

COVID-19 in Japan: A Nighttime Disease

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Abstract: *When the state of emergency was declared in Tokyo, it was less a mandatory order than a request for cooperation and for jishuku (self-restraint). Along with the ambiguous status of such a request in a time of pandemic, this confusion was further compounded by uneven enforcement. While wealthier, middle class areas were left relatively unpatrolled, the areas around the redlight district of Kabuki-chō in Shinjuku, Tokyo, were very strictly monitored despite the lack of any conclusive data at that time regarding the infection patterns or rates. In targeting workers in the “night business,” the Tokyo Metropolitan Government reenacted centuries old prejudices against those working the sex trades. This paper focuses on how the advent of COVID-19 affected the lives of people working in the settai (business entertainment) industry, in particular hostesses in hostess bars, kyabajō (hostesses in clubs), and male hosts. Their voices tell us how, through the government’s actions as well as mass media and social media discourse surrounding their work, these laborers were stigmatized, resulting in a worsening of their already precarious positions as they have been expected to do difficult and increasingly dangerous work, almost always without any contract or insurance protection, in a time of pandemic.*

Keywords: COVID-19, vulnerable populations, sex work, Kabuki-cho

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected over 200 countries and territories around the world, compelling millions of people to observe total lockdowns of their communities. The Japanese response to the global emergency prompted significant criticism from the public. The Abe government announced the state of emergency only on April 7th by requesting - rather than explicitly compelling - the population to avoid close contact and refrain from going out unnecessarily (The Japan Times, 2020a). No mandatory restriction was officially imposed. Instead, the population was requested to exercise self-restraint (*jishuku*). There were temporary closures of restaurants, department stores, shops, and clubs, along with the suspension of much commercial activity. However, since these restrictions were voluntary and remained at the discretion of individuals and business owners, the actual results of the Abe government’s request for closures was uneven.

In countries such as Italy, Australia, France, and Spain, people have been required to stay at home except when purchasing primary necessities, with fines and penalties for breaking the rules (Tondo, 2020). In Japan, despite being a country with a very high rate of mask use, people have continued to move freely from one prefecture to another, to gather in restaurants and parks, travel in crowded trains, and engage in many outdoor activities, particularly in residential areas (The Mainichi, 2020a; The New York Times 2020). It has been very common to see a significant number of

people in the streets, stations, parks, and in supermarkets and drugstores, who are making little or no effort to respect social distancing requests. Groups of children can also be observed playing in the streets, at-risk elderly people have kept gathering, and whole families can be found walking their dogs together. Both families and the elderly seem to behave as if COVID-19 is not interested in catching them.

Yoyogi Park, May 8th, 16.03. A upscale middle-class area of Tokyo where no one was wearing a mask even as they engaged in contact sports.



Shimokitazawa, May 1st, h. 14.40. People walking in groups in daytime in areas not associated with nighttime entertainment during the state of emergency.

The same scenario can be found in Toshima-ku and Shinjuku-ku’s residential areas, as explained by two residents, both young men working in the tourism industry, who also lost clients and money due to the pandemic. “Yesterday as I jogged around my house, keeping a safe distance from everyone else, the whole area, especially parks, were full of people, mostly families with children, but even some older people. I was shocked by the number of children playing even without wearing a mask,” explained P., a 30-year-old hotel staff member who lives in a residential area of Shinjuku. L., a 33-year old interpreter, provided a similar account, explaining that the parks in the residential area of Toshima-ku where he lives are still significantly crowded. “Also,” he added, “the supermarkets are small in Japan, but they still do not limit entrance to small groups of people, there is no real social distancing around here.”



In the age of coronavirus, *jishuku* (self-restraint) is the term used to suggest a need to take precautions to ensure that the spread of the coronavirus would not continue - but such calls were not directed to everyone equally. As we can see from the many examples above, this call does not seem to be intended, heeded, or enforced for the majority of suburban families and other “respectable types,” with little negative consequences in public opinion or media attention for their violations of public safety. In fact, it seems that this self-restraint primarily targets certain classes of people. This targeting bias is limited to certain areas and is built into the actual mechanism of coronavirus testing, a method referred to as “cluster testing.”. This method of testing, used in Tokyo

and other cities in Japan, focuses on certain areas and seems designed to “satisfy an anxious public” in the absence of scientific basis rather than accurately and systematically attempting to survey the whole population. (See Adelstein 2020 for the distortion of data that this method produces and Yano 2020 for the limitations of this approach.) Not surprisingly, those working in the *mizushōbai* (nighttime entertainment businesses), were far more strictly monitored and often vilified in the media, with their actions and characters questioned, with some going to the extent of suggesting that they did not deserve the 100,000 yen compensation bond that every other resident received. This paper explores how the advent of COVID-19 has affected the lives of those working in the *settai* (business entertainment) industry, particularly hostesses in hostess bars, *kyabajō* (hostesses in clubs), and male hosts. I begin by outlining the precarious nature of their work, made more dangerous under COVID-19, and the attempts at vilification and scapegoating by both media and some state officials in ways that echo long-held prejudices against this particular form of labor in Japan.

The Night World and its Labor

The negative public reaction could be traced in part to a press conference held on March 30, when the Governor of Tokyo, Koike Yuriko, requested people to exercise self-discipline, particularly stressing the need to avoid any sort of night-life entertainment, in Japanese called *mizushōbai*, which includes all the businesses involving *settai*, as well as sex-related businesses (The Page, 2020). The term *settai* refers to the practice of sitting next to a client to provide him/her company by serving food and drinks, talking and flirting, but without involving sexual services. There are several types of businesses throughout Japan - host and hostess clubs, cabarets, lounges, snack bars,

and boys’ or girls’ bars - located especially in Tokyo, with most concentrated around the Shinjuku Kabuki-chō area, Roppongi, and Ginza. Although there are substantial differences among hosts, hostesses and *kyabajō*, all earn their money based on a calculation of the number of clients they bring and the amount of money the clients spend at the club: the more clients, the more the club they are affiliated with earns and the higher the ranking of the hostess or host within the club becomes. In a time of social distancing, work that depends upon social intimacy is clearly problematic from an epidemiological as well as political point of view, both for individual providers as well as for society as a whole. However, while many restaurants and even bars closed in these entertainment areas, many others throughout Tokyo remained open.

While it is difficult to estimate, the entertainment industry around *mizushōbai* represents a significant percentage of both the national economy, and even more important, for the metropolitan economy of every major city in Japan. Nevertheless, most of the people who work in this industry are not getting rich (Kakuma, 2017). The service providers generally have no standard working contract tying them to the club, but instead can be considered entrepreneurs or freelancers who affiliate with a club and get performance-based pay which varies depending on their success with clients. They cannot be fired or laid off because they were never hired. Thus, while the club makes money from the customers, the workers assume the risk associated with a lack of customers. As a result, just like the many irregular workers around Japan, those who work in the *mizushōbai* industry are unable to sustain themselves in times of poor business. Because they have no regular contract, they do not have a company paying into any health insurance scheme. Nevertheless, many were still expected to work by their clubs. And unlike other workers who have been celebrated as “essential workers” because they labored

through the pandemic, those who work in *mizushōbai* businesses were vilified in the present climate of fear and uncertainty, in part because their work involves close contact with the public. The manner of this vilification is familiar to any student of Japanese history (Sankei Biz, 2020).

The Struggle of Media Representation of Night Work Under COVID-19

The way that individuals are treated, how the public thinks of them, and furthermore how they think of themselves, are influenced by the media construction of their situation. The tendency of talk-shows, mass media, blogs, and social media platforms to point fingers mainly at *settai* businesses was most evident with the press conference on March 30th, right after the death of the famous Japanese comedian Ken Shimura (age 70), known to be a frequenter of hostess clubs and bars. Shimura died on March 29th due to pneumonia caused by the new coronavirus and was the first Japanese celebrity known to have contracted the disease. His death shocked Japan (The Japan Times, 2020b) but also helped to raise awareness about the seriousness of the disease and to consider a lockdown. However, Shimura's death also resulted in more negative coverage of nightlife, as rumors about the comedian having contracted the virus from a hostess spread on the Internet and within Japanese news sources (Yahoo News, 2020). According to some of these stories and rumors, Shimura might have contracted the virus in a hostess club during his own birthday celebration thrown by the club's *mama*, who had been in Spain a few weeks before where she allegedly contracted the virus. The woman promptly denied the accusations, claiming that she tested negative for the coronavirus and that she did not have any other contact with Shimura except at his birthday party. Evidently, her claims did not convince the media, and

several nighttime entertainment businesses started to close immediately after Koike's press conference and in the following days soon after (Katanuma, 2020).

While the vagaries of assigning guilt and culpability can be hard to follow, money often helps to sharpen the discourse. On April 5th, during an edition of the popular TV show *Waido na Show*, broadcast every Sunday on Fuji TV, there was a discussion of the cash payouts that were to go to all residents in acknowledgment of the collective hardship suffered due to the virus. Famous comedian Matsumoto Hitoshi openly claimed that he would not want to use his taxes to provide monetary support to hostesses. "I'm sorry, but I don't want to use the taxes we have paid to pay the salaries of the hostesses who are now off." His opinion seemed to resonate with many, as several "keyboard warriors" in SNS, as well as renowned public figures such as plastic surgeon Katsuya Takasu, firmly agreed (Medium, 2020). For some, the only option in these heavily recirculated tweets was: "There's nothing to do but blow up Kabuki-chō" (Matome Matome, 2020b). As a consequence, like those who came into contact with Shimura, many night-workers tried to defend themselves through their personal profiles on social media.

The response to this public condemnation by those in the industry depended on a re-casting of their activities from the status of 'entertainers' to that of 'workers' in the most powerful form among urban youth today - social media. The workers mounted a digital defense around the hashtag "night work is also work" (#夜職も仕事です). They also wrote up a petition asking not to be discriminated against, and to be treated like any other worker facing financial issues because of the coronavirus, just as sex workers around the world have done during this pandemic. They argued that "those regulated by the Adult Entertainment Business Law are the only ones being discriminated

against. We ask to be treated as any other industry and citizen!!” (風営法の管轄だけ差別をされています。一般企業、一般市民と同じ処遇を!!) (Change.org, 2020). In doing so, they attempted to combat the negative press, but also the newly self-righteous TV talents that sought to draw a clear line between those working in the day and those working at night. Their argument was that day or night, all workers should be treated the same. It was unfair and discriminatory treatment to single out night-workers who have been marginalized by wider society simply because of their labor. In the end, the Japanese government approved a sum of 100,000 yen as support to any residents in Japan facing financial issues due to the effects of the virus. Night workers were not excluded, even if some of the bad press continued.

History of Stigmatization of Pleasure Quarters

At the time, everyone was facing an infection that was frightening and not yet fully understood. In instances such as these, attempts to segregate possible sources of danger are not unique and, in many ways, seem reasonable. However, that is not what was happening. This was punitive, an attempt to draw a line that not only excluded these mostly young workers financially, but also attributed to them the stigmatizing features of promiscuity, labeled as the polluted and the contagious (Litera, 2020). While this condemnation might seem extreme, in fact it is an old strategy when it comes to the various entertainment districts in Japan. The discrimination against these companion-laborers, whether sex-workers or *settai*-workers, has existed for centuries. The society of the Tokugawa period, where social order was mainly based on Chinese Confucian ideas, was divided according to a hierarchy of moral virtues, but also on the basis of their productive contribution to society. In this division, the

classes that did not produce goods or materials - whether of food or objects - were at the bottom, because they did not materially contribute. Thus, even more so than merchants, who only exchanged products rather than produce them, those working in the entertainment quarters were considered outcasts (Gordon, 2013). The Yoshiwara quarter, populated by women and men whose role was to offer “nonreproductive-pleasure” (Lindsey, 1988), was physically segregated to the outskirts of the city, far from the respectable classes, along with others considered outcasts due to having “low morality” or being “unclean” (such as executioners and criminals).

Even the thirst for enlightenment and civilization, and the all-out efforts to achieve modernity, was not enough for the Meiji leaders to secure better conditions for those laborers or to update their ideas of morality associated with this work. Yoshiwara remained not only isolated, but was considered one of the areas that remained trapped in the past, representing the obsolete and the non-developed feudal Japan (Maeda 2004) - in other words, the anti-Meiji. Today, Kabuki-chō is geographically situated at the center of Tokyo, easily reachable by everybody, but still suffers from another sort of isolation: a media isolation, made worse by the digital landscape.

The Voices of the Night Workers

The words of individuals working in *mizushōbai* reflect these larger concerns; the lack of a living wage, and the precariousness of having no contract or insurance, despite working in high risk contexts. But just as importantly, they talk about battling a stigmatized public perception of “night work”, which they usually feel is unfair and undeserved. In talking to those who work in the industry, their most immediate fear was that the media bashing

could have long-term effects. How long will this media-built image of the night-workers affect their businesses and reputations after the end of the state of emergency and reopening of their clubs? All interviewees expressed concerns regarding their future, and also the possibility that the negative stigma created mostly by the media could last longer than their personal savings.

The workers in Kabuchi-cho are part of a larger and growing population of irregular workers who hold up Japan's entrepreneurial economy, often at their own risk. "I haven't been working since the end of March, which means I haven't earned any money since then," explains K., a young host working in a club in Kabuki-chō. "We don't receive any allowance from the club because we earn our salary based on the hours we spend at the clubs with the clients, and receive a percentage of the money they spend on us (namely, bottles of expensive champagne or alcohol). I am looking for other jobs I can do in the meantime, it is hard though." K. is 25 years old, comes from Ehime-ken, Shikoku, but has lived in Tokyo for three years. He has dyed light brown hair, styled in a perfect host, anime-like style. He started to work as a host last year and has been living in one of the several dorms run by Kabuki-chō's clubs since then—a place that probably also is at viral risk due to the nature of it being a small communal living space. He adds, "We don't take special precautions in the dorm except for washing our hands more frequently." (Like most people in Tokyo, some wear masks, others do not. But in this industry where looks are so important, it is probable that fewer people than in the general urban population wear masks.) Having few choices, facing the loss of all his savings, he confirmed that he still sees some of his clients privately in bars in the nearby area. Still it is not enough to support himself completely.

A. is a 32 year-old from Tokyo and lives with her parents, who are not aware of her occupation even though she has been working

as a *kyabajō* since she was 18. She also works as a sales manager for a clothing shop even though she could live entirely on her income as a *kyabajō* (a luxury limited to only the most popular women). Besides income, she also chose to work in this other industry both for her parents and for her future, so she will not have to be a *kyabajō* forever. She said, "it is not easy to find another job when you are over 30 and have worked only as a *kyabajō*." She added "I've never been home for such a long time in my whole life. I'm taking this opportunity to rest for a while. Also, I've started making handmade earrings and flower compositions to sell online, as it feels good to be creative." A. explained that she has not received any money from the club since the day they closed on April 6th. She keeps in touch with her clients daily, something all *kyabajō* do as part of the unpaid effective labor that comes along with the job - constant digital contact with their clients is a necessity for any host or hostess, whether aspiring or established, and is one of the features that has survived, at least for now, in the time of coronavirus. However, A. refuses to meet her clients personally because she "heard from the news that ¾ of the infected people in Japan contracted the virus in nightclubs, therefore I am too scared to meet anyone at the moment." Despite this, both K. and A. claim that they have never heard of anyone they know, whether acquaintances or friends of a friend, having contracted the virus. All of their knowledge of people who got the virus in clubs is exclusively through the news and social media, such as Twitter and Instagram.

The stigma of working in *settai* has become more pronounced since COVID-19 arrived. M. is 28 years old and is from Yokohama, but left her hometown as soon as she became a hostess. M. has been working in the industry for 10 years. Her club has been closed since March 30th, one week before the announcement of the state of emergency. However, her club gave her a security allowance for April of 300,000 yen because she

has always contributed so much to the club's income - she is one of the most successful girls at the club. "I believe that hostess clubs and all the clubs of this kind are the most dangerous places at the moment because we sit next to the clients, it's impossible to keep safe social distancing when we work, and clubs generally do not have windows. Also, our job often involves having dinner with clients and after dinner, clients drive us to the club. If our drivers have the virus, we can also get it easily. I recognize it's necessary to close night clubs, but I feel very anxious about the future as we don't really know when we will reopen."

Her parents explicitly told her to hide her occupation from the rest of the family, especially from her grandparents. "Elders in general are still convinced that Ginza and Kabuki-chō are the same as the old Yoshiwara. I think it's impossible for them to understand our industry." Although she believes it is different from what it once was, M. has also experienced the same sort of social exclusion her mother feared. "As soon as I became an adult, I hardly met new people outside of our industry. I feel more comfortable being with those who share my view, and this protects me from any sort of discrimination against my occupation." But of course, her strategy of simply not meeting people outside her work environment to avoid confronting the stigma also makes it nearly impossible for her to make the transition to other lines of work.

The situation has forced some to leave the industry, at least temporarily. K. recently started to work for an old people's home, which has allowed him some perspective on his job as a host. "I really enjoy working with elders, it is fun. Also, I don't feel discriminated against in my new occupation. Working as a host is not seen as a good thing. I've always felt judged by others." He explains that when the government announced the possibility of a payout for all citizens, he was surprised by the negative reactions towards night workers. "I've read

horrible comments on Twitter. Most people were claiming that those working in the *mizushōbai* industry don't deserve that money, and some even suggested that we should not be allowed to apply for any financial aid from the government. It's terrible, right? We are Japanese citizens just like everyone else! But still, what can we do about it?"

C.(29 years old) has also worked as a host for 10 years but has stayed home since the announcement of the state of emergency. He comes from Bolivia but has lived in Japan since he was 13. "I feel pretty anxious about this situation because even after the clubs reopen, I strongly believe that we won't have many clients, at least not for a long time. It might take a while to get back to normal. I text my clients every day [just to keep contact], but who knows?" He explains that "the more crowded any place might be, the easier it is to get sick. Still I don't think that host bars are the main vehicle of the virus as many seem to believe."

All the interviewees expressed anxiety about their future because of the financial precariousness of their jobs and the close contact involved with meeting their clients. Furthermore, while everyone was aware of the negative stigma the public had of their industry - "essential" or not - they worried more about the deterioration of public perception since COVID-19 created a spotlight on their industry. That combination of risk, both epidemiological and financial, alongside social disapproval and stigmatization, is difficult. A. feels compelled to have two jobs to hide her involvement in the *mizushōbai* from her parents and to assure herself a future once she quits. K. does not feel discriminated against now that he works in aged care, and M. avoids meeting anyone outside the industry. Underlying this anxiety for many is the fact that for the most part, the *mizushōbai* is staffed by younger people. Their productivity, value, and capital are all linked to their youth, and once these young workers age, they are quickly disposed of - there are always

more young people waiting to get into the industry. For many, COVID-19 has simply hastened the inevitable trajectory that they each face in this line of work.

***Jishuku* - Self-restraint, but only for a few**

It is indeed understandable to request that people not go out and refrain from going to crowded places, especially where food, drink, and close contacts are involved. However, the same strictness does not seem to be applied to industries or areas involving the same risk of contagion as the nighttime businesses, such as restaurants and shops that are open in the daytime hours.

After the announcement of the state of emergency in seven prefectures, including Tokyo, on April 7th, the police started to patrol Kabuki-chō urging people in the streets to leave immediately (McGee, 2020). Some restaurants and bars in Tokyo are still open, just with reduced opening hours, but most shops and businesses are considered “non-essential” (The New York Times, 2020). In fact S. (33 years old), who works in a high-end bar in Ginza, explains that although the number of clients has dropped, the bar is still relatively crowded and no police patrol ever urged the people walking around the area to go home like they have done in Kabuki-chō. His manager reduced their working hours, but S. and his coworkers are still serving food and drinks late at night. “I don’t get why we still have to work while everyone is staying home, especially considering that nightlife is the most dangerous activity at the moment.” He added, “I feel uncomfortable telling people I am still working, but I guess it’s still fine since at least our bar is not a *settai* one.”

The spread of a pandemic affects the lives of each of us in multiple ways, both as individuals as well as part of the collective. Individuals can experience disillusionment, economic crisis,

and a sense of despair, as well as severe psychological issues. This media-imposed targeting of the “people of the night,” resting on the spurious division between “cities of the night” and “cities of the day,” not only increases the financial vulnerability of these workers, but also marks them because of the nature of their job. This division also reinstates the divide within society that has lasted for centuries, isolating and discriminating against those in the nighttime entertainment business for the nature of their occupation.

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Please also read our previous special **Pandemic Asia** on the impacts of COVID-19 in the larger Asia-Pacific region, edited by Jeff Kingston, delivered in [Part 1](#) and [2](#).

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