

WOMEN IN JAPANESE SOCIETY: THEIR CHANGING ROLES

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INTRODUCTION

The place of Women in Japanese society provides an interesting blend of illusion and myth. There are two distinct of Japanese societies – public and private. The popular western image of a Japanese woman is real, it is however, only an image. In their private family role, women quite often dominate the male members of the house hold. Judged by western standards, the woman of Japan are un-usually dedicated to their families. The current position of woman in Japanese society can be attributed to the vestiges of two old philosophies – Confucianism and samurai based feudalism. These influences are still strong, however inspite of these influences the public role of women has changed markedly since the beginning of World War-II.¹

Japan, perhaps more so then 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 re-definement 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 life style legislated out of existence, Japan turned to democracy, only to have its replaced by a right wing totalitarian government. This was followed by a 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 are Confucianism, Buddhism and

Samurai based feudalism. The Japanese, as in all societies derived from the Chinese Confucian heritage, value the group over the individual, and group needs take precedence over individual needs. In practice this means that the Japanese define their well-being and sense of accomplishment through the success of the group.

In addition to the importance of the group, Confucianism emphasized the supreme position of the male, and a hierarchical power structure for society.²

Confucianism and Buddhism combined with the military class of Japan to form the Samurai class. The ascensions 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 A.D. Japanese society had been ordered largely on matrilineal lines. The combined influences of Confucianism, Buddhism and Samurai culture forever changed the place of 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".³ 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".

Women living under the Tokugawa Shogunate 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".⁴ Women could learn to write only hiragana, and thus were prevented from reading political and business transaction or great literary works which were written in the more formal Kanji. Women were in all ways subordinate to men. The key factor which prevented Japanese society from evolving was an exclusionary edict issued in 1637 by the ruler

of Japan. This order cut Japan off from virtually all contact with non-Japanese. No foreigners were allowed to enter Japan, and no Japanese were allowed to travel outside of Japan. Japan became a time capsule which was not opened until 1853 with the arrival at Tokyo Bay of Commodore Mathew Perry of the United States. Thus Japan was thrust into the modern world with a societal structure that was barely discernable from that which had existed from the previous four hundred years.⁵ In 1858 Japan signed a series of unequal treaties with the western powers. Within thirty years of Perry's arrival all feudal lands had been seized, the feudal lords were gone, class restrictions removed, and the samurai class eliminated.

Women although ruthlessly exploited, became the key to the country's success. In a time of social upheaval, women were encouraged to be a 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.

In the commercial sector the labour provided by women became the key to the country's economic success. The Japanese imported whole factories from England, and employed hundreds and thousands of women to work in them. By 1900 250,000 women worked in the textile industry, and they accounted for 63% of the industrial labour force. 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 prisoners.⁶

The position of Japanese woman changed markedly during the years since the end of World War-II. Before, the war, the

Japanese woman was firmly entrenched in a patriarchal system, taught to obey first her husband, and later her sons.

Under the Allied Occupation in the years following the war, the status of women in Japanese society changed dramatically. As part of the new "post war democracy" the ideal of the equality of sexes was introduced to Japan and written into the new constitution in the form of the right to vote, to receive an education and to receive equal opportunity employment.⁷

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. In 1949 a woman could expect to work 3.2 years, by 1975 she was working for 6 years. The number of women in the work force increased from 7,160,000 in 1960 to 13,340,000 in 1980. The nature of women's work has changed as well. In 1900, 63% of the industrial work force was composed of women, in 1960 the figure stood 33.8% were women, however only 19.8% of their positions were considered permanent. Much of the work which women are involved in is part time. Many women work in a "Kagayo" house hold business. A Kagyo can range from wing or typing to owning a farm or fishing. By engaging in a Kagyo a wife can attempt to balance the responsibilities of being a Japanese wife with the desire or need to work. A Kagyo also offers more opportunities for a women.⁸

The field of education was one area where women were able to make large in roads in terms of employment. The teachers Union ensured that women would receive equal pay for equal work, as well as an ensuring continued access to work after marriage or child birth. In 1970 women hold 50% of the jobs in elementary schools, 25% in junior schools, and 40% in junior colleges.

In 1980 men filled 98% of the positions for elementary school principals, 99.8% of those in junior schools, and 97.5% in senior high schools.

The roles of the Japanese women in the interrelated areas of politics and consumer activism offer an interesting paradox. Women comprise a large voting bloc then men, yet the number of women elected to Diet (legislature) is pitifully small. Hundred and thousands of women belong to various organizations and engage in public demonstrations ranging from protests against airport noise, to boycotts of dangerous products. In spite of this women do not consider themselves politically active. In a 1975 poll only 16% of women felt that they were very interested in politics compared to 43% of men.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

In the end we can conclude that the status of women in Japanese society improved after the World War-II. Today's women continue to face the issues and challenges when it comes to job opportunities, career and family, today many Japanese women receive higher education and engage in the fields from humanities to engineering. These women occupy high level jobs as doctors, architects and lawyers. For the first time in history that Japan has allowed her women to know and enjoy their human rights.

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