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Sexuality, Gender and Social Scripting in Japan and China

Vivien Ng[†]

The other day on "Marketplace," a nationally-syndicated program on WNYC Radio, there was a segment called "Debunking the Myths About Japan" anchored by the journalist Y Kan. My ears perked up when Kan announced in her no-nonsense way, "There is one myth about Japan that I take pleasure in debunking: there is the common belief that in Japan, women are subservient and second-class citizens. *Not true*. In Japan, women wield tremendous power. They control household pursestrings" Every feminist fiber in me went on full alert. She continued, "While it is true that many women in the workplace are considered 'office flowers,' women now make up 40% of the workforce . . . So, things are changing in Japan for women." A myth about women may have been debunked, but I question the reality or the desirability of the new myths.

Americans still do not know much about Japan and Japanese culture. Myths and misconceptions abound, and the most guilty perpetrators are the media. The media do not try deliberately to misinform the public; rather, all too often, in their sincere attempts to inform, they unwittingly create new myths and perpetuate old ones. For example, in the *Time* Fall 1990 Special Issue on Women, there is a story written by Kumiko Makihara about Japanese women entitled: "Who Needs Equality? Not Japanese Women, if it Means Leading the Dreary Lives of Their Men."¹

Makihara tells us that the Japanese press seized upon the opportunity to rave about the dawning of *Onna no Jidai* (the Era of Women), but alas, one year later, it appears that enthusiasts of *Onna no Jidai* have spoken too soon. "While a 1985 law bans sex discrimination and requires Japanese companies to offer females the same opportunities available to males, few women choose to apply for career-track jobs. Most opt to work as assistants to men . . . Typically, a woman will leave her job after the birth of her first child and later resume a part-time career or pursue hobbies or community work."² Thus, "[t]hough Japanese women are among the best-educated in the world, they are

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1. Kumiko Makihara, *Who Needs Equality? Not Japanese Women, if it Means Leading the Dreary Lives of Their Men*, *TIME*, Fall 1990 Special Issue on Women, at 35, 36.

2. *Id.*

by Western standards, second-class citizens in their own country. Traditional values discourage women from appearing outspoken or independent-minded and demoralize those who try to climb the political or business hierarchies."³ Makihara asks rhetorically, "Why, then, aren't Japanese women angry? Why aren't they marching *en masse* for equality? Why didn't they stoke the spark of *Onna no Jidai*?"⁴ According to Makihara, the explanation for this behavior lies in the fact that most educated young Japanese women regard their male peers as "dull corporate drones"; thus, the idea of achieving equality with them is not an appealing one. Instead, the women relish the prospect of having more free time than men to cultivate their own interests.

Evidence of the social scripting of gender roles is found in the cartoon printed in the middle of the *Time* story.⁵ The caption reads: "*Sweet Spot Celebrates Female Fun.*" (*Sweet Spot* is a best-selling comic-book series that pokes fun at workaholic men and salutes the leisurely attitudes of young female workers). The cartoon has four frames. In the first frame, we see four obviously happy women. One of them is swinging a golf club, another reading *Racing News* while listening to her Walkman, and the other two heading for Hawaii. "Yea!" they say. In stark contrast, the second frame is occupied by a legion of bespectacled, gray flannel-suited men, looking very humorless and determined, with sweat on their brows. In the background is a jungle of high-rise buildings and the words "Work . . . Work . . ." In the third frame, a happy woman says, "We women play golf, go to spas, buy designer clothes, hit the discos . . . and work." In the fourth frame, we see on the left more men at work, telephoning, studying documents, toiling away at the computer terminal, all looking very harried. On the right are women in their OL ("Office Lady") uniforms. The implication is that these women are at the office, but instead of really working, one of them is polishing her golf club, another is reading the ubiquitous *Racing News*, and a third is day-dreaming about Hawaii. In the foreground, we have an obviously confused foreign correspondent reporting, "Here in Japan, it's hard to tell who's boss!!" How many Japanese women are being "scripted" to believe that they are really better off than men? How many readers of *Time* have been misled by the colorful cartoon, commissioned by *Time* itself, and the headline, "Who needs equality?"

Whereas the cartoonist celebrates pleasure-seeking as a modern feminine virtue and "scripts" it into the popular culture, other Japanese see the same behavior as a modern feminine vice, detrimental to Japan's fertility rate. In November 1990, the Japanese newspaper conglomerate Asahi Shimbun (Asahi News) co-sponsored a symposium entitled *Meeting the 2020 Challenge at*

3. *Id.*

4. *Id.*

5. *Id.*

which the banner headline read *The Time to Rectify Society and Family*.⁶ The news report raised several interesting points relating to the principal challenge facing Japan's social planners, the nation's declining fertility rates. These are especially worrisome because of the nation's already growing elderly population.

One expert, Kono Shigemi, suggested that the fertility rate's decline, which started in 1975, was attributable to the fact that women have more higher education and employment opportunities and consequently opt for late marriage or no marriage at all. "What picture of married life do women have nowadays?" he asked. The prospect of a joyless conjugal life with a workaholic husband/master and the responsibility of putting children through the so-called examination-hell—in other words, of being an "education mama"—is not one relished by modern women. Hence, he said, we have the so-called "women's rebellion" or "marriage strike." Symposium participants believed that for Japan to meet the so-called 2020 Challenge, Japanese society must work toward making marriage and family life more attractive for women. Welfare Minister Tsushima, for example, suggested that a combination of measures be employed: men must be educated to take up more household and childrearing responsibilities, and businesses must accommodate the child care needs of working women of child-bearing age.⁷

Policies embraced by mainstream Japanese policy-makers and public opinion shapers that are designed to address the declining fertility rate are limited, however, only to those which further the traditional woman's role of motherhood. A February 17, 1991 *New York Times* front page story reported that the Japanese government has launched an initiative to combat the nation's declining birth rate. As reported by Steven Weisman, the centerpiece of the government's campaign is a "reward" of 5,000 yen (\$38) a month for each child of preschool age and twice that for a third child. Understandably, many Japanese women have been angered by this "baby bonus." For example, Rie Fujinishi, a 29 year-old homemaker, said, "I really have to laugh. The Government's thinking is so simplistic. They figure if they pay a little money, the mother will have another baby, just like a machine. I won't be influenced by it. My freedom is more important than 5,000 yen."⁸

At the 2020 symposium, discussions about transforming the workplace for women centered around maternity leave and on-site child care facilities, while the climate for working women who are not mothers or mothers-to-be was not addressed. Sexual harassment is one issue that was not discussed. A couple of years ago, a women's group organized a one day phone-in opportunity for women to talk about sexual harassment in the workplace. The response

6. *Syakai to nitei minaosu toki* [*The Time to Rectify Society and Family*], ASAHI SHINBUN, Nov. 5, 1990, at 16, 17.

7. *Id.* at 17.

8. Steven R. Weisman, *In a Crowded Japan, a Bonus for Babies Angers Women*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 17, 1991, at A1.

overwhelmed even the organizers themselves. They had not expected the avalanche of phone calls that came from all over Japan. Also unexpected was a 1.1 million yen award granted by the Shizuoka prefectural court to a woman for a sexual harassment suit against her former employer.⁹ The Japanese consciousness regarding sexual harassment has certainly been raised, but the results are mixed. Judging from the number of articles in male-oriented magazines on the subject, *seki hara* has become a buzzword in Japan, and the mass media have capitalized on it by publicizing sensationalized accounts of sexual harassment in the workplace. This media-created public awareness has engendered a backlash of sorts. For example, in the last couple of years, a new kind of bar has emerged where male patrons get to "harass" the hostesses, since they supposedly cannot do it to their female co-workers at the office.¹⁰

Japanese men are bombarded with mixed messages. For example, while the *Asahi Shimbun* advances the idea that men ought to share more household and childrearing responsibilities with their wives, mental-health experts are at the same time speaking about a new male affliction: *kitaku kyofu sho*, or "fear of returning home syndrome."¹¹ One supposed reason for this is the decline of the father's status in contemporary Japan. There has also been a proliferation of magazine articles, intended for male readers, that exploit men's fear of creeping feminism. In these articles, men are being portrayed as an "endangered species." These anxieties are cleverly exploited by a popular television commercial for an insecticide spray: a man wakes up one day to find that he has turned into a cockroach. The ad warns housewives, "If you see a large cockroach, it might be your husband. Please check before you exterminate."¹²

My litmus test for a feminist victory in Japan is when discussions about sexuality no longer assume the universality and inevitability of heterosexuality. The kind of love addressed in the explosion of publications in Japan is heterosexual and the purpose of such discussions is to enhance the heterosexual institution of marriage. Comics are an example of social scripting designed to reinforce heterosexuality for women and girls. While I am waiting for the appearance of a best-selling comic-book series for teenage girls that features Japanese-looking lesbians as heroines and heart-throbs, there are already a number of comics on the market for adolescent girls with overt homoerotic themes. The heroes in these comics, however, are foreign-looking males. Some people may argue that these characters actually look androgynous, but there is no denying the fact that they are male characters. Some young Japanese women with whom I have spoken told me that they found the comic stories

9. *Sekuhara saibande otoko go shiharau 1,100,000 Yen no koi* [Sexual Harassment: 1.1 million yen award], SHUKAN SHINCHO, Jan. 17, 1991, at 24.

10. Personal communication with Jennifer Robertson, Associate Professor of Anthropology, University of Michigan.

11. Makihara, *supra* note 1, at 35.

12. Makihara, *supra* note 1, at 35.

“very romantic,” but they did not see themselves in these comic-strip romances. Instead of potentially subverting the institution of compulsory heterosexuality, these comics in fact serve the purpose of distancing female readers from homoerotic feelings because these feelings are acted out with male protagonists. Unless the readers identify with men, it is difficult for them to relate to the love depicted in the stories; and if they do become so identified, since their love object is male, not female, the “love” between them now has been transformed from homosexual to heterosexual.

China shares Japan’s social scripting of traditional gender roles although Japan and China are two very different societies and cultures. Since the Communist Revolution in 1949, many Chinese, especially those within the government, are fond of using the expression “women hold up half the sky” to describe the status of women in China. The China Civil Code guarantees equal rights parallel to the Japanese law banning sex discrimination. But equality for women in China is as much of a myth as the assertion that Japanese women are first-class citizens in their own country.

In Japan, middle-class women can afford to stay out of the workforce, while in China such an option is not available to women, nor any adult for that matter. So, while the Japanese are just beginning to address the issues of more generous maternity leave and on-site childcare facilities, China has long ago implemented such initiatives. China indeed has a generous maternity leave policy. However, the notion that fathers too can take time off to take care of newborn infants is still very alien to them. Also, in the wake of so-called economic reforms, previously state-subsidized but now-privatized industries in China are now beginning to resort to prolonged maternity leaves to effect *de facto* layoffs of female workers in an effort to cut production costs and pare down the payroll.

The main struggle in China for reproductive choice is against forced abortions. As a feminist, I find the one-child policy objectionable. First and foremost, the policy denies a woman reproductive choice. Moreover, by subjecting married women of child-bearing age to intrusive questioning about menstruation and contraceptive practices by co-workers and neighborhood grannies, the government has resurrected the old attitude that defines a woman by her reproductive capacity. The post-Revolution construction of “woman as model worker,” an asexual being, has given way to that of woman as a dangerously fecund threat to China’s economic security.

The recent crackdown in China on sexually-explicit literature reflects the puritanical attitude of the ruling regime, but we must not blame the sexual repression entirely on Chinese Communism. Fear of sexual desire is not a latter-day phenomenon in China. For example, in a 1923 publication for teenage boys, I came across a 9-step method to kill sexy thoughts. The first step read: Conjure up in your mind a newly-deceased body. Say to yourself, this body lying there has absolutely no feelings; my own body, so lustful for

money and sex, will soon become likewise. The second step read: think of the same corpse, now one to seven days old, purple and green all over. Very horrifying. Say to yourself, this body of mine, so lustful for sex, will soon become likewise.¹³ There is no need to continue. Discussions about sex in China today remain circumspect, and some subjects are taboo. One Chinese student who is currently enrolled at an American university told me that in one of her first Chinese history classes at the university the students were assigned Adrienne Rich's compulsory heterosexuality essay. At the time she felt that her professor was trying to impose on Chinese culture a Western and totally alien sexual construct because she was convinced that there were no lesbians in China. She later changed her mind about homosexuality in Chinese culture after reading my article.¹⁴

The social scripting to accept conventional male definitions of femininity and appropriate feminine behavior is another example of the lack of liberation from traditional gender roles and expectations in China. Honig and Hershatter state:

Beauty had thus become a socially approved concern for women of all ages by the mid-1980s. The cultivation of an attractive appearance was regarded by many as an assertion of personal identity that had been impermissible during the Cultural Revolution. Women enthusiastically made use of the freedom to adorn themselves, sometimes describing their new modes of dress as an explicit attack on "feudal" notions of behavior that required women to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible. But the movement toward gender-specific adornment reestablished old values even while seeming to reject them. The idea that a woman should "look like a woman," not strive for unisex appearance, was part of the reassertion of gender as a natural and valued division in society.¹⁵

The yardstick I use to judge women's liberation from traditional expectations in China is the long-cherished (since early 20th Century) ideal of self-determination, especially with respect to love and marriage. I will use as an illustration *Love Must Not Be Forgotten*, a collection of one novella and six short stories by Zhang Jie, one of China's most gifted writers. In my 1989 review of this work I stated:

Almost a century after the launching of the New Culture Movement in the late 1910s, and decades after the establishment of the People's

13. JIATING BAOPA [PRECIOUS INSTRUCTIONS FOR FAMILY LIFE] 4a-4b (1923).

14. See Vivien Ng, *Homosexuality and the State in Late Imperial China*, in *HIDDEN FROM HISTORY: RECLAIMING THE GAY AND LESBIAN PAST* 76-89 (Martha Vicinus & George Chauncey, Jr. eds., 1989).

15. EMILY HONIG & GAIL HERSHATTER, *PERSONAL VOICES: CHINESE WOMEN IN THE 1980s* 47 (1988).

Republic of China in 1949, traditional attitudes and customs maintain a tenacious hold on Chinese society. The rule remains that everyone marries; and obligation, rather than romantic love, continues to be the reason for marriage and the glue that binds a couple together

Zhang Jie writes primarily about women, not simply because she is a feminist, but because women's experience in China is the stuff of tragedy. A woman who attempts to buck tradition and challenge the role assigned her by society usually finds herself at best misunderstood and, at worst, ostracized by her community

One cannot help, however, but ask: Was the victory worth it? Was it victory in the first place?¹⁶

Women in Japan and China are not free from traditional gender roles despite vigorous public discourse and legal equality. The social scripting in both cultures reinforces traditional maternal and heterosexual images for women, and offers little in terms of new behaviors and expectations.

16. Vivien Ng, *Love Must Not Be Forgotten*, NSW JOURNAL, Spring 1989, at 536 (book review).

