

THE GREAT HAPPINESS SPACE: Tale of an Osaka Love Thief

IN DEPTH SUMMARY

Japan's adult entertainment industry, the "water trade" as it is known, is massive in scope and scale. It covers everything from special clubs for men who like to grope schoolgirls on trains, to upmarket hostess bars, to the world renowned geishas of old Japan. In a sign of an important cultural shift, there is now a burgeoning industry for women in search of young, attractive partners.

Host bars originally gained notoriety in the country's trendsetting capital, Tokyo. In a straightforward role reversal of the sexes, men are making themselves available to a new generation of financially independent women. New bars were opening up offering women what had been available to men for centuries: love for sale. Upholding the universal laws of supply and demand, where a woman provides physical companionship to their clientele, a host's main commodity is his emotional support.

In Osaka, host bars have evolved into host clubs, a younger, hipper version where the workers are an average of 21 years old. "Our club is like a pub, not serious. We have handsome hosts, funny hosts, whatever the client wants."

Welcome to The Great Happiness Space: Rakkyo Café. The club's owner, Issei (22), has a staff of twenty boys all under his training to become the top escorts of Osaka's underground love scene. Not everyone is up to this task: every year, 100-200 boys apply to become a host at Rakkyo Café, one of Osaka's top host clubs. Only 1 or 2 make the cut. During their training, they learn how to dress, how to talk, how to walk, and most importantly, how to fake relationships with the girls who become their source of income.

Interviews with Issei, once Osaka's number one host boy, and Rakkyo veterans Kazuya (20) and Ryoma (20), educate us on the training of becoming a successful host. First, you have to hook a girl. Hosts-in-training congregate on a central bridge in Dotonburi, a shopping arcade with heavy foot traffic. With boldness atypical of this reserved culture, host boys use every method they know to pick up women.

The success rate is not high, but everyone must continue to work the streets until they bring in enough clients to maintain a respectable monthly income.

Once the girls become permanent clients, hosts start playing the Love Game. Slowly, but surely, they ease the girls into a full fledged relationship, without the sex. Says Ryoma, "I know that if I [have sex] with a girl, she probably won't come back." Part of the love game is to try and draw out the relationship for as long as possible; some hosts have relationships that last several years before "breaking up". Like a typical boyfriend, hosts and clients enjoy each other's company drinking, talking and sharing problems, just like any other relationship. The only difference is that every minute spent together is paid for.

With girls falling in love and wanting to spend more and more time with their hosts, bills can accumulate to an overwhelming amount. Hourly rates can be \$12-\$50 an hour depending on the seat in the house, but the prices really soar when the drinking begins. Issei explains that it becomes a contest for the girls to prove how much they love their host by spending the most cash, "It's not just the price of the bottle. It's how much they want to financially worship their host." This financial worship can earn hosts up to \$50,000 dollars a month in sales.

This frank look at an industry of romantic entertainment reveals itself to be more complex than women falling in love and into debt. The great irony is that the majority of the girls who are paying for love are themselves selling it. In order to pay off debts to a host, some girls turn to prostitution to make quick cash. With the disgrace and stress of becoming a nightworker, the girls can turn only to their hosts for sympathy and compassion. This vicious cycle ensures the survival of hosts indefinitely.

"If you start to feel guilty, then you won't make it in this business," Issei coaches one of his hosts. "It's the guilt that won't allow me to make more than \$50,000 a month."

Hosts are like pop stars and film celebrities. Their youth is an asset to the physical demands and stamina needed to keep the

THE GREAT HAPPINESS SPACE: Tale of an Osaka Love Thief

IN DEPTH SUMMARY

long hours of catering to women and the massive amounts of drinking they do every day. They have a discreet system of taking trips to the bathroom in order to purge alcohol, just so they can keep up with their female clients; many hosts worry over the state of their livers. While the profits are as high as the risks they take, the returns slowly diminish the longer they stay in business. Even the most psychologically dexterous become emotionally numb, as Ryoma declares, “Yes, I believe money can buy love.”

