In 2009, the New York Times ran a story about a Japanese man who was in love with a pillow (Katayama 2009a). More specifically, the article describes a man calling himself Nisan who is in love with a large body pillow printed with an image of Nemu, a teenaged character originally from a video game. The author, Lisa Katayama, narrates time she spent with Nisan and the ways he treats his pillow girlfriend: carefully putting her in a car and restaurant booth while talking to and about her as if she were a real person. Although the article focuses primarily on this one man, it claims such behaviors tell us something about Japan more generally, including a multitude of problems surrounding romance and intimacy. Using terminology that labels a human’s relationship with an imaginary character “2-D love,” Katayama makes macro claims that “the rise of 2-D love can be attributed in part to the difficulty many young Japanese have in navigating modern romantic life” (2009a). Citing national statistics about the high percentage of virgins and low numbers of people dating, Katayama presents a problematic but recognizable image of Japan that meshes well with similarly distorted representations frequently used by American news media.

In such depictions, Japan and Japanese people are presented as the extremes of humanity: group-oriented but unable to form real attachments, dysfunctional but entertaining, and almost certainly harmless to the point of impotence. Such a profile describes a population fascinated by sex but not actually having any, fetishistically attached to both schoolgirls and inanimate objects, and thwarted by those very same preferences in any attempt to build real loving relationships. The tone of Katayama’s article
parallels Nisan’s earnest care of his pillow and employs an uncritical cultural relativism to suggest that while Nisan might be a bit extreme, his behaviors and preferences accurately reflect more general trends in Japan. Like problematic coverage in the same newspaper in years before (Zipangu 1998) and while purporting to share some true facts about Japanese culture, this article merely repackages long-standing stereotypes. Bringing a new twist to the “culture of contradictions” thesis first popularized through Ruth Benedict’s work (1946) and as a possible apotheosis of clickbait, this article resituates orientalism and exoticism by focusing on Japanese intimacies. In fact, Katayama was simply wrong about her source; she either failed to understand or failed to report that Nisan is something of a performance artist intentionally presenting an overwrought extreme (James 2009). Moreover, before the article was corrected, it included survey data that Katayama had radically misrepresented to support her hyperbolic claims. The substantial inaccuracies within this article exacerbate popular misperceptions about intimate Japan.

Japanese intimacies command a surprising amount of attention, both within and beyond Japan. The New York Times’ focus on so-called 2-D love is only one example of non-Japanese media coverage on Japanese intimacies. Indeed, in recent years, a broad range of fluffy news pieces have centered on particular aspects of Japanese intimacies: Japanese divorce ceremonies, the “new phenomenon” of single Japanese women throwing themselves a wedding with no groom, Japanese men literally yelling confessions of love for their wives in order to save their marriages, Japan’s low rate of sexual activity but supposedly high rates of extramarital affairs, and the reverberations as other media outlets picked up Katayama’s 2-D love story as if it were accurate. Much of this media coverage presents Japanese people as what I label “hypersexual virgins,” people who are unduly focused on sex but not actually able to convince anyone to sleep with them. This theme—unusual sexual preferences so strange as to render actual sex nearly impossible—functions as a Trojan horse enabling English-language news media to surprise readers with stories about sex that don’t include much sexual activity. Depending on the reader, perhaps this type of story allows titilation combined with a sense of superiority, evidence that once powerful Japanese businessmen are so impotent now as to be a threat in neither sexual nor financial markets, making Japanese women both more grateful and more available to lovers who don’t have these sexual proclivities. This certainly wouldn’t be the first time that discourse about, and attention to, intimate practices has figured into geopolitical power struggles (Lowe 2015; Povinelli 2006; Stoler 2002).
ATTENTION TO INTIMACY WITHIN JAPAN

Within Japan, popular media also pay attention to intimacies, but coverage takes a very different tone, and discourse regularly represents contemporary intimate practices as a key measure of the strength of the Japanese nation. Even more than the risks from earthquakes or tsunami, in recent decades the most severe threats have come from the simultaneous problems of a rapidly falling fertility rate and an aging population. First brought to public awareness in 1989, when the national fertility rate dropped to a mere 1.57, the low birthrate issue (shōshika mondai) has remained a staple of popular and political attention. As people have fewer children and wait longer to have them, politicians, academics, and policymakers have been attempting to figure out why people are less inclined or able to have children and what incentives might be used to change their minds. With fewer children, Japan’s demographic pyramid is quickly becoming top-heavy, and the aging workforce’s pension benefits and health care costs will soon be too much for younger workers and taxpayers to sustain (Traphagan and Knight 2003). Why, exactly, Japanese people are having fewer children remains an open question, but such intimate choices are both reflecting and contributing to major social shifts.

Beyond the falling birthrate, profound and ongoing social shifts occurring in recent decades have prompted both personal and public questioning about what used to be basic social norms. Although the diverse Japanese population never moved in lockstep, throughout much of the postwar period there was a strong sense of mainstream, unmarked social norms that located people in particular forms of families, school, and work: a heterosexual, middle-class couple, including a breadwinner husband and stay-at-home wife, children deeply involved in the educational system, within an extended family network shaped by gendered roles defined through the stem family system (ie seido). For instance, for much of the postwar period, a responsible and loving father might demonstrate his feelings by working so hard as to remove himself from a family’s daily life (Allison 1994; Hidaka 2010). Love, care, and intimacy were demonstrated through behaviors that might, at first, seem to include none of those feelings. The realities of labor patterns—that only a minority of men ever held “ideal” white-collar jobs and that most mothers worked part-time jobs—did little to shift the sense of what was normal or what kinds of relationships and behaviors required no explanation (atarimae).

Starting in the early 1990s, these very norms have been called into question, challenged, or rendered impossible. The falling birthrate is matched
by a rising age at marriage and shifting divorce ideologies (Alexy 2011; Jolivet 1997; Rosenberger 2013). Many men and women are not content with marital lives like those of their parents and are trying to negotiate new standards for intimacy within and beyond marriage. Gay, lesbian, and queer people still face substantial discrimination but have been working to increase their visibility, decrease stigma, and legally formalize their relationships. The “lifetime” careers previously imagined as ideal are perceived to be evaporating, and potential employees are more likely to be offered contract or part-time positions, reflecting both labor market restructuring and governmental policies. People are increasingly likely to live alone, especially in old age (Hirayama and Ronald 2006), and older people are negotiating their changing sexual relationships (K. Moore 2010).

These new patterns are taking place within popular rhetoric that describes Japan as a society newly lacking “connections” (muen shakai; literally, bondless or disconnected society), where people who were once tied to extended families, paternalistic employers, or an intense education system might now float in relative isolation. A more positive interpretation of these trends can be found in the popular buzzwords “independence” (jiritsu), “self-responsibility” (jiko sekinin), and “being true to oneself” (jibun rashisa), which are commonly suggested as attributes necessary for success and happiness in the contemporary moment (Fukushima 2001; Hook and Takeda 2007; Takeda 2008). Indeed, to be freed from restrictions or requirements can be both positive and negative, releasing people from rigid social norms but removing structures of support, allowing new possibilities but disrupting the social safety net.

In light of these shifting social norms, intimacy stands at the center of personal, public, and political debates about how best to conceptualize and construct relationships between selves and others. How should one build meaningful, loving, or supportive relationships if older models for behavior are no longer deemed appropriate or seem possible? What styles of intimacy create relationships that are good for the people involved in them? How can people create a sense of themselves (jibun rashisa) and feel a sense of independence (jiritsu) without becoming utterly or problematically disconnected (muen)? Rather than providing categorical answers to these questions, this volume argues that intimacy is a key platform through which people negotiate shifting social norms, balancing personal preferences and desires with what might be possible or acceptable. Through careful ethnographic analysis we challenge the two most dominant images of intimacy in Japan, arguing that intimate practices are neither the exoticiized freak show represented in English-language media nor evidence of the decline of the Japanese nation-state as suggested by domestic moral
panics. Instead we suggest the broad scope of intimacy represents a focus of ontological debate, if not crisis, in the contemporary moment. By focusing on intimacy, we trace how social change is becoming manifest through deeply personal choices.

**DEFINING INTIMACY**

Before framing this volume’s contributions, we first contextualize and define our key term. The diversity of scholarship locating “intimacy” across cultural contexts demonstrates the concept’s centrality but muddies definitional waters. To cite some recent research framed through this key word, is the intimacy desired when a male tech worker hires a “temporary girlfriend” for a liaison (Bernstein 2010) at all congruent with the intimacy leveraged by state violence within the Peruvian civil war (Theidon 2012) or the expectations of an American liberal arts education (Abelmann 2009)? While plausible to use the same term in English for each of these contexts, do we find productive personal, social, or phenomenological resonances among the parallel terminologies? What do we gain or lose, analytically, by joining diverse instances of intimacy within the same term? To situate our answers, I engage some of the most commonly cited definitions of intimacy and delineate this volume’s use of the term and its relationship to the broad body of research.

Although a popular dictionary (Merriam-Webster 2015) defines “intimacy” as “a state marked by emotional closeness [and] something that is very personal or private,” academic definitions challenge and complicate this simplistic equation of intimacy with closeness. An intimate relationship, Viviana Zelitzer argues, is not merely close, but also clearly marked as such; it is close in demonstrable, recognizable ways with “particularized knowledge received and attention provided” (2010, 268). She labels two types of connected and overlapping intimacy—first, the transfer of personal information and, second, wide-ranging long-term relations, both of which can contain different “kinds” of intimacy: “physical, informational, emotional” (2005, 16). Boris and Parreñas similarly suggest that intimacy might come from either “bodily or emotional closeness or personal familiarity” or “close observation of another and knowledge of personal information,” factors that need not be simultaneous (2010, 2). Berlant (2000) convincingly argues that intimacy is never only private as it might feel. Political and popular attention, not to mention moral panics, regularly focuses on intimate lives and practices, from same-sex marriage to abortion rights or citizenship acquired through family membership. Despite its feeling, intimacy is never only private and operates “intertwined
with material social relations and public fantasies” (Frank 2002, xxviii).
Therefore although intimacy is often assumed to be only private, in practice it exists at the center of public consciousness (Faier 2009, 14; McGlotten 2013; Ryang 2006). Emphasizing the actions involved in intimacy, Plummer writes that “intimacy exists in the doing of sex and love, obviously, but also in the doing of families, marriages, and friendship, in child bearing and child rearing, and in caring for others” (2003, 13).

Building from these careful phrasings, in this volume we define intimate relationships to be those (1) marked by particular emotional, physical, or informational closeness or aspirations for such; (2) taking place within realms commonly understood to be “private,” although we recognize the constructed nature of such a category; (3) often, though not always, framed through bonds of love and/or sexual desire and contact. We use our ethnographic attention to focus on the doing of intimacy—actions, practices, and patterns that are always shaped by imagination, fantasies, and various mediations.

In Japanese discourse and scholarship, intimacy stands within a cluster of terms, and the most direct translations from English are not necessarily the terms at the center of contemporary Japanese discussions. For instance, bekkon (別懇), shinai (親愛), and shitashimi (親しみ) all gloss the idea of intimacy. They describe relationships that are particularly close or familiar, and they can be used to describe a range of intimate relationships from friendships to parent-child bonds to sexual partnerships. In the contemporary moment there is a similar range of vocabulary used to talk about romantic love, including ren’ai (恋愛), aï (愛), daisuki (大好き), and rabu (ラブ). There is regular debate about which terms are best used to describe different forms and styles of love, and people regularly switch among these terms when they’re discussing intimacy. In many confessions or expressions of love, for instance, people are more likely to use daisuki (“I really like you”), such that ren’ai or aï can, at times, sound a bit more formal or conservative.

When people discuss or debate tensions between people who have or might want particularly close relationships, they regularly refer to a catch-all term, ningen kankei (人間関係), which literally means “human relationships.” Often used to discuss relationality, this term represents a category broader than the intimate but has come to symbolize both a central aspiration and conundrum of the contemporary moment. Citing Shinmura (1998), Prough describes ningen kankei as “1) person-to-person association or interaction within society; 2) relations between individuals including a correspondence of emotions; 3) the number one workplace complaint” (2010, 2; see also Van Bremen and Martinez 1995; Rohlen 1974). As suggested by
Prough’s third point, figuring out how to relate to other people—what forms of relationships might be ideal, pleasurable, or possible—not only takes energy, but can cause significant stress and has become a discursively common complaint. Navigating the particularities of intimate relationships is a small subset of this broader category of human relationships, but contemporary Japanese discourse about the former firmly situates them in the latter. Working from this shared definition, the chapters in this volume carefully trace differences in the terminology people use to describe their intimate relationships.

THEORIZING INTIMACY

In recent decades, scholarly attention to “intimacy” has boomed, particularly in the social sciences and humanities. Referring to a wide range of beliefs and practices, “intimacy” stands at the center of an amorphous but growing body of academic attention. The analysis within this volume links this extensive theorization of intimacy to the myriad questions surrounding intimacy, its stakes and significance, in contemporary Japan, and in this section I provide a brief overview of this scholarship to better situate Japanese trends.

Although within anthropological literature intimacy has been explored through a myriad of themes—for example, sex, sex work, kin and friendships, violence, transnationalism, migration, citizenship and nation, and as mediated through technology—it is often linked with configurations, practices, and experiences of romantic love. Although the particulars of what counts as romance are frequently shifting and remain under debate in various cultural contexts, scholars have positioned romance as a key platform through which to understand intimacy. In particular, scholarship in various cultural contexts has focused on the rising popularity of companionate marriage, also called love marriage, which Hirsch characterizes as a “new form of marriage focused on the affective elements of the relationship” (2003, 9). Rather than being founded on family obligations, reproduction, or a sense of duty, these relationships are based on a sense of “partnership” (Smith 2009, 163) or emotional intimacy, as well as “friendship and sexual satisfaction” (Simmons 1979, 54).

Across cultural contexts, anthropologists have found companionate romance represented as “the epitome of progressive individualism” (Masquelier 2009, 226), and people frequently link their love marriages with self-consciously modern sensibilities (Collier 1997; Smith 2008, 232). Thomas and Cole suggest that “claims to love are also claims to modernity” (2009, 5), and Gregg describes companionate marriages as “a core
ideology of modernity” (2006, 158). For instance, some Mexican men and women insist that, compared with relationships in their parents’ generation, contemporary relationships are “better—supposedly freer from constraint, more pleasurable and satisfying, perhaps even in some way more prestigious” (Hirsch 2003, 13; see also Schaeffer 2013, 17). Wardlow and Hirsch acknowledge popular assertions that certain forms of intimacy are more modern, but they make clear that contrary to such representations, companionate ideals bring “gains and losses, both for men and for women” (2006, 14). Although local interlocutors often suggest a fundamental break between older, traditional styles of intimacy and newer, modern styles, scholars instead find that even in so-called modern marriages, “ties to kin and community remain strong” (Smith 2009, 163), suggesting that discursive shifts might not be matched in practice or, more important, that the struggle to be and feel modern in an intimate relationship brings potential risks to one’s identity, community standing, or physical health (Collier 1997; Hirsch 2003; Smith 2006). Thus scholarship on romance traces popular belief in particular intimate forms and practices as instantiations of modern identities at the same time that it critically positions such intimacies in structures of power and inequality.

In English and Japanese, intimacy is euphemistically linked to sexuality, and “being intimate” can be code for having sex. Giddens situates sexual desire as a fundamental characteristic of what he labels the “pure relationship” idealized and normalized in the contemporary moment (1992, 58). Akin to companionate marriages mentioned above, such relationships include sexual desire as a key manifestation of closeness—what Giddens calls “plastic sexuality”—so much so that relationships lacking regular sexual contact are likely to be judged problematic (1992, 2; Jankowiak 2008). Such a tight link between intimacy and sexuality is visible in people’s choices to use (or not use) condoms or other birth control mechanisms in pursuit of “more intimate” sex (Plummer 2003, 3, quoting Becker 2000; see also Hirsch et al. 2010). Dean argues that intimacy is created not merely through lust or unprotected sex, but also “signals the emotional experiences that accompany sex” (2009, 45). Jankowiak (2008) suggests that in popular understandings, sexual desire brings ideological risk to intimate relationships by necessarily putting passion, romance, and togetherness in conflict with each other. Other scholarly engagements with risk, particularly approaches in medical anthropology and epidemiology, highlight how sexual practices, self-consciously modern identities, configurations of intimacy, and structural inequalities have tremendous ramifications on public health, especially through sexually transmitted illnesses (Hirsch et al. 2010; Mackenzie 2013). Recent work has problematized
patterns in earlier scholarship that focused on sexuality or sexual practices in isolation, failing to contextualize them within structures of emotion and exchange. While arguing for more attention to the broad range of African intimacies, Thomas and Cole argue that “[much] social scientific and historical scholarship has reduced African intimacy to sex” (2009, 3; see also Spronk 2012). These efforts to refute such a reductive analysis are paralleled by those of other scholars working to situate sexuality as a key platform for expression within intimate relationships while not privileging sexuality as the only means for intimacy. The chapters in this volume build on these various theorizations of intimacy to analyze contemporary Japanese practices and beliefs.

INTIMACIES IN JAPAN

In Japan, intimacy and issues broadly related to it are at the heart of contemporary questions about what it means to be a good or successful person, how to balance personal desires with responsibilities, and the future of the nation. In this section, I give an overview of key themes within intimacy in Japan to better situate the chapters in this volume, each of which explicitly engages at least one of these topics. Extant scholarship on Japan makes clear the ways in which seemingly personal and private decisions about intimate needs and wants link with larger political, social, and economic issues.

Families in a Family Nation

As a “family nation” (kazoku kokka), Japanese ideologies have long linked family membership with nation and citizenship. Since the Meiji reconfiguration of all citizens as children of the emperor, starting in 1868, the stem family system (ie) and household registry system (koseki) linked actual families with the ideological and ideational “Family” (Gluck 1985). Although the system is no longer a legal requirement, many scholars have argued that it continues to play a tremendously powerful role, shaping people’s expectations of how families should be organized (Ueno 2009). For instance, familial roles such as “oldest son” (chōnan) or “daughter-in-law” (yome, literally bride) continue to have substantial social resonance, conveying the image of a man entrusted to take care of his entire family or a put-upon young woman struggling to learn the preferences of her affinal kin (Harris and Long 1993; Lebra 1984). Such common social tropes of family roles continue to impact Japanese people today, even as families are reshaped in light of the falling birthrate, aging population, later marriages, and changing patterns of divorce. Not only is the aging population of baby boomers
stretching social services like the pension and health-care systems, but also younger people are waiting longer to have children, having fewer children overall, and are increasingly likely to forgo having children. On a national scale, these private decisions manifest in a failing social safety net because the Japanese government has long relied on families to provide support that is, in other countries, conveyed through governmental welfare systems (Goodman 2002). Much contemporary scholarship, including work in this volume, explores how changing family norms, personal preferences, and governmental policies intersect to shape the lives of individual people within families.16

Heteronormative Marriages

Japan’s postwar economic recovery—described as miraculous until the 1990s Heisei recessions burst that bubble—was substantially structured through intimate relationships. Although academic and public attention was frequently directed at white-collar male salaryman and other male laborers as agents of the economic miracle, in practice these workers were facilitated through structures of intimacy (Dasgupta 2013; McLelland 2012; Plath 1980; Vogel 2013). Because salarymen and other male workers were required to work very long hours, stay out late building working relationships, and generally be available to their employers, their lives and work habits were made possible only through domestic labor and assistance (Allison 1994; Brinton 1993; Kurotani 2005). Within middle- and upper-class families, men could not work without wives taking care of basic needs like preparing food, cleaning clothes, and paying bills. At the same time, precisely because companies were offering so-called “lifetime employment” to a minority of male workers, other categories of workers were needed to be easily laid off. Especially between the 1960s and early 1990s, female workers often filled this role, acting as part-time or dispensable laborers who enabled employers to spend financial resources on other workers (Brinton 1993). Such patterns of gendered employment are visible in the M-curve graph, so named because it shows how female labor force participation changes over the course of a woman’s life: typically women work before marriage or children, at which point many drop out of paid work before returning after children get older (ibid.). Writing in the 1980s, Edwards described the interconnections between labor and domestic realms as the “complementary incompetence” of each spouse, suggesting that men and women were each socialized to fulfill only half of their own needs (1989). These labor structures were often combined with patterns of same-sex socializing that meant husbands and wives rarely spent leisure time together (Imamura 1987;
Ishii-Kuntz and Maryanski 2003; Lebra 1984). During Japan’s economic miracle, many scholars described social intimacies built in workplaces, such as work teams and junior/senior (kohai/sempai) relationships, that were used to make workers feel like part of the corporate “family” (Kondo 1993; Nakane 1967; Plath 1980).

These patterns—male laborers disconnected from the daily realities of their family lives, women serving as both domestic support and a stopgap labor force, and employers using particular social forms to build intimacies and loyalties among co-workers—have been shifting to reflect new intimate ideals and the restructured employment system. As many full-time jobs are replaced with part-time, flexible, or contract labor, young men and women especially are facing a brave new world of employment possibilities.17 At the same time, as discussed throughout this volume, many people are questioning the intimate norms that were acceptable a generation before, finding them no longer as attractive or beneficial (Borovoy 2005; Miura 2009; Occhi, SturtzSreetharan, and Shibato-Smith 2010). Moreover, queer intimacies are increasingly visible and are challenging the heteronormative focus of marriage.

Queer, Lesbian, Gay, Trans, and Bi Intimacies

Scholarship across disciplines documents same-sex, queer, lesbian, and gay intimacies in Japan throughout history and in the current moment (Ihara 1990; Pflugfelder 1999; Tanamura and Nakagawa 2016). Much of this work complicates the terms used to label these relationships, suggesting not just troubles caused by translation to and from English, but also the deeply embedded cultural nuances that shift over time and context.18 When scholars describe the range of experiences, connections, and desires within queer intimacies, many highlight the complicated conflicts between discourse and practices, between popular perceptions and extant discrimination toward queer people. For instance, Maree identifies both academic and mainstream misperceptions that Japan is unusually tolerant of same-sex issues: because “Japan has no laws criminalizing homosexuality or sexual acts between persons of the same sex. . . . Japan is often positioned as being queerer earlier than so-called western nations” (2014, 187). However, as Maree goes on to explain, the family registration system designs all families to be fundamentally heteronormative, a labeling that presents many problems for same-sex partners who want to start legal families together or receive any of the myriad benefits that come through family membership (ibid.; see also Ninomiya 2006). In other contexts as well, Japan’s long history of same-sex loving relationships represented in art or literature, which continues through the present day, does
not bring substantial relief to overt and implicit discrimination faced by queer people on a daily basis (Chalmers 2014; McLelland, Suganuma, and Welker 2007; Summerhawk, McMahill, and McDonald 1998). For instance, the strong social norms surrounding heterosexual marriage can put substantial pressure on people to enter into “paper” marriages to seem normal (Chalmers 2014; Lunsing 1995). Gay salarymen report that not having a wife presents a serious threat to career advancement—even more, potentially, than not being straight (Dasgupta 2005; McLelland 2005). Within this context of continuing structural, legal, political, and social discrimination against queer people, the popularity of fiction centered on loving relationships between two men remains important to consider. These stories, often manga, include a genre labeled “Boys’ Love” or yaoi, a shortened version of the phrase “no climax, no point, no meaning,” which derogatively describes the slow pace of the archetypal narratives (McLelland et al. 2015). Boys’ Love comics tell (and show) stories of men falling in love with each other but are typically created and consumed by straight women (Galbraith 2015; McLelland 2000; McLelland et al. 2015). Although there is some scholarship that challenges the common gendered patterns around yaoi manga, much of this pop cultural attention to gay men involves few actual gay men (Hester 2015; Nagaike 2015). Paradoxically popular attention prioritizes, if not exoticizes, gay men but only or mostly within fantasy realms, a dynamic parallel to trans celebrities presented as caricatures on mainstream Japanese television (Dale, this volume).

International Marriages

Relationships between Japanese and non-Japanese people have long been a subject of both media and academic attention. Within popular consciousness, the most common pairings involving Japanese people and foreigners are typically imagined as relationships between Japanese women and foreign men (Leupp 2003, ix). In practice, however, the international marriages Japanese people enter into reflect structures of power, desire, and attraction, and in the current moment, they involve far more Japanese men married to non-Japanese women. Reflecting intersections of geopolitical power and desire, as well as class, race, citizenship, and gender, the range and types of international relationships cannot be easily grouped together (Imamura 1990; Suzuki 2000, 2005). Yamamoto, for instance, highlights substantial differences between foreign women who travel to Japan as “marriage migrants” and Japanese women who seek foreign partners in their process of “life-style migration” (2010, 3). When analyzing popular media (in Japan and elsewhere) about Japanese women’s relationships
with non-Japanese men, Kelsky (2001) argues that women’s desire for “the West” offers a compromised but transformative force for women already at the margins of Japanese society. For these mostly elite women, engaging the West—through intimate relationships with foreign men, among other activities—can bring at least a temporary solution to patriarchal structures they face in Japan. In contrast, relationships between Japanese men and foreign women are more likely to include women from elsewhere in Asia. Partnerships between Japanese men and Filipina women might first seem to symbolize racialized, classed, and gendered power of husbands over wives, and while those structures are very much operational, in daily life such dynamics might be far more complicated. For instance, when trying to counter deeply stigmatizing images of themselves as merely bar hostesses, women used the rhetoric of “love” to articulate “globally recognizable forms of agency and subjectivity within transnational relations of power” (Faier 2009, 149).

Parents and Children

Within the broader scholarship about family lives in contemporary Japan, social scientists have focused specifically on relationships between parents and children. Continuing social norms that delineate a male breadwinner and female caregiver mean that many children are more likely to have a primary, daily relationship with their mothers, particularly in early childhood. Ivry (2009), for example, describes how common beliefs suggest that a child who isn’t raised by his or her mother in the first three years of life will go on to have problems, a notion that makes women less likely to continue work after having a baby. In this belief system, being a good mother is about being present to assist and aid one’s children on a daily basis (Ivry 2009; Seaman 2011). But women continue to prefer having children as part of a married couple, partly because many believe that having a husband enables a wife to be as indulgent as she wants, and perhaps needs, to be with her children (Hertog 2009).

Within common Japanese idealizations of family lives, skinship plays an important role linking parents, children, and siblings. A neologism Tahhan (2014, 11) has translated as “intimacy through touch,” skinship describes love and affection expressed through breast-feeding, co-sleeping, bathing together, or play (Caudill and Plath 1966). Although scholars have found that Japanese children tend to be in more frequent direct contact with their mothers, parenting norms and expectations of fathers are shifting, potentially changing gendered household dynamics and intimate practices within the family.20
Birth Control Practices

Japanese birth control practices throughout the postwar period lie at the intersection of governmental policies, individual choice, and family norms. In particular, Japanese abortion ideologies and practices have served as a counterweight to American and European patterns. Samuel Coleman’s (1983) work on birth control practices among 1970s Japanese housewives, mostly those living in apartments (danchi) specially built for white-collar workers and their families, found that couples limited children primarily through condom use and abortions. Throughout the postwar period abortion has been available and regularly used by married housewives who already had the children they wanted (ibid.). Scholars have linked abortion with Buddhist religious practices, tracing how beliefs might allow women to understand abortions as acceptable (LaFleur 1992) and how temples have marketed expensive religious services to women who have had abortions (Hardacre 1997). Since 1999, when the birth control pill was legalized in Japan, scholarship has focused on why the pill’s approval was so long delayed and how it compares with Viagra’s relatively quick approval, as well as public perceptions and use of it since then (Castro-Vázquez 2006; Norgren 2001). Norgren (2001) argues that the long delay in the pill’s acceptance reflects not only the paternalism and anxieties of male politicians, but also the deeply influential national doctors’ lobby, which worked to protect doctors’ financial interests in lucrative abortion procedures by limiting new birth control methods. Even after it has become legally available, the pill remains largely unpopular in Japan; as Sandberg (this volume) describes, these preferences reflect understandings of intimacy.

Paid Intimacies and Sex Work

Sexual contact in exchange for money in Japan is often categorized within the broad category of mizu shobai. A euphemism literally meaning “water business,” this term encompasses businesses offering a wide range of intimate contact; they include bars, strip clubs, host and hostess clubs, and people performing sexual acts. Because only coitus is rendered illegal by anti-prostitution laws, sex workers and the establishments where they work can freely advertise other acts (Allison 1994; Takeyama 2016). Links between the labor market and paid intimacies are particularly apparent in hostess clubs, where women are paid to be flirtatious while serving drinks and food to male customers who are often socializing with co-workers or clients. During the height of Japan’s economic bubble, such spaces of groping and sexualized jokes were, at least for some large companies, vital to business, both because of the male relationships fortified via hostesses and
the company’s co-optation of male employees’ leisure time (Allison 1994). Highlighting enduring links between female sex work and male labor, Koch (2016) found prevalent rhetoric about female care needed to “heal” male workers. Although Allison’s (1994) ethnographic portrait of the elite club where she worked remains a touchstone, newer research makes clear how unusually elite that space was (Gagné 2010; Parreñas 2011). In general, women working as hostesses in Japan are likely to be foreign, making citizenship and legal status vitally important (Faier 2009; Matsui 1995). Links between paid intimacies and nationality are also explored in scholarship about what are often called Japanese “sex tours”—touristic encounters especially throughout Southeast Asia (Muroi and Sasaki 1997).

Paid intimacies are not just, however, the provision of women serving men. In recent decades, host clubs have been growing in popularity in Japan. These involve male hosts catering to female clients in patterns that are parallel to, but not simply inverted forms of, hostess clubs. Takeyama (2016) argues that male hosts are likely to understand themselves as self-responsible entrepreneurs and as the embodiments of the contemporary model for “ideal subjectionhood” enacting “postindustrial consumer logic and neoliberal values” (Takeyama 2010, 232).

**Intimacy Panics**

Throughout the postwar period, public attention has focused on intimate practices supposedly causing harm to the social order. I label these “intimacy panics” and define them as moral panics surrounding intimate topics (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2010). Although such public anxieties focused on intimate practices are not unique to Japan, these cases demonstrate how intimacy has been an ongoing focus of attention and can often index other concerns.

The so-called “1.57 shock” of 1989 describes the first time the national birthrate fell below replacement level and prompted people to worry about the health of the nation. National worry about this topic continues to coalesce around the low birthrate problem as an instantiation of Japan’s inability to reproduce itself and therefore sustain the economic development of the postwar years (Goodman 2002). In the 1990s, worries about intimacy and youth fused around “compensated dating” practices (enjo kōsai), in which young women would accept luxury goods as payment to go on dates that might include sex (Leheny 2006). At the time, public awareness and media discourse about the practice suggested that it was very common and that young women were quite literally prostituting themselves for Louis Vuitton goods, an anxiety that neatly tied together fears of possible female empowerment, youth cultures, sexual intimacies, and rampant
consumerism. Scholars have contextualized this discourse as largely a creation of the media (Kinsella 2014) and politicians (Leheny 2006), with statistics failing to back up the hyperbolic claims of its popularity.

The late 1990s brought the term “sexless” (sekkusuresu) to describe marriages that no longer included sexual intimacy (Moriki, Hayashi, and Matsukura 2015; Moriki 2017; Narabayashi 1997). Although family norms throughout the postwar years positioned marital sexuality as directed at reproduction (Lebra 1984), discourse about sexlessness within marriage was used to describe it as a social problem. Spouses who did not have sex (or who did not want to have sex) were suddenly described as missing a key element of necessary intimacy, and discourse about sexless marriage suggested it as a warning sign of marital discord. Scholarship on the use of “love hotels” by married couples describes such hotels as a way people try to create spaces for spousal intimacy in relation to parental responsibilities (Lin 2008).

In the same period, media attention to a newly created category of “shut-ins” (hikikomori) highlighted the risks caused by and for those lacking intimate connections. Although practices vary, this population is typically described as comprised of younger people, mostly men, who remove themselves from normal society to remain within their homes and, in more extreme cases, within their bedrooms. Horiguchi traces the rapid rise in media attention concerning people not “taking part in society” to argue that the discursive category fails to reflect the true range of such withdrawn behaviors (2012, 129), which Borovoy (2008) argues often cover a variety of mental health concerns. At root, the creation of, and attention to, such categories of experience demonstrate popular and media fascination with seemingly disordered intimacies (Arai 2016; Heinze and Thomas 2014).

In the mid-2000s, public worry focused on “later-life divorce” (jukunen rikon), the possibility that couples in their sixties or beyond might suddenly end their marriages (Alexy 2007). These anxieties were pinpointed to a legal change that would make it possible for women to claim up to half of their husbands’ national pension (kokumin nenkin) after divorce, a possible stimulus that had more symbolic than financial value. Yet the idea that a generation of grandparents—indeed, the very baby boom generation who had built Japan’s postwar economic recovery—might suddenly divorce called into question the norms, values, and practices that had previously been held up as a strength of the nation.

Most recently, as described in greater detail by Miles (this volume), discursive anxiety has swirled around young men who are antisocial, unattractive, and potentially so feminized as to be unable to find dates or get
married. Public worries about young men's masculinity, in parallel to earlier worries about young women's sexual activity, are found in the derogatory terminology labeling men “herbivores” (as opposed to “normal” carnivores) because they enact masculinity in ways that disrupt or refuse earlier models for masculine silence, emotional distance, and patriarchal control (Cook 2016; Fujimura 2006; Morioka 2008). This label could be an insult or a new badge of pride, and it’s equally possible to find people who relish the distinction from older performances of masculinity or those who identify such a “loss” of masculinity as evidence of Japan’s decline.

Finally, contemporary Japanese popular and academic discourse positions the potential relationship between intimacy and fandom using the term moe. Moe describes “a euphoric response to fantasy characters or representations of them” (Galbraith 2009, n.p.; Galbraith 2015) and can also be the longing, love, or intimacy a person feels for a fictional character, that character’s visual image, or its material representations. For some people, as with the discourse about young men’s decreasing masculinity, this type of relationship symbolizes Japan’s ruination and the failure of “actual” human relationships. For others, the term describes common and frankly real feelings cultivated within Japan’s broad commercial market for characters, pop culture, and figurines. Rather than suggesting a decline, moe might instead be interpreted as offering new configurations of intimacy through fandom, capital, mediation, and popular culture. As suggested by the example that began this chapter, because moe is a native Japanese term, it has also been used to falsely assert that Japanese intimacies are fundamentally based on unreal or less real relationships.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS IN THIS VOLUME

Given these social contexts and extant literature, this volume is designed to offer ethnographic analyses theorizing how intimacy is being imagined, constructed, and enacted in Japan or by Japanese people in other cultural contexts. We ask the following: To whom and in what contexts does intimacy matter? What can intimacy be used to symbolize, and what are the stakes of such symbols? Within the public, private, and political attention surrounding intimate decisions, how do people imagine and discuss changing intimate norms? How do intimacies relate to extant structures of power, particularly those intersecting with gender, sexuality, class, and race? How are mainstream norms created and transmitted? When people challenge or refuse such norms, how do they demonstrate their choices? What types of intimacy do people find appropriate, good, and viable? How does intimacy feel or sound, and what can it look like? What are the
risks that come with intimacy for individuals, communities, or the nation-state? The chapters in this volume engage these questions from linked but diverse perspectives, building thematically in relation to each other.

In chapter 2, Yukari Kawahara analyzes an influential but largely hidden context for intimacy: the high school classroom. Focused on sexual education classes that took place in the 1990s, Kawahara’s work sheds light on how men and women now in their thirties and forties—a generation experiencing changes to marriage, parenting, and labor norms—learned about, imagined, and practiced intimacy when they were still students. The in-depth case studies presented provide an ethnographic point of comparison for later chapters, giving both a sense of how things have changed and how adults today might have situated intimacy in their early lives.

Next, Shana Fruehan Sandberg explores how young, unmarried women in mid-2000s Tokyo decided what birth control to use and how such choices contributed to constructions of intimacy. Beginning from the fact that the “withdrawal” method is apparently more commonly used than previously recognized in surveys, Sandberg theorizes that women use particular birth control methods to create trust with their sexual partners. She argues that women have commonly articulated “reliability” as a necessary characteristic for intimate relationships, and birth control is a key context in which such reliability is demonstrated, challenged, and negotiated.

Laura Dales and Beverley Yamamoto extend the previous discussions of birth control to explore how women idealize and attempt to create intimacy before or beyond marriage. They argue that nuclear family ideals remain ideologically forceful, even if they are decreasingly common. Describing entangled intimacies, they find many women building relationships in the shadow of marriages or marital ideals. Focusing on women self-described as “unconventional,” some of whom have had extramarital affairs, Dales and Yamamoto argue that while marriage remains discursively central to women’s lives, disincentives push some women to create intimacies before or beyond marital relationships.

Allison Alexy’s analysis begins from a piece of advice popularized in mid-2000s Japan: to strengthen a marriage, spouses should make sure to say “I love you” to each other. She argues that this piece of advice, and the illocutionary and perlocutionary effects being attributed to that particular phrase, reflect contemporary attempts to balance connection and independence within intimate relationships. This tip suggests that spouses should be connected through feelings of romantic love but nevertheless separate enough so as to need to verbalize those romantic feelings.
Kaoru Kuwajima explores marriage from the perspective of domestic violence. Analyzing how female victims of domestic violence understand and define intimacy, she suggests that such definitions can influence women’s decisions to leave violent relationships. Although new national legislation has been designed to reduce domestic violence, this legislation requires victims to leave violent situations, something that many women are often unwilling to do. Kuwajima argues that reconsidering and redefining intimacy in these contexts is vital before a victim of domestic violence can leave a relationship and that victims’ shifting definitions of, and expectations for, intimacy are often a necessary part of their recovery.

Emma E. Cook examines the ways in which intimacy is enacted by men who work in irregular jobs as freeters and how irregular work shapes gender roles, intimate practices, and power within relationships. Social emphasis on fulfilling particular gendered roles in intimate relationships—for example, as a male breadwinner—creates tensions when individuals find that these ideals cannot be made manifest. Cook argues that the precariousness of the irregular labor market does not easily allow men to demonstrate their ability to fulfill such expected roles to potential marriage partners, making it harder for them to create and sustain intimate relationships.

Elizabeth Miles extends the discussion of male experiences by focusing on how some men view the burdens of intimacy. The ideology and practice of “love marriage,” while notable for its illusion of free choice and greater potential intimacy, contributes both to people’s delaying marriage until later in life and the increase in the number of Japanese singles. Miles argues that in contemporary popular discourse, finding a potential mate now requires constant effort on the part of men, a polishing of the self and one’s attributes that many men find to be onerous and in contradistinction to their idealized versions of what love is and should be.

S. P. F. Dale analyzes the lines among gender, identity, and desire in intimate acts for people who identify as “x-gender,” a category neither male nor female. Akin to the English term “genderqueer,” x-gender allows people to talk about their sexuality and desire in terms beyond hetero- or homosexuality. Dale argues that while this term can be used to challenge binary understandings of sexuality, it also might allow people with queer desires to avoid the stigma of being labeled homosexual. The examples presented ultimately argue that preferences in intimate acts—and the resultant negotiations in interpersonal relationships—are a central domain through which gender identity is formed.
Kathryn Goldfarb expands on the tensions inherent in familial relationships to explore a common claim that “blood ties” are central to Japanese kinship. Focusing on the incredibly low rates of child adoption, she traces a common belief that few parents would want to adopt a child not “of their own blood.” Goldfarb argues that blood ties themselves are conceptualized as a type of intimacy and that discourses surrounding blood ties reflect anxieties that intimate ties without blood will fail to generate durable family bonds.

Chigusa Yamaura explores how men who have been unable to find or sustain marriages in Japan look to China for potential partners. Because most people believe that “domestic” marriages (in which both spouses are Japanese) are ideal, marriage brokers and clients work to explain their stigmatized choice to move to the international marriage market. Yamaura argues that for these Japanese men and transnational marriage brokers, perceptions of “ordinariness” are vital to construct intimate relationships. Neither love nor passion are seen as a prerequisite for intimacy but rather the ability of participants to view their relationships as socially acceptable, if not ordinary.

Diane Adis Tahhan examines tensions in international marriages between Japanese women and Australian men. Arguing that expectations for and expressions of intimacy vary between these two cultural contexts, Tahhan traces how families attempt to negotiate conflicts over how best to be intimate. Common points of tension include figuring out sleeping arrangements when parental co-sleeping is common in Japan but less so in Australia. Exploring the lived experience of intimacy through bodily practices and the conflicts caused by them, Tahhan analyzes the meanings of intimacy in these transnational relationships.

Finally, chapter 13 gathers short essays from every contributor reflecting on the methodological challenges surrounding ethnographic fieldwork about intimate topics. Because of the sensitive, private, or personal nature of many of the subjects explored in this volume, the researchers necessarily used novel and creative methods to gain access and gather data. In this final chapter, we reflect on more and less successful methodologies to provide a general overview of the practice of doing research about intimacy in Japan.

Although these chapters draw from unique ethnographic data, they are crosscut by similar themes and questions because such topics are omnipresent in contemporary Japan. Intimate relationships attract attention not only when people are invested in imagining and enacting the most ideal relationships they can, but also because intimate decisions have tremendous knock-on social effects, such as the birthrate. Paying attention
to how people imagine relationships and attempt to enact those ideals, as well as the political, social, and economic antecedents to personal choices, this volume highlights the variations within the individual lives and experiences discussed. We hope that readers will identify the diversity represented within this volume, but we highlight it here to combat the pernicious stereotype of Japanese people as hive-minded automatons. There is so much debate represented in the chapters—about how to build and sustain intimate relationships, let alone how those relationships might matter in the first place—demonstrating how wrong such characterizations are. Moreover, as delineated above, because Japan is frequently represented as an “exotic” place with strange sexual practices, we hope to both engage and challenge readers who might have picked up this volume hoping either for titillation or confirmation of what they think they already know.

NOTES

1. The terminology of “2-D” contrasts feelings a person has for another person (which would presumably be in three dimensions) with those for a character in comic books, films, or television shows. In Japan, such affection for characters is often linked with “moe,” which Galbraith (2009, n.p.) defines as a “euphoric response to fantasy characters or representations of them.”

2. Although Benedict’s problematic description was published half a century ago, it remains relevant because her suggestion that Japanese people are somehow more contradictory than others continues to be repeated. Benedict’s book begins with a list of extreme contradictions she believes to be true of Japanese people: “The Japanese are, to the highest degree, both aggressive and unaggressive, both militaristic and aesthetic, both insolent and polite, rigid and adaptable, submissive and resentful of being pushed around, loyal and treacherous, brave and timid, conservative and hospitable to new ways” (Benedict 1946, 2). By suggesting this list was evidence of pathology—rather than normal and appropriate for any person moving through different contexts and moods—she characterized Japan as a culture of contradictions. Similar characterizations are visible in the media representations under discussion in this section.

3. This wasn’t the first time that a reporter for the New York Times incorrectly represented an artistic project or extreme outlier as mainstream and normal. Martin Fackler (2007) incorrectly represented Tsukioka Aya’s art as earnest but insane attempts to ward off imagined criminal threats by dressing as a vending machine (see also Marx 2007). Moreover, Richards (2009) suggests that Katayama might have pulled some of the Nemu story from a 2007 article published in the now defunct WaiWai, an online section of the English-language Mainichi newspaper that was a collection of poorly sourced, highly sexualized clickbait (M. Moore 2008).

4. In the first published version of the article, Katayama stated that according to a government survey a quarter of Japanese people were virgins, presumably evidence to support her claim that Japanese people have difficulty creating relationships with other humans. However, as visible in the correction later issued by the New York Times, the actual survey stated that one-quarter of unmarried people between the ages of 30 and 34 were virgins, a population much smaller than Katayama had originally claimed (Richards 2009). According to my calculations, based on 2010 census data, her first, inaccurate claim labels about
32 million people as virgins while the survey’s actual findings put that number closer to 970,000 (National Institute of Population and Social Science Research 2012). Such an inaccurate expansion—attributing the characteristics of a small segment of the population to the population as a whole—serves as a microcosmic representation of common problems English-language news media have concerning Japan.

5. On divorce ceremonies, see “Japan’s ‘Bizarre’ Spike in Divorce Ceremonies” (2011); Demetriou (2010); Ferrari (2011); Lah (2010); Moorhead (2010); on women throwing themselves a wedding with no groom, see Aran (2014); Davis (2014); “Japan: Solo Weddings for Single Women” (2014); Kaneko (2014); McGuire (2014a, 2014b); Flautz (2014); on men yelling their love as a way to save their marriages, see BBC Radio (2015); Craft (2013); Fujita (2013); “Video” (2013); on low rates of sexual activity, see BBC Two (2013); Chavez (2011); Haworth (2013); Hoffman (2013); Kageyama (2014); Keating (2013); Waldman (2013); on Japan as a culture of extramarital affairs, see Adelstein (2013); Dehart (2014); Kageyama (2014); on reverberations of Katayama’s 2-D love article, see Frucci (2009); Katayama (2009b); Mancuso (2010).

Overall in this chapter, I have placed longer lists of references here in the endnotes so they are available to interested readers but won’t distract from the points being discussed.

6. For more on the “low birthrate problem” and political responses to it, see L. Coleman (2008); Gelb (2003); Goodman (2002); Ogawa and Retherford (1993); Schoppa (2006); Takeda (2004).

7. Considerable scholarship analyzes the wide variety of family decisions being made in Japan, particularly in comparison with earlier generations, including the following: Aoyama, Dales, and Dasgupta (2014); Hashimoto and Traphagan (2009); Kawano, Roberts, and Long (2014); White (2002).

8. English-language scholarship explores same-sex intimacies, activism, communities, and representations; sources include Chalmers (2014); Mackintosh (2010); McLelland (2005); McLelland and Dasgupta (2005); and McLelland, Suganuma, and Welker (2007).

9. Shifting hiring and employment patterns, as well as their impacts on younger generations, are explored in greater depth in Blind and Von Mandach (2014); Brinton (2010); Cook (2016); and Takeda (2008).

10. Scholars have explored discourse about and practical responses to “disconnected society”; for instance, Ando (2013) and Rowe (2011) examine changing funeral rituals; Brinton (2010), Miyamoto (2012), and Toivonen (2013) analyze labor instability; and Allison 2013 focuses on media discourse about this as a problem.

11. To be clear, in this quote Frank does not use the term “intimacy” but is describing the materiality and communal fantasies that intertwine around the “personal erotics” she observed while doing fieldwork in American strip clubs. I use her words here because I find them to be a helpful articulation of the dynamics surrounding intimacy.


13. As one measure of this increase, consider the increasing frequency with which articles archived within JSTOR’s 120 English-language journals categorized as anthropology include the word “intimacy” in their titles. The first article appeared in 1972 (Barrett 1972) and was one of only two published in the 1970s. Three articles were published in the 1980s and none in the 1990s. Nine articles were published in the 2000s, and sixteen have been published from 2010 to 2015. These articles occur in conjunction with the large number of books including “intimacy” in their titles or subtitles, some of which are cited in this chapter.

14. On the intimacy of sex work, see Bernstein (2010); Frank (2002); Parreñas (2011); on the intimacy of family relationships, see Yan (2003); on the intimacy of friendship, see Bell and Coleman (1999); Desai and Killick (2010); on intimate violence, see Lancaster (1992); Lazarus-Black (2007); on how transnationalism and migration impact intimacy, see Constable (2005);
Hirsch (2003); Kelsky (2001); Suzuki (2005); Yamaura (2015); on the relationship between intimacy and citizenship, see Freeman (2011); Friedman (2006, 2015); Frühstück (2003); Lowe (2015); Plummer (2003); on intimacy and technology, see Boyle (2010); Gershon (2011); Schaeffer (2013).

15. Agustín (2007), Kulick (1998), and Reddy (2006), for instance, make it a point to emphasize how sex workers create and maintain intimate relationships beyond their work, precisely because popular representations often reduce their capacity for intimacy not just to sexuality, but also to transactional sex.

16. The centrality of family—both as a key symbol and lived relationships—is reflected in the extensive scholarship on the topic, including three recent edited collections in English: Aoyama, Dales, and Dasgupta (2014); Hashimoto and Traphagan (2009); Ronald and Alexy (2011).

17. Brinton (2010), Cook (2016), Kosugi (2008), and Rebick (2006) offer trenchant analyses of how changing employment patterns, and fewer full-time positions for younger men, are impacting family relationships.

18. Scholars conducting historical analysis (Pflugfelder 1999), media analysis (Lunsing 2005), and projects in cultural studies (McLelland 2000, 2005) have emphasized the challenges in translating terminology like “queer” or “gay.”

19. Some cities and wards in Japan have recently approved same-sex partnership certificates. As of this writing, two of Tokyo’s wards (Shibuya and Setagaya) and some cities elsewhere in Japan (Naha and Takarazuka) have begun to allow citizens to request a certificate formally recognizing a same-sex relationship (Esumuraruda and Kirig developed and Kira 2015). However, these certificates neither designate the relationship a “marriage” nor force any authority to legally recognize the relationship. Although the certificates “request” that the couples be treated as married—for instance, if one partner is hospitalized—there is no guarantee that such a request will be honored (Murai 2015).

20. For more on how masculine and paternal ideals are changing, see Ishii-Kuntz (2003); Ishii-Kuntz et al. (2004); Mathews (2003, 2014); Mitsukoshi, Kohlbacher, and Schimkowsky (2016); and Roberson and Suzuki (2003).


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