



Being Queer & Seeking Therapy in Japan

Written by Matty Norris, CET Japan, Academic Year 2018-2019

Who is the intended audience(s) of your perspective piece?: “queer, genderqueer, and gender-questioning folks, as well as those with mental health struggles or those thinking about seeking counseling while in Japan”

My name is Matty, and I spent one year in Japan (summer 2018 in Hakodate, Hokkaido; fall 2018 & spring 2019 semesters at CET in Osaka). I am an AMAB genderqueer person who uses the pronouns they/them/theirs in English. I am going to talk about a few things related to my experience with gender, sexuality, and mental health during my time in Japan. To note before I begin: Japan is a large country and Osaka, the hub of CET, is a massive city. Though my experience has the possibility to be informative, one must be sure not to take the testimony of one foreigner as singular truth. There are always resources undiscovered and communities unseen, as well as consistent change around identity politics and resource availability.

My Experience of Queerness:

That being said, coming from the United States, I would say that urban Japan is a comparatively safe place for an exchange student to be visibly genderqueer or transgender. I claim this for a few reasons:

1. As a foreigner, you are not expected to conform to rules around “proper” presentation to the extent of someone who was born and raised in Japan; conversely, it seemed as if I was almost expected to look and act as an outsider, and displaying adopted “Japanese-isms” was instead the surprising concept. I would maybe even go as far as to say that my non-traditional gender presentation was “explained” by the fact that I am a 6’2” white foreigner. I already stood out, so what more harm could booty shorts exact? I cannot speak for the experience of those who may be perceived as native Japanese due to their race, however.
2. As a university student, you will unlikely come into contact with the strictly gendered and hierarchical structures of anime fame that still dominate many high schools and corporate workplaces. At Osaka Gakuin University there is no dress code and no uniform, and though a senpai-kohai age-based dynamic still exists, again, as a foreigner the linguistic rules that dictate such a hierarchy do not really apply unless you choose to subscribe to them. As an example, my language partner was four years younger than I am, but from our first day we both used a casual form of speech with each other.
3. In general, Japan is a much safer place to exist in public than the U.S., and this reality extends itself to those with non-traditional gender presentations. Much of the anxiety I experience around gender and presentation in the U.S. is due to the possibility of harassment and/or violence in public; in

Japan, however, I have observed that there is a high value placed on keeping to oneself while in public space. Sure, people will stare if any part of you (race, gender, presentation) stands out, but these differences would generally never create any sort of interaction, positive or negative.

4. Linguistically, Japanese is gendered very differently (and beneficially, IMO) than English. Third-person pronouns are very rarely used; instead, one generally refers to a third person by their name rather than as “she”, “he”, or “they”. However, first-person pronouns are somewhat gendered, with some flexibility. This orientation allows you to gender yourself if you choose, but you will never misgender someone else using a third-person pronoun. Here is my guide on first-person pronouns from what I gauged from a year in Japan:

- 私 watashi: the closest to a non-gendered “I”; in formal/polite contexts, it is used by all genders, though in casual speech it is used mostly by women and non-binary folks. Worked well for me as a AMAB genderqueer person!
- 僕 boku: historically male pronoun with a “boyish,” young tone, though increasingly it is being used by young women and non-binary people, especially in music; has a deferential/humble tone when in contrast to someone else using a more dominant pronoun.
- 俺 ore: historically gender-neutral pronoun that has developed a very masculine, gruff tone; can be considered rude or too informal in some contexts. To me, when people use ore it seemed as if they were trying to broadcast masculinity.
- あたし atashi: an informal feminine pronoun; often only used among other feminine people. I used atashi only around other queer people to build a sense of femme pride, but used watashi as a standard safe neutral referent.
- 内 / うち uchi: a Kansai specialty; literally “home”/“inside”, has a very familial tone used mainly by women to refer to themselves, or by anyone to refer to their family (e.g., “uchi no neko” [“my (family’s) cat”]).

I do want to point out that though presentation and self-identification may not necessarily be an issue of safety in Japan, there still does not exist as robust a public queer scene as some cities in the United States, and I never met any “out” Japanese folks. Osaka Gakuin University does not have any queer identity-based organizations, and most queer life in Osaka was centered around nightlife--not the most welcoming scene for everyone. Apps like Tinder and Grindr are definitely used, but mostly by those wishing to associate specifically with foreigners, and even then, many folks were quite discreet and afraid of being outed to co-workers or other students. I sensed a general lack of knowledge and stereotypes about queerness, though not necessarily a hostility towards it. Most people have seen drag queens on TV but do not think they personally have any queer friends, creating a sort of distance from the realities of everyday queerness. I would recommend watching these Youtube videos from the voice of Japanese folks that I found really helpful when contextualizing queerness in Japan:

- [“Being LGBT in Japan \(Japanese Interview at Tokyo Rainbow Pride 2015\)”](#) [That Japanese Man Yuta (His channel is awesome! Check out his other videos too)]
- [“How do the Japanese Feel About LGBT?”](#) [Asian Boss]
- [“How do LGBT See Japanese Society?”](#) [Asian Boss]

In the CET-specific context, queerness was a non-issue for me. It turns out that over half of our spring semester cohort identified as LGBTQ, and local roommates would not likely have been chosen had

they harbored any issues with queer-identifying people. I had many open conversations with roommates about gender and sexuality--about pronouns in English, the concept of Xジェンダー (“X-gender,” or “non-binary gender”), sexual preferences, etcetera--and I even focused on gender and genderqueerness for my CET fall semester independent project. I was pleasantly surprised to find that no matter the age of the interviewee, everyone I spoke with was open to discussing these issues, even if they were not very knowledgeable about them. Thus, I never experienced a conversation in which I felt I shouldn't have brought up something just to keep the peace.

My Experience with Mental Health Counseling While in Japan:

In the United States, I had been seeing a therapist for chronic depression and an anxiety disorder, but I didn't believe I had the level of Japanese to see a counselor while in Japan, and I did not wish to counsel remotely (via video calls or the like) with a English-language therapist, so I began the year with no plans of pursuing therapy. However, someone close to me passed about a month into the program, resulting in a deterioration of my abilities to maintain good sleep hygiene, keep my space clean, and socialize with others in the program. I knew I needed professional help. Luckily, I reached out to the CET program director, who informed me that there were in fact many English- (and other foreign) language therapists in the Kansai area, some themselves expatriates, some Japanese nationals with fluency in English and other languages. They are listed in a directory called “[International Mental Health Professionals Japan](#),” in which one can search by region, services, or specialty. CET staff also has the names of specific therapists CET students have received care from in the past. I believe all of these therapists' services are covered by CET's GeoBlue Health Insurance, and some therapists that I looked into offered a free first consultation by phone or in-person to gauge the right fit.

My experience with therapy in Japan was overwhelmingly positive. As an expatriate himself, my therapist was able to understand how a new environment compounded some of my specific mental health struggles, as well as how distance from the support of friends and family in the U.S. affected how I could deal with things I thought I had under control. He ended up becoming a dear and trusted friend to me, and my weekly trips to his office in Kyoto became a grounding ritual. If nothing else, I would recommend anyone to develop a weekly or other-timed personal ritual that takes you outside of your normal commute and crowd of people--a sort of personal retreat. Kyoto, so close yet a world away, served as that for me.

I hope that these few paragraphs have given you a little bit of context about queerness and mental health as a participant of CET. Keep these conversations going! Ask questions of your roommates and language partners, or watch one of the bilingual videos I listed above as a starting point. And if you do have any questions or things you'd like to discuss, feel free to email me anytime at *mkznorris [at] gmail [dot] com*. Safe travels and 頑張ってください *ganbatte kudasai* (“Good luck”)!