out of her brown Louis Vuitton purse to pay for her evening's entertainment. The narration begins, undramatically: 'Alcohol, money, and the game of romance are intermingled in host clubs...' For NTV, it's yet another prime-time show in the can about host clubs. But for Japanese viewers, the seemingly endless fascination with handsome hosts and their free-spending clients knows no bottom.

Not long ago, host clubs were virtually unheard of in Japan, and far less known about than geisha culture. Concentrated media exposure in the last decade, however, has cleared the air of the mystery that surrounded the business since the first host club opened in Tokyo in 1966. Host clubs are now flourishing despite Japan's overall weak economy. To find out how and why women spend tens of thousands – in some cases millions – of yen a night, I recently spent a year researching host clubs in Tokyo.

Fantasy and everyday life

The host club *Fantasy*, where I conducted most of my fieldwork, is located in Tokyo's Kabuki-cho, the biggest sex district in Asia. Female clients – students, housewives, office workers and business owners – visit the club in the relatively early hours, while hostesses and sex workers stop by late at night after work. Most of them go to the club to escape from daily stress and have fun. They also enjoy a form of intimacy fostered through the game of romance, which I term 'commodified' romance. Once they fall in love with hosts for fun or for real, they come back to the club repeatedly and spend money on their hosts. Yuki, a 46-year-old housewife of a company owner and mother of three who visited the club for a year, says, 'I guess women visit host clubs to enjoy the kind of romantic excitement (*tokimeki*) that rarely happens in everyday life. In the club, they can meet the self who is in love with young attractive hosts who are beautifully radiant.'

On the other hand, their male host counterparts, who typically have minimal education and working-class job experience, make every effort to satisfy these women in order to receive tangible return – money. According to hosts, the host club affords an opportunity to become an overnight millionaire, to enjoy an 'upper-class' lifestyle and the 'respectful' attention of society. For example, Yoshi, a 24-year-old host and high school dropout, says, 'I wanted money for a 'better life' – living in a nicer place, eating gourmet food, and wearing expensive watches. I quit my construction work to become a host, who, I imagined, would receive cash and expensive gifts from women while merely drinking alcohol and flirting with them!'

As Yoshi and Yuki exemplify, that which is missing in day-to-day life turns into a seductive object whether it is tangible or imagined. In short, fantasy embeds in, and derives from, everyday social life, and is therefore gendered and class-distinctive. Money and the opportunity for romantic excitement attracts working-class men and romance-seeking women. The host club thus becomes their meeting place. A 32-year-old veteran host, Ryu, says: 'Hosts can only seduce women who are willingly seduced, for whatever reason. Women who are not interested in [romance] are not seduced no matter what we do.' Yuki correspondingly says, '[In host clubs], I also perform as if I eagerly adored my host so as to heighten the romantic mood and feeling of intimacy. In that way, he [my host] treats me even more specially and in turn, I feel better.'

Subtle yet calculated

To perform as seductive men, hosts stylize their appearance and bodily movements. They wear expensive brand suits and watches coordinated to enhance their slim bodies, salon-tanned skin, and perfectly set medium-long hair. Attention to detail extends to their fingertips. Ryu applies a nail topcoat every two weeks and on occasion goes to a nail salon. He does so because, he says, 'Hands are one of the few body parts exposed and women like clean and beautiful (*kireina*) ones.' Hosts' smooth hands aestheticize their body movements and by extension the whole scene. When a female client reaches for a cigarette, for instance, a host smoothly flips open his lighter and provides a light before she has time to put it in her mouth. When she is about to stand up, he swiftly scoops his hand up to give symbolic support. These unrealistic performances not only draw women's attention to his hands, but also render the entire scene phantasmic. The hosts' seductive performance is effectively played out in subtle yet highly calculated ways.

Let me now invite the reader to a host club scene. Amid the alcohol-fueled revelry, the dim and lively atmosphere in the host club shortens the distance between a 25-year-old host, Koji, and his client, a 31-year-old mother and part-time worker, Megumi. Koji and Megumi, who have known each other for three months, are trying to have a conversation and alternately whisper in each other's ear to cut through the noise of the club. Every whisper causes a burst of laughter between them. Their intimate interaction excludes all other people, including 'helper' hosts at the table, and creates their own intimate world. The moment, however, is ephemeral, and Koji leaves the table once the brief conversation is over. Megumi waits for Koji to return, and in the long and awful wait, Koji's seductiveness is greatly amplified.

Megumi unconsciously looks around, even though other hosts try to entertain her. Seeing Koji, she abruptly asks, 'Why doesn't he come back?' A helper host replies, 'Well, the woman over there opened a new bottle.' Megumi says, 'Why don't I order champagne?' She knows that ordering a more expensive bottle will bring Koji back. Indeed, Koji hurries back and gives her almost excessive attention. He cheerfully says, 'So, you feel like drinking tonight, don't you? Let's enjoy ourselves!' Megumi maintains a glum silence and gives a sulky look. Koji looks at her and says innocently, 'Oh no! The sulky look ruins your beautiful face!' He gently grabs her cheeks and pulls them outward 'See, this is my favorite smiling face of Megumi,' he says to everyone at the table. 'Isn't she pretty?' 'You didn't have to come back!' Megumi says. Koji teasingly responds with, 'Oh, are you jealous?' and then seriously adds, 'You are so much younger and prettier! Look at these juicy thighs!' Megumi finally makes a bashful smile when Koji says, 'To drink with Megumi is after all the best (*ichiban*)!'

Megumi's seemingly self-contradictory attitude – attempting to draw Koji's attention but not quite accepting it – has the effect of intensifying Koji's attention. The performed ambivalence that implies her mixed feelings of jealousy, sulk, and gladness maximizes what she wants. Her tactic, however, is not completely autonomous. In my interview with Koji, he explained that he carefully calculates how to move from one table to another in order to give the impression he is very popular. Popularity, according to Koji, compels women to compete with one another for his attention. In this way, 'I can kill two birds with one stone: satisfying both my own and my clients' desires,' he says. Indeed, on that night, Megumi paid over 110,000 yen (roughly 1,000 US dollars) and left the club satisfied.

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Presenting the seductive self

Koji contends that Megumi is manipulated to spend more money on him because of his skill at seduction. To an extent this is true, but his view of himself as an aggrandizer – the masculine narrative of the active seducer and capable individual – is only part of the story. Koji diminishes the fact that he also has been seduced by Megumi's economic capital, which in her case is performative, enough to *invest* himself in her. Even so, several women I have interviewed have emphasized that it is their personalities rather than their economic power that enables a 'noncommercial' relationship with their hosts. Sachiko, a 46-year-old widow, for example, visited the club once a week for two years to see her host and described her relationship with him. 'Our relationship is not based on money, but trust. He trusts me and opens his mind to me.'

Like Koji and Sachiko, hosts and their clients attempt to present themselves as capable and/or attractive selves worthy of receiving money and noncommercial attention respectively. For its part, seduction is a dialectical process, in which one's desire evolves. Desire to attain money and attention, as Koji and Sachiko exemplify, metonymically orients itself to the creation of the 'capable' and/or 'attractive' self in a very gendered way. The dialectical process enables two individuals who have different social backgrounds and desires to collaborate and fulfill each other as long as mutual satisfaction – even if it is asymmetric – is maintained.

Thus, seduction in the host club is not just about seducing the *other* but also about the presentation of the seductive and therefore valuable *self*. Such ambivalence is rooted in the mirror image that seduction reflects: one simultaneously *seduces*, and is also *seduced* by the other. This reflex allows both host and client to use seduction to feel good about the self and at the same time enjoy the intoxication of being seduced. The ambivalence is, I argue, the beauty of seduction that poetically evokes sensuous, affective, and visceral pleasure, while leaving room for multiple interpretations, all with a pleasant aftertaste. <

A host club billboard on the street in Kabukichō

photo by William Steele

Note:

All names, including that of the host club, are pseudonyms.

Akiko Takeyama is a PhD candidate in cultural anthropology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her ethnographic research was funded by the Japan Foundation doctoral fellowship. She is currently writing her doctoral dissertation and has recently contributed a chapter to the book *Genders, Sexualities and Transgenders in Japan* (Routledge, 2005).