



This is a repository copy of *The Japanese adult video industry*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/160496/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Coates, J. orcid.org/0000-0001-7905-9504 (2019) *The Japanese adult video industry*. *Contemporary Japan*, 31 (2). pp. 268-271. ISSN 1869-2729

<https://doi.org/10.1080/18692729.2018.1553753>

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Contemporary Japan* on 13th december 2018, available online:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/18692729.2018.1553753>.

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

To reference the original published version of this review see:

Coates, J., 2019. The Japanese adult video industry. *Contemporary Japan* 31(2), 268-271

Wong, Heung-wah and Yau, Hoi-yan. 2018. *The Japanese Adult Video Industry*. London: Routledge

Jamie Coates

Heung Wah Wong and Hoi-yan Yau's *The Japanese Adult Video Industry* is one of the first English-language ethnographic accounts of the business of Japanese pornography. While there have previously been works on particular pornographic texts and their implications for diverse, particularly queer, genders and sexualities in Japan, this is one of the first ethnographic descriptions of the production of pornographic material for the heterosexual market. It is also perhaps one of the most detailed and candid ethnographies on the topic, providing vivid observational descriptions of encounters within the industry, both sexual and otherwise. The Japanese adult video (AV) industry has attracted the attention of Japanese historians and sociologists, with a healthy side industry in popular non-fiction publications about the lives and experiences of AV stars and actors. English language accounts have tended to be thin on the ground however, mostly consisting of side projects and commentaries that emerge from other ethnographic encounters. Wong and Yau's account goes beyond these works to provide an exhaustive historical, anthropological and sociological account of this ubiquitous yet under-examined industry. Despite the brilliance of its ethnography however, a few unfortunate word choices and occasionally clumsy phrasing diminishes the impact of this otherwise excellent work. Nonetheless, it is a timely contribution that drives not only the field of Japanese studies but also anthropology and porn studies into new ethnographic terrain.

The major argument of Wong and Yau's book is that pornography has reality producing effects that are particular to each different culture. Pornographic reality, as they call it, is the way in which pornography feeds into our wider ideas about what constitutes the nature of 'men and women's sexual being' (226). As Wong and Yau point out, most porn studies literature has focused on how the consumption of pornography has reality producing effects by focusing on the semiotics of particular pornographic texts to construct universalising moral arguments. While they repeatedly acknowledge the important contribution of this body of scholarship, and occasionally utilise its methodology, Wong and Yau bring a new focus to this field through their ethnography of the *production* of pornography. As they argue, much of porn studies has focused more so on the consumption of sexually explicit material or have covered the industry from a significant historical distance. In contrast, Wong and Yau conducted exhaustive fieldwork between 2010 and 2016 with a variety of people involved in the AV industry in Japan, from studio owners and directors to cameramen and actors. Through this work, they have written a very honest ethnographic account of pornography production, attending casting interviews, movie shootings and censorship processes as part of their fieldwork.

The book starts with a blow by blow description of a sex scene being watched by Wong and Yau's informant in Taiwan where they had initially been conducting research on the reception of Japanese AV. Describing a coercive scene between a ballet coach and his student, Wong and Yau introduce the key conceptual term they use to thread their ethnography together: the cultural code of 'salvage ideology'. As Wong and Yau describe it, 'salvage ideology' is the cluster of cultural scripts that shape the pornographic reality of Japan, one where men are seen as naturally dominant figures who coax sexual sentiment and orgasms out of women. The carry-on effects of this dynamic are that men are framed in pornographic texts as sexual saviours who understand women's needs more so than women themselves.

The logics of Wong and Yau's analysis are compelling and help us understand the common and unnervingly coercive tone found in much of Japanese AV. My only reservation would be with their choice of the word 'salvage', which I would argue has a slightly different connotation to that which their argument suggests. Salvage connotes images of men roaming the seas looking for flotsam that can be repurposed, or the rescue of someone or something in peril. In contrast, Wong and Yau describe narratives and cultural frameworks that present men as saviours engaged in acts of sexual salvation rather than 'sexual salvage'. Wong and Yau are clearly impressive linguists who work in at least 4 languages to conduct their research, and I do not make this comment in jest. I mention it because it distracts from their overall very convincing argument about the figuration of men as saviours and suggests a certain degree of oversight on the part of the copyeditors for this otherwise impressive book.

Chapter 2 charts the history and organisation of the contemporary Japanese AV industry. Starting from the increasingly sexualised nature of postwar popular culture, Wong and Yau weave together a useful summary of the history of contemporary Japanese popular culture as it relates to pornography. In particular, they chart how the public emphasis on companionate and romantic love in many ways planted the seed for the image of men as sexual saviours. Starting with magazines and guides about married sex life, they show how discourses about men's need to become sexually skilled and liberated filtered into various other genres of popular culture such as in pink films, vending machine magazines and *roman porno*. They also trace how the figuration of women in materials such as vinyl cover books (*binibon*) foreshadowed the rise of sexualised idols. When video technology became affordable in the early 1980s a series of new productions came out and the term 'adult video' or AV (*ebui*) entered the Japanese lexicon (41).

As Wong and Yau argue these early developments shaped the content provided by different production companies, which in turn shaped much of the organisation of the industry. They summarise these dynamics through continued reference to two dominant categories of AV: *tantai* (single person) and *kikaku* (planned, or narrative form). *The Japanese Adult Video Industry* shows how *tantai*, which focuses on individual sexualised encounters with models, grew out of depictions such as those found in *binibon*. Similarly, the more story-driven AV (*kikaku*) was a popularised video genre

that borrowed heavily from pink films and *roman porno*. Chapter 3 Follows the production, circulation and regulation of these AVs in Japan, explaining how the wider structures that govern AV production relate to its content. In particular, they show how vertical integration structures and the imperative to self-censor allowed for the 'Big Five' companies to dominate the AV industry.

Chapter 4 combines textual analysis of *Tantai* and *Kikaku* films with detailed analysis of how narratives are chosen, models employed, covers designed, market audiences and prices determined, and content circulated. We find out many interesting trends in this chapter. For example, although *tantai* actresses are technically paid more per job, many *kikaku* actresses are able to make more money overall. This chapter also provides a multi-layered analysis of how *tantai* and *kikaku* productions map onto the broader cultural argument Wong and Yau are trying to make. *Tantai* AVs are the major site where AV has emphasised the lack of sexual agency of individual women. In contrast *kikaku* films tend to emphasise the active role of men in coercing women into sexual excitement, a point which is returned to later in ethnographic detail. After these chapters that provide context, *The Japanese Adult Video Industry* turns to questions of recruitment. In 'who wants to be an AV girl' (chapter 5) Wong and Yau analyse a dataset of 588 forms that women interested in working in AV filled out as part of their recruitment between 2007 and 2010. This chapter, alongside the first five chapters are a highly useful roadmap of the Japanese AV industry that would make excellent reading for students and scholars studying popular culture and creative industries.

The last three chapters are detailed ethnographic descriptions of three different encounters. The first follows the recruitment interview of a young woman. The chapter is almost a transcript of the encounter, following her responses to questions about her sexual experiences, the men she has slept with and her career so far. Of particular note is the way Wong and Yau juxtapose the questions the interviewer asks with their decisions to photograph and film different parts of the actress's body. These decisions and questions are used to explore and showcase the 'bodily capital' of the actress, indicating her degree of freshness and uniqueness.

The next chapter is the most explicit in *The Japanese Adult Video Industry* and follows the filming of a *kikaku* film where a woman is laid down and subjected to a range of techniques and contraptions intended to make her orgasm so many times she reaches an uncontrollable point of ecstasy. Wong and Yau are present throughout the whole scene and describe the way the director embodies the idea that women's sexual agency must be released by a skilled man. The ethnography is excellent, but very graphic, indicating that it might not be suitable reading for certain audiences. Nonetheless, this chapter illustrates Wong and Yau's major argument the best, showing how the frameworks that inform the actresses participation in this scene, coupled with the hypnotist like triggers (*kotoba-zeme*) utilised by the director, produced an entrancing pornographic reality that turns the young woman into an 'animal' rather than a sexual subject.

The final chapter describes a short exercise that Wong and Yau participated in, where they experience the process the *Eizorin* self-censoring organization uses to check AV materials. In this session they sat through 360 minutes of AV materials to check the quality of the filmmaker's efforts to follow censorship guidelines. This chapter allows the reader to reflect upon the relationship between the highly sexual encounter in the preceding chapter and the various bureaucratic operations that form the reality of AV in Japan. Through this analysis they reflect on ways AV, from its sexual encounters and production to its regulation, shape the 'reality' of sex and gender in Japan today.

The Japanese Adult Video Industry is rich with detail and is bold in its descriptive choices. Wong and Yau demonstrate significant theoretical ambition, drawing on classic ethnographers and theoreticians such as Turner, Saussure, Sahlins and Levi-Strauss to emphasize the ways Japan's particular pornographic reality is produced. Their reliance on these theories leaves a somewhat unsatisfying conclusion however where they make a series of suggestions that would require further conceptual work. For example, they argue that Japanese men need to liberate themselves from an obsession with women's lack of sexual agency by recognizing the arbitrary nature of the cultural codes that shape this perception. But they don't really explain how this is possible from the classical theoretically informed concept of 'reality' they present. Similarly, greater consideration of where non-normative sexualities and genders fit within the codes they lay out would also have strengthened their central argument. Despite these shortcomings however, Wong and Yau's book is undeniably an impressive feat with a compelling central argument. It is the product of two dedicated ethnographers who are unembarrassed to tackle the graphic complexities of AV production in Japan and East Asia more broadly. *The Japanese Adult Video Industry* will prove useful for teaching at advanced levels and is likely to herald new debates and directions within Japanese studies, porn studies, and anthropology.