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The Alteration of the Image – Women and Japanese Society (1600-2000)

by
Frank JACOB

Introduction

Despite Japan's being one of the most successful and most Westernized countries in Asia, women are still suffering from a high level of gender inequality. More than 60% of the women still feel that they are treated worse than men, especially with regard to their wages and working conditions (Wulansari, 2013, 13). This seems to be ironic considering that Japan was ruled by a woman, the legendary empress Pimiko, in the third century and that its highest goddess, Amaterasu Omikami, was a female (Silva-Grondin, 2010, 1). Japan had been a matriarchal antiquity until the sixth century when the introduction of Buddhism changed not only the existing religious system but the shape of gender roles as well (Joyce, 1976, 4).

The adaption of Buddhism by Shôtoku Taishi (574-622) created an anti-feminine society, and “spiritually based judgments produced a chauvinist society“ (Silva-Grondin, 2010, 2). Epiphany was determined to be male because Buddha was male as well, a fact that would degrade women for centuries. The history of women and their image in Japanese society is a very interesting case study. It provides an explanation model showing that external forces are highly influential in the development of gender-based ideologies and are responsible for the image of women in Japan over the last four centuries.

The following chapter will outline the way the image of women was defined and then re-defined by the Tokugawa rule, due to the Meiji Restoration, the democratic intermezzo of the Taishô period, and finally by the Second World War, the American Occupation, and the Cold War. It will be shown which external parameters, meaning transnational factors, were responsible for the extreme changes of the female image in Japanese society. This will explain how a matriarchal antiquity was transformed into a modern and westernized society where women are still unequal and disadvantaged in comparison to their male counterparts.

Women and Tokugawa's Japan – Agriculture, Education, Arts, and Prostitution

When Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616) seized power in Japan in 1600 after the battle of

Sekigahara, he was anxious to stabilize his own rule and the title of Shogun for his family. To enact this ambitious plan, he recreated Japanese society adapting a Neo-Confucian model that separated Japan into four classes: warriors, farmers, artisans, and merchants (Jacob, 2014). There was no allowance for social mobility in general and as a consequence of the existing vassal system, the general samurai “households were again based on patriarchy” (Silva-Grondin, 2010, 3) resembling the political status of Tokugawa Japan.

Nevertheless, the system was not as strong as Ieyasu believed or would have wished it to be. This was particularly so in rural surroundings where women lived in a more equal environment because their workforce was imperative for the survival of the rural families per se. Thus, even though the man remained the first instance of family decisions, women were able to influence the course of events as well (Hane, 2003, 78). However, it was not only rural women who had more rights than one would expect at first instance. Early modern Japan was also not the “nadir in the status of Japanese women” (Tocco, 2003, 194). Women were even allowed to deny marriage if they were willing to remain with their parents to take care of them, although this could be dangerous for the structure of the whole society, which is based on the consistency of the single household (Sugano, 2003, 187-188).

The samurai children received an intensive education, and women were not disadvantaged with regard to this procedure. It was the women of the samurai and the common class who organized an educational system consisting of newly established schools and private academies, where women trained themselves in reading and writing (Tocco, 2003, 194). This development was not contrary to the Tokugawa rule because its philosophy demanded the education of women. The Neo-Confucian philosopher Kaibara Ekiken (1630-1714) went even further by propagating that men should evaluate not just the female appearance but also the grade of education before marrying a woman (Tocco, 2003, 196). These factors led to a high level of education for the gentry, samurai, and common women, who were able to read and write even complex texts and special compilations, for female education were bestsellers during the two and a half centuries of Tokugawa rule. In contrast to their rural counterpart commoners, by living in the urban centers, they were able to receive a higher level of education (Tocco, 2003, 206-210). From a cultural perspective, the Edo-period with its growing cities – in 1740 Edo (Tôkyô) had more than one million inhabitants and was the largest city in the world (Swinton, 1996, 13) – was highly productive, but the image of women was very eclectic.

While “*kabuki* [theatre] was a main site for production of gender” (Gabrovska, 2009, 71), women were prohibited from performing on stage as a consequence of increasing prostitution. It was men, the so-called female performers (*onnagata*), who depicted high-ranking courtesans (*keisei*), red princesses (*akahime*), young girls (*musume*) and other female roles. Performers like Yoshizawa Ayame I (1623-1729) were icons of their day because they were seen as perfect women performed by men. Due to this inverted gender ideal, “an *onnagata* should at all times make a point of living and behaving like a woman offstage, and must never play both female and male roles onstage” (Gabrovska, 2009, 74). Nonetheless, in contrast to the *kabuki* stage, women were highly active in other cultural fields.

As education was highly encouraged for women as well, there were many instructional books for women written by male Confucianists, who “were willing to write down their cultural and moral wisdom for a popular audience” (Schalow, 1995, 16). However, they were not the only ones who produced readings for women. There were female authors as well. Since the Heian period, the format of the diary (*nikki*) had been “one of the forms of expressions female writers were allowed, indeed expected, to utilize” (Nenzi, 2006, 46). In the time of Tokugawa, this format was complemented by the genre of travel narratives, which were written by samurai and gentry women to report their experiences during long journeys through the country (Nenzi, 2006, 52). In contrast to these forms of female expression, the most dominant literary products were novels, manual books and woodblock prints, where the readers were informed about sex, the most important part of popular culture in those days. The erotic literature of the 17th century was used by male and female readers and was responsible for the high number of editions in circulation. Books from 1600 onwards described masturbation techniques for women, and often in “subsequent images, women display[ed] their genitals to each other and the viewer, with clitoris, labia and vagina clearly differentiated and outsized” (Walthall, 2009, 3).

Despite the high popularity of such masturbation manuals, the process of masturbating was mostly viewed as a substitute for having sex with a man. Additionally, things like long radishes or potatoes, which could be inserted into a female’s vagina, had just become a replacement for a real penis (Walthall, 2009, 4). Female masturbation was recommended “for good mental and physical health, to console the heart and calm the spirit” (Walthall, 2009, 5-6). Female images of the Tokugawa era were especially related to sex, and this could be seen by the depictions of the Yoshiwara Pleasure Quarters as well, where popular culture was

transformed into art, and life was a reflective copy of the same popular art (Swinton, 1996, 14).

The women of the Yoshiwara district became an emblem of new aesthetics and built the center of this exciting floating world. In 1760, of 10,000 people living in the red light district, just 2,500 were prostitutes, and even though one could buy them for sexual practices as well, “[v]ulgarity had no place in this world, which was governed by strict protocol and a code of behavior” (Swinton, 1996, 31). These days had nothing in common with modern prostitution because sexual relations with a high-class Yoshiwara courtesan was unthinkable before the third date. Hence, many people were not able to afford such a pleasure, and it remained just a dream for them. The dreamers in this case were supported by erotic print albums like Suzuki Harunobu’s (around 1725-1770) *The Elegant Amorous Adventures of Maneemon (Fûryû Enshoku Maneemon)*. The visual arts thereby depicted supreme females, no matter if they were performed by male *kabuki* actors or as part of woodblock prints, which remained an essential part of Japanese popular culture until the 19th century. This image of women was positive, although it was a highly art-centered one, and it needed the opening of Japan in 1853 and the Meiji Restoration from 1868 onwards to change it again.

Western Influences and the reversal of female positions

When Commodore Matthew C. Perry (1794-1858) with his small fleet of black ships reached Japan in 1853, he would lay the ground for further developments that would change Japanese society as a whole. Due to the Meiji Restoration, since 1868, Western ideas were imported, and some cultural aspects were seen with other eyes. Prostitution was officially banned by the government, but this made the situation of the women who worked - or more precisely were forced to work - in this field even worse. Poor rural families even sold their daughters to brothels to ensure the survival of the family during bad times, and the market was big enough to make that possible, as the urbanization of the Meiji years led to an increasing demand for prostitutes (Fig. 1).

Year	1904	1909	1912	1924
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Number of	43,134	47,541	50,410	52,325
Prostitutes				

Fig. 1 The increase of prostitution in the Meiji era, the number of 1924 is showing that the climax was almost reached in 1912 at the end of the Meiji reign (Hane, 2003, 210).

Women from Kyûshû were even sold as prostitutes and sent to the Asian mainland, where for example in 1909, 3,500 Japanese women served in brothels in Shanghai (Hane, 2003, 219).

Although women mainly living in rural areas were sold to brothels, most of them remained in their rural surroundings, where their working force was required by their families to provide extra income and additional hands for daily business (Nagashima, 1982, 55-56). As a result, these women were not allowed to receive an education, which was seen as something useless for a farm woman. The agrarian structures were not changed as a whole during the Meiji Restoration, and this made women who married an eldest son still the de facto slave of her mother-in-law. As a consequence of this situation and the hard work which had to be done every day, “[i]t was said that peasant women aged ten years more quickly than urban women” (Hane, 2003, 84).

With regard to their former almost equal positions, the image of women had mainly been changed by the modernization of Japan and especially during new religious movements like the one of the Great Origin (*Ômoto*), which was led by Deguchi Nao (1836-1918). Such movements were dominated by new female leaderships (Ishiwata, 2000, 85). In addition, the Meiji era created another view of women and their place in society: The image of the good wives and wise mothers (*ryôsei kenbo*), which provided the image of an ideal woman in the following decades (Wöhr, 2000b, 1). These ideals were propagated by the first magazines, which were published since the 1870s. These magazines written by men were supposed to help the women of Meiji Japan to identify with the new society and educate them in the “*ryôsei kenbô*” doctrine (Wöhr, 2000a, 17-18).

Despite this new model, women have been important for the success of the Meiji Restoration and the Japanese economy since the 1880s. During the Tokugawa period, young females were sent to towns as so-called *dekasegi* workers, where they worked to provide an additional income for the family at home (Tsurumi, 1990, 10). When the first big silk mill in Tôkyô, the Tomioka mill, began its operation, females were sent as the first workers, and they were educated to work as trainers for the new technology, which they would spread over the

whole of Japan. In the first mills – silk- as well as cotton-mills – during the first years, the working conditions had been good for the young females, and it was these young women who made the introduction of the new technologies a success story (Tsurumi, 1990, 26-32). Regardless, it was not just new technologies adapted during the early Meiji years. Emerging traders wanted to make a higher profit and followed the capitalist doctrines of a free market economy. When the Ôsaka Cotton-Spinning Company, a non-government enterprise, opened in 1883 with 10,500 mills, their main target was not the spread of technology but to produce a profit for the owners. Because of this, the large army of working women was paid less money, and the working conditions got worse (Tsurumi, 1990, 39-42). The women received lower wages than their male counterparts, which is why more and more women were made to work in the factories. By 1900, 80% of female workers had a rural background and were sent to the cotton- and silk-mills to improve the economic state of their families (Fig. 2 and 3).

1902	1919
61.980	175.873
79,4%	77,4%

Fig. 2: Women working in the cotton industry in 1902 and 1919 (Tsurumi, 1990, 10).

1902	1919
120.980	278.249
93,8%	93,4%

Fig. 3: Women working in the silk industry in 1902 and 1919 (Tsurumi, 1990, 10).

No matter which of the above mentioned industries the young women worked in, they were almost always paid less than the men, who had to work harder, at least from the perspective of the factory owners, who were male themselves. Consequently, the good new working system for young women changed, and “after Osaka Spinning established large-scale operations near reserve armies of urban and suburban poor and scheduled day and night shifts, taking a “profit first“ attitude toward its mill hands, the scene was set for a less happy world for cotton workers“ (Tsurumi, 1990, 46). This bad working situation would remain unchanged until the end of the Meiji period, when the democratic wave of the Taishô years initiated a growing

female assertiveness.

The emergence of modern girls

The Taishô years (1912-1926) are generally evaluated as being a democratic intermezzo between the Meiji period and the radicalization and militarization of the early Shôwa period. The idea of the good wives and wise mothers was exchanged for new self-aware concepts of femininity. Due to this, women came to be described as “new woman” (*atarashii onna*), “modern girl” (*modan garu*) or “poison woman” (*dokufu*) (Mackie, 2013, 7). The new type of modern girl was called by Wöhr an “epiphany of modernity” (Wöhr, 2000b, 2), when the status-based interconnections of the feudal age were transformed into the class and gender interconnections of a modern society (Mackie, 2013, 2).

In the 1910s and 1920s, a discourse was started by reactionary intellectuals about “transgressive female figures who were seen to be the antithesis of good national subjects” (Mackie, 2013, 1), but new journals that were created especially for women became famous and widely received. Journals like *Women’s Review (Fujin kôron)*, *The Housewife’s Companion (Shufu no tomo)* and many others were starting to revise the antiquated female image (Wöhr, 2000a, 18). Women’s magazines became a mass medium that provided the opportunity for a female discourse about their own situations and standing in the Taishô society. The increasing education of Japanese women made this possible. High school girls became interested readers of special journals like *A Woman’s School World (Jogaku sekai)*. They did not only read these new magazines but were also able to comment and write letters that would be printed in the forthcoming journals. They participated for the first time, while former journals for women were entirely male-dominated (Sato, 2000, 46-50).

Despite the fact that Murai Gensai (1863-1927), the editor of *Fujin sekai*, at first created a journal that reflected mainly his own interests in the field of popular literature, housekeeping, and food, the magazines began to change in the 1920s when they increasingly reflected the needs and wishes of their female readers. A new image of the Japanese woman and reports about fashion or make-up trends were transmitted. Although the journals were criticized to be low-grade or inferior, the circulation of this new medium reached up to 300,000 copies (*Fujin zasshi no hihankai*, 1928, 102; *Fujin zasshi saikin no keikô*, 1929, 23).

Another event that was responsible for major changes during the Taishô era was the

Great War. Regardless of the fact that the war was mainly seen as a European event in Japan during the four years from 1914-1918, this global and transnational event had a tremendous impact on the Japanese society as well. As a consequence of the economic boom resulting from Japan's exports to the warring states, labor unions demanded higher wages, and women requested equal pay for their work. Female factory workers, teachers and new professionals like female bus conductors wanted to be treated like equal employees and receive equivalent wages for their work (Freedman, 2010, 173-224).

The new consciousness of Japanese females was increased in the 1920s when the modern girls were seen almost as militant. They as well as the common working women became the new customers of cosmetic products from Shiseidô and other companies and created a modern image of their own, a new overarching image of femininity (Mackie, 2013, 6; Silverberg, 1991, 240; Weisenfeld, 2010). Irrespective of this new level of emancipation, Japanese women had to face a rejection of their new societal position during the early Shôwa years.

Militarization and the female sex

In the 1930s, Japan became a militarized state, where the military was willing to overcome the politicians, and assassinations as well as attempted coup d'états happened frequently. During these years until the end of the Second World War, women were commonly treated as minors, and the society became strongly patriarchal again (Hane, 2003, 78). Economic crisis forced farmer families to sell their daughters to brothels again, and the women's magazines were again used by the military to educate the women. Women were to be prepared to serve in the war machinery of Japan and become part of the war as reliable factory workers (Wöhr, 2000b, 3).

Japanese women were supposed to be the fighters of the home front, active for the sake of the empire. To organize them, the government initiated female associations, e.g. the Greater Japan Women's Association (Ueno, 2004, 17). This organization was initiated by the military, and it assembled all women from the age of 20 and prepared the mass of Japanese females for the war ideology. Despite this organizational preparation of Japan's future war effort, it was never seen as an option to engage the women as soldiers for real fighting. Regardless, women were now able to escape the shame of not having participated by sending

their sons into death for the home country.

All in all, it had been the factors of foreign policy and the planning of the forthcoming war that determined the image of women during the early Shōwa years. Here, there were again transnational factors responsible for the creation, or better re-creation, of the image of Japanese women. This image would officially change once again: during the occupation by the United States.

Conclusion

When Douglas MacArthur (1880-1964) landed in Japan, he wanted to create a new Japanese society in which women were equal. They were granted the right to vote and were allowed to pursue the same rights their male counterparts did. Nevertheless, despite his ambitious aims, MacArthur had to change his policy as a consequence of the start of the Korean War. Japan had to be brought back to economic strength to secure its standing during the upcoming Cold War (Bestor, 2002, 31).

Due to this, the reforms were not brought to completion, and Japan gradually returned to older models. Women remained a kind of second-class citizen, but after an anti-atomic movement and a consumer movement, the women's liberation movement became stronger from the 1950s to the 1970s (Bestor, 2002, 33-34; Wöhr, 2000b, 9). If one is researching the long history of changing images of women in Japan, it can be shown that there is still some sexual subtext of citizenship in Japan (Mackie, 2002, 201), which forces women to work for less wages, even though the Equal Employment Opportunity Law of 1985 should have changed this situation (Mackie, 2002, 205). It is unbelievable that in a modern country like Japan, there are still women who are discriminated against because of biological sex. The gap in wages decreased to 67.5 % of male wages with regard to full-time working positions, but in part-time work, women still earn less than men today (Tachibanaki, 2010, 20). This is unfair and has tremendous consequences. Less and less children are born in Japan because if a woman wants to be autonomous in current Japan, she will not want to be pregnant. This would lead her directly into the male patriarchy again. Even though the situation is still changing today, the consequences of the mainly bad image of Japanese women during the last four centuries cannot be omitted.

To conclude, it was mainly transnational parameters that changed the image of

Japanese women, and with the exception of the late Tokugawa and the Taishô period, the female sex has had to suffer from a chauvinistic society, which did not respect women as equals but looked down on them with a strong kind of chauvinism.

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