

CHAPTER III

THE CHANGING ROLE OF JAPANESE WOMEN

The life conditions of Japanese women have been less visible and less subject to systematic examination than men's in the literature of Japanese studies until recently, though slightly over half of the Japanese population are women. According to Yoshio Sugimoto in *An Introduction To Japanese Society*, gender has been an important principle of stratification throughout Japanese history, but the cultural elaboration of gender differences has varied over time and among different social classes. The rise of feminism outside and inside Japan, however, has sensitized observers to gender stratification in Japanese society and directed their attention to a wide range of questions (2001:136).

According to Edwin O. Reischauer in *The Japanese Today*, in the twelfth century, women could inherit property in their own names and manage it by themselves. Later, under feudal governments, the status of women declined. Peasant women continued to have de facto freedom of movement and decision-making power, but upper-class women's lives were subject to the patrilineal and patriarchal ideology supported by the government as part of its efforts at social control. With early industrialization, young women participated in factory work under exploitive and unhealthy working conditions without gaining personal autonomy. In the Meiji period, industrialization and urbanization lessened the authority of fathers and husbands, but at the same time the Meiji Civil Code denied women legal rights and subjugated them to the will of household heads.

Peasant women were less affected by the institutionalization of this trend, but it gradually spread even to remote areas. In the 1930s and 1940s, the government encouraged the formation of women's associations, applauded high fertility, and regarded motherhood as a patriotic duty to the Japanese Empire. 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 (1977: 176).

Japanese society has been formed from many influences, among the most important are Confucianism, Buddhism, and Samurai based feudalism. Confucianism emphasized the supreme position of the male, and a hierarchical power structure for society. 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 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 the woman in Japanese society. These three institutions were all highly discriminatory towards women. Subsequently, however, Confucian philosophy and the long feudal experience combined to restrict the freedom of women and force them into complete subordination to men. Confucianism stressed the preeminence of men over women that a woman is to obey her father as daughter, her husband as wife, and her son as aged mother (<http://www2.gol.com>).

According to Mikiso Hane in *Modern Japan: A Historical Perspective*, 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 (1986:36). 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." (*ibid*, 35)

Women living under the Tokugawa Shogunate (1602-1868), as the government of Japan was known, did not exist legally. Women could learn to write only hiragana, and thus were prevented from reading political and business transactions 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 Matthew 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 for the previous four hundred years (<http://www2.gol.com>)

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

“umeyo fuyaseyo” - produce more babies and increase the population (Reischauer, 176).

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, 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. 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 population. At the end of the war 7,190,000 men were serving in the armed forces. With millions of men removed from industry, women found themselves working in coal mines, 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 sometimes triple duty (<http://www2.gol.com>).

After World War II, the legal position of women was redefined by the occupation authorities, who included an equal rights clause in the 1947 Constitution and the revised Civil Code of 1948. Individual rights were given

precedence over obligation to family. Women as well as men were guaranteed the right to choose spouses and occupations, to inherit and own property in their own names, to initiate divorce, and to retain custody of their children. Women were given the right to vote in 1946. Other postwar reforms opened education institutions to women and required that women receive equal pay for equal work. In 1986 the Equal Employment Opportunity Law took effect. Legally, few barriers to women's equal participation in the life of society remain (Reischauer, 183).

According to Sharon L. Sievers, *Flowers in Salt*, in the commercial sector the labor provided by women became the key to the country's economic success (1983:57). According to Dorothy Robins-Mowry in *The Hidden Sun: Women of Modern Japan*, 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 accounted for 63% of the industrial labor 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 virtual prisoners (1983:36).

According to Sonya Blank Salamon's *In the Intimate Arena: Japanese Women and their Families*, 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 toward 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 marriages, "Many young women acknowledge that they took paid employment mostly in order to find a husband on their own" (1980: 56). In spite of this and other influences a 1982 figure showed that almost 40% of marriages were still arranged (Christopher, 62). According to Takashi Koyama in *The Changing Social Position of Women in Japan*, this figure is however half the size of a 1955 poll which showed that almost 81% of marriages were arranged. 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, albeit in a somewhat passive-aggressive framework (1961:47). Women have sought more personal satisfaction from their lives in the past few decades. According to James Trager in *Letters from Sachiko: A Japanese Women's View of Life in the Land of the Economic Miracle*, during their pre-marital lives women constitute an almost free-wheeling segment of Japanese society. A survey of new brides reported that only 12% expected their marriage to be happy. There is an old Japanese saying, "*Kekkon wa josei no hakaba de oru*" which translates as "marriage is a women's grave" (1982:167). Robert C. Christopher in his book *The Japanese Mind*, 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.” 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 (1983:63). Japanese women, however, must be careful to maintain themselves within acceptable social standards otherwise she will not be wanted as a bride. A woman who drifts past thirty and remains unmarried will become the topic of gossip and comment, the assumption being that there must be something wrong with her to explain her marital status. Once married a 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. It must be remembered that a short one hundred years ago the attitude towards women was that “She (women) has five blemishes in her nature. She is disobedient, inclined to anger, slanderous, envious, and stupid. In everything she must submit to her husband” (Sievers, 5). By the 1980’s the role of women had changed, “the typical Japanese household is a disguised matriarchy and a rather thinly disguised one at that” (Christopher, 64). 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. 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. For whatever reason, women in Japan seem to have an almost contemptible attitude towards their husband's abilities (*ibid*, 68). Japanese women commented that "...the middle class wife in Japan regards her husband as if he were the oldest son, who must be respected, but who is not fit to handle delicate matters". Fifty years ago these statements would have gone unspoken. The fact that women speak about their husbands in this manner shows that they no longer consider themselves subservient. Women's feelings of equality, if not superiority, are starting to come into the public view (*ibid*, 66).

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 (Trager, 77).

The role of women in Japanese society will continue to evolve. Having already achieved a dominant role in issues involving the household it will only be a matter of time till women start acquiring public power. This process is being accelerated by a declining birthrate; families can now expect to have 1.7 children. Japan increasingly will be forced to turn to women to fill job vacancies (Christopher, 64)

The current generations of Japanese women are in some ways victims of the past, trapped by the conflicting poles of old and new. This conflict is clearly shown by a woman trying to come to terms with her position in Japanese society, she is a housewife and worker which generates more income than her husbands salary. It is not usual, and it is a sign that things are changing at least in the way some men regard women (Trager, 130).

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS