The politics of dancing in Japan

Dancing is illegal in Japan. That does not mean it doesn’t happen, and indeed nightclubs regularly stay open into the early hours. However, since 2010 police have begun reanimating Japan’s old fueiho cabaret law, dubiously used although Japan’s narcotics consumption is extremely low by international standards, and even the national sport property and construction (the Japanese state’s perceived golden goose of economic growth), and even the national sport

The Meiji period (1868-1912) was a time of incredibly rapid change for Japan and its people. The country was in the midst of its catch-up phase, after having been forcibly pulled out of its sakoku period whereby contact with the outside world was restricted to a few key trading posts. As foreign contacts increased, new ideas and concepts were introduced, challenging traditional Japanese culture and society. The Meiji period’s transformation from a feudal society to a modern nation-state was facilitated by the westernization movement, known as Meiji Restoration, which began in 1868.

The fueiho law

The fueiho law, which refers to entertainment and performance venues, was enacted in 1948. The law was implemented to control and regulate the entertainment industry, particularly during the postwar era when Japan was rebuilding from the war's devastation. The law was known for its strict regulations and restrictions, including the requirement for venues to obtain a license, which was difficult to obtain due to the stringent conditions.

The enforcement of the fueiho law was a reflection of the government’s efforts to control social behavior and maintain social order. However, it also contributed to the development of a subculture of underground music venues, such as dancehalls and cabarets, which became popular among the generation known as the ‘yumeOtaku’ (夢ヲタク, dream otaku).

The 1990s and beyond

The 1990s saw a resurgence in the popularity of dancehalls and cabarets, driven by the emergence of a new generation of Japanese youth who embraced a more alternative and non-mainstream culture. This period was marked by the rise of ‘superstar’ DJs and the development of new music genres, such as dance music and techno. The fesuto (festivals) became a major event, attracting thousands of participants.

The 2000s and beyond

The 2000s marked the beginning of a new era in Japan’s nightlife scene. The closure of many dancehalls and cabarets in the 1990s was seen as another attempt to control and regulate the entertainment industry. However, this led to the rise of a new generation of music venues, known as ‘super clubs’, which were characterized by their large size, high-end production values, and the presence of famous DJs.

The current state

Today, the Japanese government continues to regulate and control the entertainment industry through various laws and regulations. While there are some restrictions on the operation of nightclubs and cabarets, the vibrant nightlife scene in Japan still thrives, attracting both locals and tourists alike.

References


Ryan Hartley
Sumyoshi-ko, known as the Kanto Rengo-ko, are less than discreet about celebrity activities in nightclubs they protect, which has resulted in lurid newspaper front pages, thereby breaching the implicit compact: do not embarrass the police or their authority. Two cases that severely hardened the police resolve were an assault on Yomoguchu-gumi members in a cabaret club in Roppongi in 2011, and the beating to death of the owner of Club Flower, again in Roppongi, in 2012. The investigation went out of control with a media-savvy splinter group, controlling this violent splinter group, in addition to allowing the police to reassert their position. However, it may be that the fujiro law has disappeared from the US security regime and US national idealistic shifts, is the pressure from the decision to campaign for and win the international crime-beating ego competition that is the Olympic Games. The world’s gaze on Japan is making the country’s elite very anxious, as many nightclubs are either in soundproof rooms, which have resulted in lurid newspaper front pages, thereby breaching the implicit compact: do not embarrass the police or their authority.

The police also have a political agenda. Modern police force is a product of welfare states, and in Japan, there is a lack of any clearly defined laws concerning yakuza (it is not actually illegal to be a yakuza). Therefore, to meet targets it is easier to aim at easy targets (the nightclub) rather than difficult targets (a yakuza gang) to push up the points. The fujiro law is ideal, because it is so vague as to allow the police to enter the premises on the slightest of pretexts, pick up anyone of suspicious look, make drug busts without the need for probable cause, and exert a general influence over society. The Japanese police will sometimes claim that the reason for a raid on a club is to pick up local residents, and indeed, this had been the pretext for the original crack down on emiriki mura in Osaka. A range of recent local ordinances in fukuoka city is an example of this approach.

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Three people from dancing from a dancefloor; a discriminatory attempt to prevent multi-racial mixing in Harlem and other downtown districts, which have been analysed historically kept on the statute book but rarely enforced. That is until Mayor Rudy Giuliani was elected in 1994, remaining in office until 2001, and in the wake of the brouhaha holding seemingly resonantly similar to Mayor Giuliani’s rhetoric in New York.

Asahi Shimbun, 24 November 2014)

The World: Sparkling targets, there is no telling when it will once again be ‘business as usual’ under the regulations. The law is old and irrelevant, it incentivizes the police to subjectively decide when and where to measure the lights, and hence when a venue is in breach of the rules. In addition, it is more than likely a combination of preparations for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and the desire to further integrate into the US security apparatus that is driving change, especially with regards to the yakuza. In this case, the police are recently prompted to bring about significant change without it. Domestic protest has thus come at an opportune time; leaders and lawmakers are conscious of their, and the country’s, status. However, once the international gaze has shifted to its next sparkling target, there is no telling when it will once again be ‘business as usual’ under the regulations.

Vague laws are powerless authorities, as they enable the inchoate in both investigatory and judicial powers, being able to exercise all at will of the prosecution law. What is reprehensible is a lack of evidence, which draws a parallel that lawmakers, police, and civil society, can see. This will place controls on state authorities by giving non-state actors an awareness of their rights. Japan still has a little way to go.

References
1 The law (in Japanese, and yet to be updated) can be found at www.tinyurl.com/com/antidancing (accessed 24 November 2014)
3 John Dower details how various cultures arose from this – a sexualized literature (resonant literature), prostitutes or ‘women of the streets’ (an act of violence) for escapism encompassed in the ‘three-f’ policy of sex, sports, and screens, washed down with copious amounts of black market choki or ‘black market beer’ (shizuku-shochu, or sake that was sold on the black market) (Dower, J. 1999. Embracing Defeat: In the Wake of World War II, New York: W.W. Norton Company/The New Press. 4 Quoted in Geoffrey, A. 29 May 2013. ‘Dancing all night is a crime? Tokyo Nightclub District and the Re-Shaping of a Global City, Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press.
5 Stefan Saxonow, an expat club owner in Tokyo, claims that a police officer in 2010 told him ‘provoked the evaluation of the Policies [гиен для оконок сексу миха кимо камуру хиттоси] is the problem. It requires bodies to report centrally on regulations they are responsible for, to assess whether they are still relevant and workable. In the case of fujiro, rather than admit that the regulation is old and irrelevant, it incentivizes the police to use the law more, in order to show that it is still worth having on the statute book. Quoted in Hudfleid, J. 12 October 2012: ‘Japan: no dancing please. Police are raiding clubs nationwide’, www.toyota.koikita.com/japancrush (accessed 24 November 2014)
6 'broom holding' seems resonantly similar to Mayor Giuliani’s rhetoric in New York.
7 Several high profile cases of celebrities in drugs and assault related incidents in nightclubs around Nishi-Azabu and Daikan-yama in Tokyo, involving Kanto Rengo-gumi members – long time member one sumo wrestler Abarai Kyo Akihito in February 2010 (sumo a sport riddled with yakuza and gang connections) and 11th generation kabuki actor Ebi Ichikawa in 2009 (ichikawa was publicly acknowledged to have relations with a local yakuza clan) members parade themselves on stage at a Nagoya event, and details of police officers and their family members;
9 The law itself that is mitigating this problem.
10 The international: the US and the Olympics
11 Following a seemingly global trend, Japan is currently experiencing a shift to the political right. From 1999 until 2012 Ichihara Shintaro, a conservative nationalist, governed Tokyo. In Osaka, between 2008 and 2012 Hashimoto Toru, himself the son of a yakuza member, was elected by adopting yakuza populist public policy.
12 Asahi Shimbun, 24 November 2014)
13 2011 US President Obama signed Executive order 13581 giving the US Department of Treasury the ability to impose sanctions on transnational criminal organizations (TCOs), allowing the freezing of their assets in the US. Japan’s isolation strategy in the late 1990s. Asahi Shimbun, 22 November 2014)
17 A 2008 National Police Agency ‘Special Report on the Yakuza’ states that due to its inroads into the financial sector the yakuza represent a threat to the economy itself, fifty Kanto-ko (a wealthy sub-branch of the Yomoguchu-gumi clan) members paid an entry sumo wrestling ban in 2009, the Yomoguchu-gumi syndicate begins to record the names and details of police officers and their family members; finally resulting in National Police Agency chief Ando Takaharu’s call to all police in Japan to devote their energies to targeting the Kanto-ko and other yakuza groups. Adeline, J. 2011. ‘Dance is a crime: Dancing all night is a crime? The Newsletter Tokyo Nightclub District and the Re-Shaping of a Global City, Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press.
19 The newsletter Tokyo Nightclub District and the Re-Shaping of a Global City, Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press.
20 Stefan Saxonow, an expat club owner in Tokyo, claims that a police officer in 2010 told him ‘provoked the evaluation of the Policies [гиен для оконок сексу миха кимо камуру хиттоси] is the problem. It requires bodies to report centrally on regulations they are responsible for, to assess whether they are still relevant and workable. In the case of fujiro, rather than admit that the regulation is old and irrelevant, it incentivizes the police to use the law more, in order to show that it is still worth having on the statute book. Quoted in Hudfleid, J. 12 October 2012: ‘Japan: no dancing please. Police are raiding clubs nationwide’, www.toyota.koikita.com/japancrush (accessed 24 November 2014)
21 'broom holding' seems resonantly similar to Mayor Giuliani’s rhetoric in New York.