

THE CHANGING ROLES OF WOMEN IN JAPANESE SOCIETY:

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It is a time when women in many parts of the world are questioning the roles, life styles and values by which women have lived for centuries. Barring a few societies of past and present generally the position of a woman in most of the civilized societies has been miserably low as compared to men. Among the eastern cultures, Japanese women is the first who under the influence of west took initiative to liberate herself and fight for her rights in Japanese society. For more than a thousand years, Japanese women have been taught that they existed to serve men faithfully and well. They have been carefully indoctrinated with the idea that women are subordinate to men. But today women in Japan are departing from the traditional feminine ideal, an ideal that prescribed a domestic, subordinate and often subservient role for women.¹

The place of women in Japanese society provides an interesting blend of illusion and myth. The popular western image of the subservient Japanese woman is real, it is however, only an image. In their private family role, women quite often dominate the male members of the household. Judged by Western standards, the women of Japan are unusually dedicated to their families. The current position of women in Japanese society can be attributed to the vestiges of two old philosophies – Confucianism, and Samurai based feudalism. These influences are still strong, however in spite of these influences the public role of women has changed markedly since the beginning of World War II.

Japan, perhaps more so than any other country, has undergone numerous, radical transformations during the past 150 years. Beginning with those born in the early 1800's, every generation of Japanese has experienced some sort of revolutionary redefinition of society. Japan has evolved from its semi-feudal roots to become a world power. Along the way Japan struggled with the West, admiring, imitating, fighting, and ultimately, equaling its power. Its feudal lifestyle legislated out of existence, Japan

turned to democracy, and only to have it replaced by a right wing totalitarian government. This was followed by a devastating war, and then a socially devastating peace. Finally, the Japanese people have had to cope with the problems that came with their newly found economic power.

Japanese society has been formed from many influences, among the most important is Confucianism, Buddhism, and Samurai based feudalism.

Confucianism and Buddhism combined with the military class of Japan to form the Samurai (warrior) class. The ascension of the Samurai code of life to become the law of the land drastically changed the place of women in Japan. Before the advent of the Samurai in the 15th century AD, Japanese society had been ordered largely on matrilineal lines. The combined influences of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Samurai culture forever changed the place of the woman in Japanese society. These three institutions were all highly discriminatory towards women. Confucianism stressed the preeminence of men over women, stating. “A woman is to obey her father as daughter, her husband as wife, and her son as aged mother”.² A basic tenant of Buddhism is that salvation is not possible for women, and the Samurai believed that “...A woman should look upon her husband as if he were heaven itself”.³ An example of how society viewed women is shown by an excerpt from *The Tale of Genji*, an 11th century Japanese novel, written by a woman; she said: “If they [women] were not fundamentally evil, they would not have been born women at all”.⁴

Women living under the Tokugawa Shogunate (1602-1868), as the government of Japan was known, did not exist legally. Women could not own property, and according to a Portuguese trader, a woman’s “...husband may kill his wife for being lazy or bad”.⁵ Women were in all ways subordinate to men.

Women, although ruthlessly exploited, became the keys to the country’s success. In a time of social upheaval, women were encouraged to be the moral foundation of the country. The traditional notion of the Confucian family, i.e. – Father to son, senior to junior, husband to wife, was pushed by the government as it attempted to increase the birth rate so that Japan could compete on a more equal footing with the countries of the West.

Women were urged to live according to the saying “umeyo fuyaseyo” – produce more babies and increase the population.⁶

In the commercial sector the labor provided by women became the key to the country’s economic success. One author said: “Without the work of Japan’s women, the apparent miracle of Japan’s economic growth might not have been possible”...⁷ Japan needed a way to finance its modernization effort, and it found this means in the industry of textile export. The Japanese imported whole factories from England, and employed hundreds of thousands of women to work in them. By 1900 250,000 women worked in the textile industry, and they announced for 63% of the industrial labor force.⁸ Women were forced by economic realities to work in the factories. The women who worked there were paid low wages, lived in crowded and often diseased dormitories, where they were virtual prisoners.

The position of women changed little during the fifty-year period leading to World War II. Educators spoke of “equality between men and women” as a corollary with the notion of “equality of all classes”⁹ which was instituted after the Meiji restoration, but women gained nothing. In 1887 laws were established which limited women’s rights. Women did not have the vote, (universal suffrage for men came in 1924) and they still suffered from the vestiges of Samurai culture which kept them subservient to their husbands. They could not divorce their husbands, while they were subject to easy divorce by their husbands. The *Mainichi*, a Japanese newspaper, commented on the position of Japanese women during the 1920’s: “...Japan maltreats and insults her women to a graver extent than any other country on the globe”.¹⁰ World War II changed everything.

During World War II the role of women changed. Almost 2.5 million men served in the Japanese armed forces, this represented 10% of the male population or 17% of the male working population¹¹ with millions of men removed from industry, women found themselves working in coalmines, steel mills, and arms factories. With their husbands gone, wives were now in complete control of the home. Japanese wives found themselves doing double and sometime triple duty.

By the close of the war Japanese society had been transformed. One Japanese city after another had been subjected to terrible bombings. "The war brought to Japan both economic bankruptcy and the bankruptcy of social traditions. In the economic and social anarchy that followed, everyone, except just a few strangely tucked away individuals, had to pick a living by himself. ...This desperate situation helped to foster a basic democratic tendency, and worked as the principle factor for the shattering of the feudalistic family system."¹² The arrival of the Allied Occupation, led by General MacArthur, ensured that the social revolution, which had started, would continue. The Japanese people were ready for a change.

The Americans introduced many reforms to Japanese society. They rewrote the Japanese Constitution, outlawing war, ensuring parliamentary rule, encouraging union activity, and reducing the Emperor to the position of a normal human being. MacArthur was a godsend for women's rights in Japan. MacArthur spoke of the "essential equalities"¹³ of the sexes, women suffrage came in 1946, all inequalities in laws were ended, high schools became code, 26 women's universities were opened, and nationwide there were now 2,000 female police officers. A Labor Standards Law was passed in 1947, it had regulations which covered equal pay, working hours, maternity leave, and holiday leave.

Since the 1950's women have sought a more individualized means to provide themselves with a sense of well being. The evolving role of women has been most apparent in their attitudes towards marriage and the family system. Since World War II women have drifted from group-oriented thinking to a more individualistic approach to life. Women have started to wait till later in life to marry, in the process they have been living at home, vacationing in Hawaii, and pumping money into the economy with their disposable income. In recent years there has been a trend away from arranged marriage, "Many young women acknowledge that they took paid employment mostly in order to find a husband on their own".¹⁴ In spite of this and other influences almost 40% of marriages were still arranged in 1982.¹⁵ This figure is however half the size of a 1955 poll which showed that almost 81% of marriages were arranged.¹⁶ Once married, many women now continue to work, and increasingly they return to work after childbirth, something which was inconceivable a generation

ago. A woman's role in the family is evolving as well, becoming more and more dominant.

Women have sought more personal satisfaction from their lives in the past few decades. During their pre-marital lives women constitute an almost freewheeling segment of Japanese society. There is an old Japanese saying, which translates as "marriage is a woman's grave."¹⁷

One author noted that "Japanese still regard marriage not as the culmination of a romance but as a commitment that is primarily social and practical in significance".¹⁸ As a result Japanese women take full advantage of their years prior to marriage. Most women remain at home while working, living with their family in a sort of extended dependency.

Once married Japanese woman finds herself in a role opposite of the perceived sex roles in Japan – the female is dominant in the house. The relationship between the partners of a Japanese marriage clearly shows the evolving role of women.

A Japanese woman has almost unquestioned authority within the family system of today's Japan. Typically the wife will make all decisions regarding the raising of the children, and will have absolute control of the family's finances. There are two factors, which explain this, first that "...the mother-son relationship in Japan breeds in most Japanese boys a taste for dependence".¹⁹ Secondly, and the factor which accounts for the first reason, is that the wife often assumes household dominance because the husband is simply not at home often, and the wife fills the vacuum created by his frequent absences. In Japan, a typical workday, already long by Western standards, is made even longer by commutes which often add three hours to the husband's day. As a result the raising of children is left almost entirely in the hands of the wife.

The changing role of women in Japanese society is also shown by their employment patterns. Traditionally Japanese women have worked until marriage and then they "retired" to become housewives. In recent years women have increasingly worked longer until "retirement". The entry of women in to various kinds of occupations started during World War II

when they were called to replace the working men. After the war however more and more women began to take additional jobs. During the ten years from 1960 to 1970 a most remarkable increase in the number of working women took place in the manufacturing industries, in the private or non-government service industries etc. Statistics in 1974 showed that more than 80% of working women concentrated in manufacturing, private or non government service and in the whole sale and retail trades, though, before 1950, as in prewar times majority of the Japanese working women were engaged in agriculture and forestry. Today, Japanese women hold professional and technical jobs. Many of them have become teachers, doctors and pharmacists. Many others are in such fields as advertising, foreign trade, mass communications and even science technologies. New opportunities have recently been opened to them where only men used to occupy positions of authority.

In discussing today's Japanese working women, we cannot help but think of traditional Japanese society where a girl from a good family was rarely permitted to work before marriage. Thus, we can see that today's Japanese society has shed off its prejudice against working women.

The position of Japanese women in marriage has also been liberalized since the war. Since 1947, the principle of equality between the sexes has been established, in relations to freedom of marriages and divorces, property and inheritance rights, parental rights and so forth.

Also, there is no discrimination between the sexes regarding freedom of assembly, association and speech. Japanese women have begun to organize themselves into political, religious and economic organizations.

In addition to the legal protections and safe guard afforded to women, technological changes have also freed the Japanese housewife, from much drudgery, which used to keep her busy in the house all day. The introduction of modern house appliances has given her more free time.

Expanding urbanization, as well as laws and better education have also contributed to the liberation of the Japanese women from the restraints of the past. As the result of the Second World War and occupation of Japan

by American forces, education, new laws, exposure to the city and the world, rising expectations and economic necessity have all contributed to the enlarging independence and equality of the Japanese women. Today, the Japanese women are among the most progressive women in the world.

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