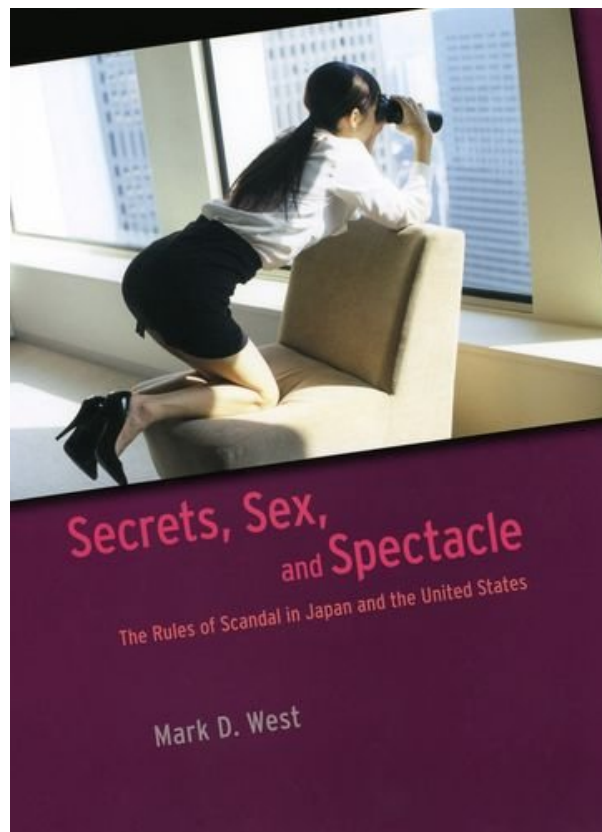
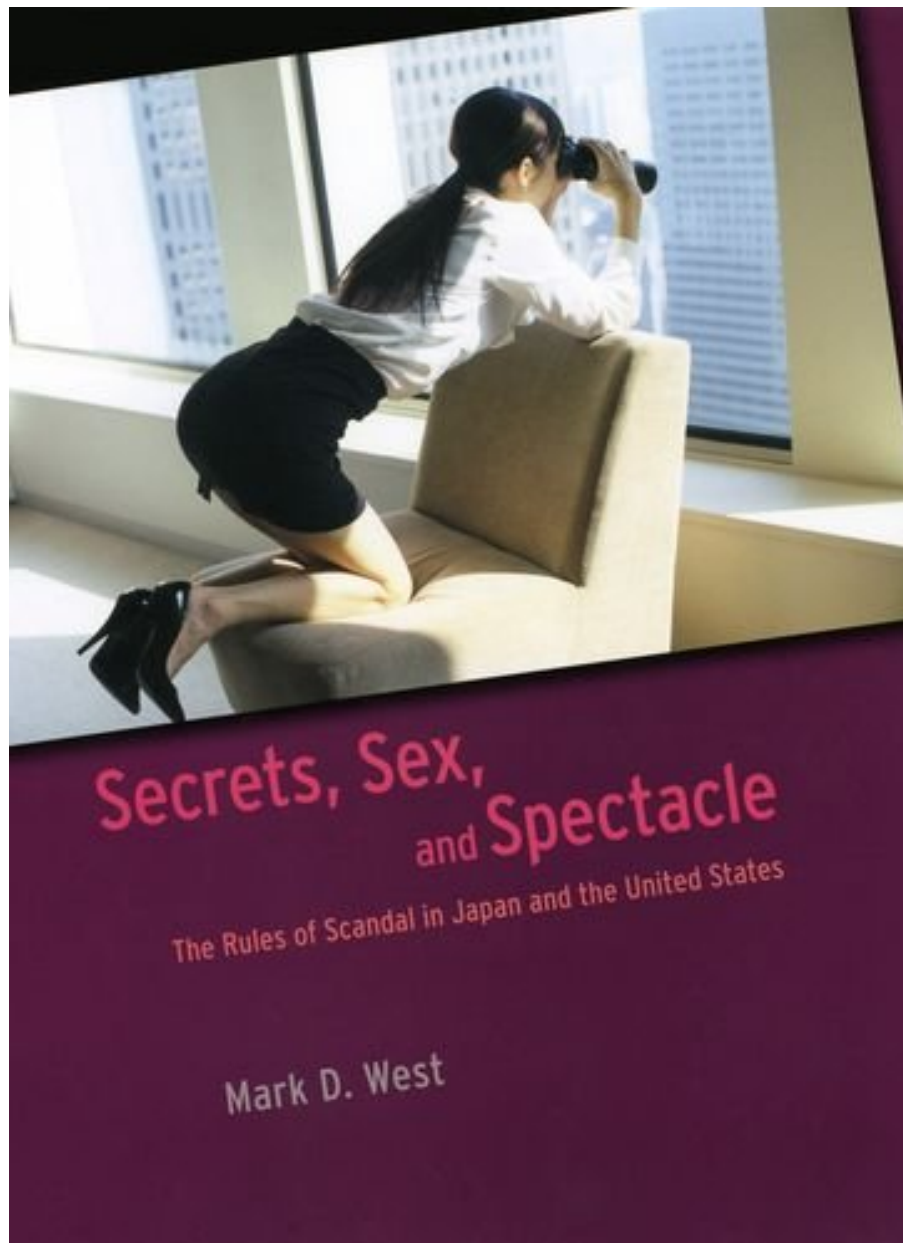


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Not as racy as you might think, but fun for an academic book

By A. J. Sutter

The cover of this book is a bit of a tease. What lies within is not a breezy bit of titillation, but a footnote-rich book about comparative law. It's not a fast read -- quite the opposite (unless your sensibility has been warped by the grotesque literary standards of American legal scholarship, in which case this book reads like a romance novel). In case you're wondering, the "sex" chapter takes up only about 15% of the main text, and includes the relatively humdrum topic of divorce. So cool down.

Within the parameters the author has chosen for the book -- a comparison of Japanese and US attitudes towards what constitutes a scandal, what types of social and legal redress (group discipline, defamation law, etc.) are available against an allegation of a scandal, how protagonists are punished (or not), and how to apologize -- it is terrific. The emphasis is on Japan, with US mainly as a foil to highlight the Japanese point of view. And that point of view can be quite surprising for a Westerner. E.g., West compares the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal with a 1989 scandal involving then-Prime Minister Uno Sousuke and a mistress. The public turned against Uno, who was forced to resign. But it wasn't because he had an affair. Rather, the trouble came after the mistress revealed that Uno gave her only \$3,000/month support (much of which he consumed by eating meals at her house most nights) -- Uno was too cheap.

The book describes literally dozens of scandals involving corporations, entertainers, athletes, politicians and ordinary citizens. The emphasis is on the past 20 years or so (Heisei Emperor's era); in fact many of the scandals are from 2000-2005. An impressive feature of the book is that West actually interviewed many of the scandal protagonists or their friends or colleagues, as well as Japanese journalists. You'll learn a lot about the infrastructure of the Japanese media, including talent agencies and press clubs, and the book provides many serious insights into the nature and extent of press freedom in Japan. But while the author tries to maintain an entertaining tone throughout, this is pretty much impossible in those parts of the book that describe US or Japanese law rather than facts of actual cases. And although most of his cultural observations are pretty acute, occasionally they're slightly off. E.g., he glosses 'enka' as "Japanese folk song", but in modern times it's more like very commercial country music on a stock theme (such as hey bartender, or I miss dear old mom, or I'm glad I'm a fisherman), punctuated with cheesy electric guitar riffs. The author also makes a religious cult or two sound more benign than they really are.

Here are a couple of caveats that might limit the appeal of this book to a wide readership, and that might help you to calibrate my review: First, most of the first couple of chapters focuses on law, so it may take more than 100 pages before the mood lightens somewhat for the average reader. I'm a lawyer myself, and even for me some patches in these chapters were a bit of a slog. Second, although you can learn a lot about Japanese society from the book, you may be overwhelmed with detail if you don't already know anything about it. If you've never browsed even for a couple of minutes in a Japanese newsstand or never channel-surfed Japanese TV, you will need a very powerful imagination to follow the action in this book. There are tons of knowledgeable references to Japanese TV show formats, actors, actresses and MCs, to different categories of magazines and to such institutions as "gurabia" (grave) models, as well as to various business and political scandals that were headline news in the past 5 years. I've been visiting Japan often during the past 10+ years, and now live there much of the time, but even I had to run to a search engine to look up photos of

entertainers whose names were meaningless to me. If you're relatively new to Japan, prepare either for information overload or for a lot of online research into pop culture and recent history. But if you have some familiarity with the Japanese scene, and if you believe that even a book with footnotes can be fun, then this book is a great choice.

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