

The Changing Japanese Mind: Gender Roles

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JAPN: 306

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November 11th, 2016

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Introduction

Gender roles in the modernizing role is a growing political topic for discussion that can lead to a variety of social interpretations and arguments. The portrayal of women, homosexuality, and gender roles in Japan links how the Japanese Mind works with issues out of the social norm. The discussion regarding Japanese Gender can be can be difficult when compared to a western perspective of what gender is. From a western perspective I originally viewed Japanese perceptions towards gender roles as narrow, conservative, and even offensive. Studies and topics of gender perceptions allow a broader understanding of Japan’s changing

identity and complicated understanding of women, men, and gender roles. I plan to analyze how gender roles are defined and viewed by examining women in media and language, homosexuality and concepts of masculinity, business, and the changing mind of Japan. These ideas will answer questions like; how does the Japanese Mind view gender, how is this perception changing, and what does this reflect about the Japanese Mind? By focusing on these question we can understand and potentially better improve the western concepts of gender fluidity in Japan. The results of the studies will show how concepts of harmony, *honne/tatemae*, social-norms, and globalization operate in Japan. These can be linked to art, literature, media, politics, religion, and language of everyday life in Japan. Another important concept to understand is the globalization of Japan and its progression with the rest of the world. This progress shows Japan's unique changing mind and redefining what gender can be understood internationally.

As the ideas discussed in Takahashi's course has shown, Japanese concepts of fear of failure, maintaining harmony and focusing on the group, using *honne* and *tatemae* for harmony, vertical structure and limitation of women, as well as "the tall nail gets hammered down" mentality presented in *Japanese Business Culture and Practices: A Guide to Twenty First Century Japanese Business* (Alston, Takei, 2005, pg. 13,14,19,24,27). These concepts reflect the current states and perceptions of what the majority of Japan thinks. This Is reflected when examining how women are portrayed in Japanese Magazines as well as the Japanese language. Magazines show a changing of stereotypes while language shows deep rooted traditions that are changing as well. On the physical identity of gender, men often face a strict style of life and interaction. Homosexuality and the Japanese population's understanding of it is a stark contrast to how

westerners understand sexuality. Images of male femininity are semi-fetishized in Japan but doesn't necessarily connect with an individual's experience of being gay. Finally, by glimpsing into the popular discussion of the workforce in Japan we can see recurring themes of Gender inequality and progress, which all point to a changing Japan.

Portrayal of Women in Japan

The portrayal of women in Japan will see trends of how women are views in magazines which will compare to the international community, as well as discuss how women are used in language. The depiction of women in magazines is changing and diverging from western portrayals, however this will be presented through one case study and should be carefully examined. Sexism in the Japanese Language Can be seen through a case study conducted by Naoko Takemaru, who interviews women and then compiles data regarding discriminative words and phrases. Both of these show how traditional concepts are beginning to change in Japan.

Women images in magazines

In the research article *Gender role portrayals in Japanese advertising: A magazine content analysis*, authors discuss the gender stereotypes present in Japan as well as analyzing changes in these stereotypes through magazines. Comparatively they looked an analysis from America which showed harshest stereotypes and found “exposure to the media and advertising has been found to have a causal traditionalistic effect on gender role values and detrimental effects on women's self-concepts, achievement aspirations, and self-images” (Ford et al., 1998). This perception of objectification of women is noticeable in America and really shows the differing gender disparity in Japan. Since the 70's advertising and magazines has been analyzed to reveal

the importance that media has on a population and perceptions to gender roles. In Japan traditional values like 男尊女卑 *danson johi* were once prevalent in history, however similar essences of female discrimination remain in modern society. (Ford et al., 1998). These ideas of female discrimination are not solely in Japan, modern day stereotypes internationally in literature portray women younger and more concerned with looks, show women as decorative or sexual objects, shown as product users, usually buying cheap products.

How do stereotypes in Japan compare? The study analyzes Japanese Magazine Advertisements and expects to find men being portrayed more positively compared to women in Japan. The study's results found Japanese Magazine Advertisements were showing women in a more positive way than men. Previous manly stereotypes have been more associated with women in magazines. Women portrayed with higher priced products, rather than previous depiction of lower priced commodities. Finally, that trends counter traditional Japanese stereotypes and diverge from western stereotypes (Ford et al. 1998). These results were then expanded upon and show that discrimination and stereotypes are present, but changing to reach a more equality based identity. From the study women are portrayed younger and more concerned about looks, compared to males. Men were portrayed more decoratively and product users, as opposed to product authorities. This flip reflects changing depiction of men and women, women are now becoming involved in the economic and commercial fields. While it seems that equality is true in Japan there are drawbacks to consider. 82% of magazines shown women as belittled or kept in place socially. 14.8% of magazines shown to have women equal to man and in non-traditional roles (Ford et al., 1998) Overall Japan is a mix of western and asian perceptions of gender. This study counteracts the traditional values of Japan maintaining conservative ideologies, and shows

the idea of a changing/progressing Japan. Japan in the sense of media, art, literature, and business is still grappling with conservative perceptions of men superiority. This growing movement can be attributed due to modernization, economic conditions, population trends, as well as globalization. A heavily rooted concept to the discrimination of women involves not only how they are seen, but how they are discussed.

Sexism of women in language

In the research article *Japanese women's perceptions of sexism in language* the author Naoko Takemaru focuses on how language can be interpreted today by different age groups and its relation to the degrading of women. In this study women are interviewed and discuss words that are used to represent a lower social standing of women, and how it affects them.

A major word that places women as a commodity in marriage is 嫁 *yome*. A woman even said “It is dreadful that once married, women are reduced to the weakest status of *yome*”. Or by another “*Yome* signifies that a married woman becomes the property of her husband and in-laws” (Takemaru 2005). The term *yome* places women as an object of a household, and can be a very disrespectful title. In relation to marriage women are treated as of secondary importance to men and phrases like 貰う *morau*, 嫁に行く *yome ni iku*, 嫁 *totsugu*, and 嫁いびり *yome ibiri* (Takemaru 2005). Using such phrases dehumanizes women to a lower status, even though there are non-discriminative terms relating to marriage. Non-discriminative phrases like 結婚する *kekkon suru* are available and are growing to be more and more common. Titles and words of housewives like 奥さん *okusan*, 家内 *kanai*, 愚妻 *gusai* are all recorded in this studied to be prevalent, however such terminology are becoming archaic. Relatively good terms related to a spouse may seem positive, but also assume and contribute to the perceived lower status of

women. あげ間 *ageman*, a wife who raises the status of her husband, and 糟糠の妻 *soukou no tsuma*, a wife who marries into poverty, both spin a positive female persona (Takemaru 2005). The issue with terms like あげ間 *ageman* or 糟糠の妻 *soukou no tsuma* is that they assume women are normally not in that positive light. These terms regarding marriage show the stigmatization that women face in day to day life. Business also contributes to the idea that women should only focus on being housewives.

The idea that women should become housewives was a prominent image not only in Japan but as well in America, however this is no longer the case. The Japanese phrases and words 女の癖に *onna no kuse ni*, 年増 *toshima*, 女の子 *onna no ko*, 掃除の叔母さん *souji no obasan*, 御局 *otsubone*, and even 寿退職 *kotobuki taishoku* are discriminative and play into the perception of women in a workplace (Takemura 2005). This is similar to the OL, office lady, identity in Japan. An OL is often seen as a 職場の花 *shokuba no hana*, an office flower. These concepts play into the issues women have faced in Japan as well as the progress that has been made.

When it comes to religion and culture there are old ideas that can be identified to encourage the disparity for women. Old Confucian and Buddhist ideas like 男尊女卑 *danson johi*, men superiority over women, 女三界に家なし *onna sangai ni ie nashi*, the burden on women's existence, as well as 女三従の教え *onna sanjuu no oshie*, the three laws women must obey (Takemaru 2005). As for 女三従の教え, it states that a woman must respect her father when a daughter, respect her husband when married, and respect her son as a widow. Takemaru compiles this data and makes the connection towards the different types of words and how they degrade a woman. I want to focus on the trend that is present in the decreasing rates of words when connected to age and education. Young generations see less words, and the more educated

see the similar trends. This study shows current issues, but the acknowledgement and resentment of them which pushes for change. From the author, the younger generations reduced usage of older words are helping remove them by not using them commonly. However, this also means new words could easily be formed and yet to be identified. The changes seen in the different age categories can be attributed to feminism and equal rights movements as well as a changing mentality in a modern society.

When examining how women are portrayed in Japanese Magazines as well as the Japanese language. Magazines show a changing of stereotypes while language shows deep rooted traditions that are changing as well. From these two ideas we can see a preservation of the conservative culture even in a progressive Japan. Directly these studies give a glimpse into how important the vertical structure is in Japan and maintaining harmony.

Homosexuality in Japan

When we discuss homosexuality in America we see the struggles of social acceptance as well as the history of gay right movements. In Japan the identity of homosexuality is heavily stereotyped in media and emphasizes *okama* culture. Mark McLelland discusses in *Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan: Cultural Myths and Social Realities* the portrayal of feminine traits and the actual identities of homosexuals in Japan.

Images of male femininity

I will first focus on *Chapter 3: Just Like a Girl: Images of Homosexual Men as Feminine* of McLelland's book. After reading the beginning of the chapter it can be hard to understand especially when femininity, gender, and sexuality in Japan are interpreted differently. A strange

separation of homosexuality and *okama* bars is prevalent in Japan. An *okama* bar is where customers can be served by crossdressing men who are seen as homosexuals, and is accepted by the Japanese culture (McLelland 2005, Pg. 40). A weird phenomenon is happening where non-homosexual customers are attending for a mode of entertainment and social interaction. This new trend is making homosexuality a bit confusing in Japan especially with the introduction of image clubs. イメクラ *imekura*, or image clubs is where customer can dress up as women or pursue sexual relations with women as a woman (McLelland 2005, Pg. 42). In these establishment some men are involved with sexual acts that from a western perspective are homosexual, however in Japan the men participating are not seen as such. These bars also reinforce the idea that homosexuality is to be shown in an entertainment fashion, and can be difficult for non-crossdressing homosexuals in Japan.

Situations of gender ambivalence are not disregarded and can be actually admired according to McLelland. who also presents the mindset of Japanese populous not addressing the possibility of an *okama* man being gay. One account of a man who was bullied in high school dropped out to go to Tokyo in hopes of finding a community that would accept them, however when he joined an *okama* bar he felt like they were “performing in a degrading manner for the entertainment of the straight patrons” (McLelland 2005, Pg. 45). Since the terminology of “Gay” in media has been assigned to cross-dressing, those who do not are faced with issues even when they are homosexual. McLelland discusses Nomura Sachiyo who writes a book that contains a chapter on how to identify gay men. In Nomura’s book she attributes traits of cleanliness, insecurity, narcissism, and feminine mannerisms of cooking and home decorating. Nomura’s approach to a discovery of a gay man is positive, and that it can present an opportunity to start over. Nomura

even explains gay men are one of the best friends a woman can have (McLelland 2005 Pg. 48). A homosexual who is within the context of entertainment is accepted, however those who fall out of that context is a cause for anxiety. Gay men are often presented on television without sexual relations and without definitive sexuality. Similarly, lesbians that are portrayed outside of television are unsympathetic and feared. The author also discusses the “gay boom” which arose in the 90’s, however also points out that gay men are still being used by society for entertainment. (McLelland 2005 Pg. 53). This is seen by a western perspective as offensive and can be troubling to understand. However, this also goes into the concept of harmony. Instead of completely ostracizing the homosexual community, the public Japan attempts to adopt them in the form of media entertainment. This is a step in the right direction towards a more progressive Japan.

Homosexual identity in Japan

In *Chapter 7: Interview with Japanese Gay Men* the entertainment fantasy of homosexuality avoids the reality of gay men and their lived experiences. McLelland conducts interviews with gay men who have been able to experience other nations attitudes and perspectives towards homosexuality. An interview with Sato, an anonymous identity, revealed that he “was very surprised to hear about Japanese gays participating in ‘Gay Games’ abroad and campaigning for ‘gay rights’ in Japan.” (McLelland 2005 Pg. 165). Sato was even urged by his sister to see a medical professional, who said it is normal. When Sato was asked the difference between Gay Men in Japan and Canada he said, “they [gay people] are much more open...everybody has to be the same in Japan.” (McLelland 2005 Pg. 166) This experience presented by Sato shows the confusion young men face when identifying themselves as homosexual. Hiroaki says ““In Japan,

I was blinded as a gay person. I did not know who to turn to or talk to. I eventually decided to keep quiet about my sexuality.” (McLelland 2005 Pg. 167). All these experiences show the personal struggles of gay men whose only knowledge of homosexuality is from hearsay and social media. Many of these individuals do not openly come out in fear of sticking out as well as wanting to maintain harmony.

Another topic which can be examined is how masculinity fits within the vertical society of Japan. I believe masculinity is more valued and men who are seen as homosexuals can be disregarded and not as respected. The changing concepts of masculinity and femininity are progressing, but it is important to identify how and where.

Changing Mind

While common stigmas dominate Japan currently, there is a movement to new perceptions and acceptance. In the business field ideas that women are just office flowers, women cannot be managers, and women leave the workforce to be mothers is common today (Renshaw 1999 Pg. 94) These realities can only make it harder for women to balance and maintain their lives in a transitioning system. Despite all the difficulties of understand men and women things are changing in Japan.

Changing Trends

Donald Keene points out in his article regarding Feminine Sensibility that prior to the Heian age masculine prose was prominent. After the introduction of pillow books and the adoption of feminine writing styles that femininity began to shape the way literature was formed in Japan (Hume, 1995. Pg. 109-110). This is important to note when discussing the early approaches to women incorporation in media which can be connected to how women use media to advocate

their goals. While comparing this to other trends which I have discussed studies by Ford, McLelland, and Takemaru we can see the slowly changing and progressive action that occur within Japanese Culture. Accompany all this with the discussions in Takahashi's course regarding what the Japanese Mind is we can see positive change. These ideas are not just limited to discussion but prevalent in solid statistical data.

Looking at data collected by the World Bank, it is apparent women in the workforce are continuing to grow. The ratio of female to male labor force participation rate is increasing from 65% in 1990 to 69% in 2014 (World Bank 2016). This trend shows more and more women entering the labor force in Japan and began to steadily increase in 2002. While men still dominate the workforce, this data shows how things are beginning to change. Another sign of change comes from Japanese Prime Minister who aims to reduce the inequality in the workforce, as discussed in the Washington Post. With *Abenomics* comes a reform in how women are addressed in the workforce, “‘*Abenomics* won't succeed without *womenomics*,’ Abe told a women's business forum [in 2014]”. This concept has been dubbed “*Womenomics*” in Japan (Fifield 2014). This public display of bettering the involvement is a step towards reaching equality in the workforce. When a government official addressing something regarding gender this is a big deal, because when these topics are discussed they are often improved. An important factor to consider when it comes to the percentage of women in the workforce is affected by economic downturns, as well as the male percentage.

Conclusion

How does the Japanese Mind view gender, how is this perception changing, and what does this reflect about the Japanese Mind? Japan views gender still entrenched in traditional views regarding

women, men, and gender roles. Women are seen as secondary to men traditionally as in most cultures, but fares better than America's objectification of Women in media historically. Also in a unique way of differentiating homosexuality and entertainment's portrayal of homosexuality. This traditional perception is changing and morphing into a more progressive Japan due to younger generational movements, economic conditions, and globalization. More and more women are working to redefine the housewife tradition as well as becoming managers in corporations. After this discussion of gender roles, sexuality, and discrimination it can be difficult to accurately reflect the Japanese Mind, however can be generalized. Fear of failure is a large factor that plagues and motivates many Japanese. This perfection attitude makes individuals want to be accepted into a community. The communal goal can be achieved through harmony and focusing on the group. Women who strive in business ventures may step out of their comfort, but overall attempt to maintain harmony. Homosexual in Japan also maintain this harmony by not publically addressing their sexual preferences and often become skilled in *Honne and Tatame*. This all ties into the strict vertical structure and the phrase "the tall nail gets hammered down". I believe by addressing this it can allow for a better understanding of the Japanese mind as well as benefit all genders and identities in Japan.

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