

## JAPANESE GENDER RELATIONS

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**Introduction** Japanese society emerged largely independent of other societies in East Asia even though it developed more than a thousand years after Chinese civilization had. It was in the enviable position of being aware of how society was structured and what had worked on the mainland, but was largely free from military coercion. Because of its geographic position as a set of islands on the edge of the vast Pacific Ocean, the Japanese were free to pick and choose what elements of culture to borrow and what to discard as unsuitable. As a result, Japanese society often resembled elements of northeast Asian culture, but was distinctive in its own ways. For example, Japanese elites in the Nara Period (710-794) adopted a number of Tang Dynasty government and social structures, but adapted them to meet the needs of a small, largely rural system struggling to establish itself. Japanese society has therefore been closely linked to its neighbors on the mainland, but has always maintained its own identity. In particular, Japan's martial heritage (the samurai), and the extent to which it dominated society for almost a millennium, has no continental analogue.

### PREHISTORY—The Neolithic Age (10,000-2000 BCE)

**Gender and Social Relationships.** For most of the neolithic period people lived in small groups where many if not most social relationships were based on some level of kinship ties. Fathers, mothers, uncles, aunts, cousins, in-laws, and other extended family were all a part of any given group--which was likely a patriarchy. When groups got larger and small villages emerged, family ties were still paramount. Daughters were likely married out but sons likely were not. Women were pregnant for many if not most of their childbearing years and often died in childbirth. Men hunted, fished and fought, and suffered injury and death from those activities. Though likely, it is not known whether serial monogamy was practiced in mating partners. Boys learned life skills from older men in the group and girls learned from older women. To the extent possible, families cared for the old and infirm, although few would have survived into their dotage. The struggle to survive in an age where disease, injury and unexpected death were constant companions even for the young and healthy provides context for social relationships. It indicates that flexibility and utilitarianism must surely have governed most of humanity. Orphans must have been adopted, widows remarried and wanderers taken in.

### IRON AGE (1000 BCE-500 CE)

**Gender.** In iron age Japan, gender roles were well established. Family units were dominated by a patriarchy and women were rarely allowed to participate in public life. Non-aristocratic women were expected to bear a son who would eventually become head of household and pass on the family name. This was her foremost duty. Still, peasant women worked alongside their husband in the rice paddies during the labor intensive planting and harvesting season. As the Yamatai state began to emerge in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries CE, men went to fight, kill and be killed, thereby leaving many women the total responsibility for subsistence and family life for longer periods of time. Of course, social convention often did not (and still does not) apply to aristocratic women, some of whom emerged to become prominent figures in society. For example, the Chinese sources tell us that a woman—Pimiko—emerged to rule the earliest state. She was succeeded by another woman—Iyo.

### POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD (500 CE-1500 CE)

**Gender Roles.** Both peasant men and women worked hard or didn't live long. Women were generally keepers of home and hearth. Their primary job was to gather and prepare food, and men worked the fields and rice paddies. However, it should be noted that during planting and harvest seasons, both genders and all age groups could be found in the paddies. Indeed, religious festivals grew up around women transplanting rice into flooded paddies. Men sometimes hunted and trapped animals if they had access to forests and other lands. Village life revolved around family and the village headman. He was the intermediary between government officials who set rice (tax) quotas and the peasants. His job was to

collect the tax, keep the peace and settle disputes before they came to the attention of officials above the village level. It is believed that spouses were selected by parents and girls in particular were married at a very young age. If sufficiently nourished, women spent most of their adult lives pregnant or nursing and could expect to lose a significant number of their offspring to injury or illness in childhood.

Aristocratic society was highly ritualized and refined in the Heian period (794-1185). Virtually all lived in the city of Heian. Men were head of household, generally well educated and earned a living. Women were a part of public life mostly insofar as they were objects of desire and/or wooing by men or vice versa. Many aristocratic women were literate (at least partially) and free to attend parties and poetry exhibitions but could not expect to rise to positions of leadership outside of their homes—and no woman has become emperor or shogun since the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Aristocratic men were expected to marry for politics and take second wives, concubines or mistresses for love. Women, however, could only be married to one man at a time. Principal wives were expected to remain faithful during childbearing years. Divorce, however, was acceptable and remarriage legal for both genders. Aristocratic women lived in a society which glamorized the taking of lovers and were largely free to participate. Both genders controlled who they had affairs with and could spurn a potential lover or suitor at will.

## **EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1500-1800 CE)**

**Gender.** Gender roles were well defined by the early modern period. The chaos of the Warring States period (1467-1600) which had undermined customary roles for both genders gave way to more traditional patterns after the Tokugawa seized power. In general, peasant women took care of the home and family and worked in the rice paddies during the labor intensive times of sowing and harvesting. Peasant men worked the fields and did other heavy labor. Both took their turn caring for children once they were old enough to provide labor. As might be expected, men of the samurai class practiced the martial arts, learned to read and write and many later became government bureaucrats. Women of the samurai class were expected to bear children, particularly boy children, and to look after them until the age of ten or so. Marriages were arranged by family members or matchmakers for virtually all classes of society. Women played no role in public life.

### **The 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY**

**Gender.** Gender roles had not changed much from the early modern period to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, political chaos had loosened some social conventions among the samurai and peasantry. However, traditional roles still largely held sway. Peasant women had responsibility for home and family and peasant men worked the rice paddies and did other heavy labor. After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the new elites decided to investigate gender roles in western nations and some women (particularly in the large cities) began to experiment with western dress and patterns of behavior. This lasted until late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but was ultimately not accepted by most of society. It should be noted that men also experimented with western attire and patterns of behavior. However, both men and women briefly returned to traditional roles by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until rapid industrialization began the transformation of gender expectations.

### **EARLY 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY (1900-1950)**

**Gender.** Industrialization disrupted traditional gender roles in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Women by the millions moved into the cities and went to work in the factories. Most female workers were between the ages of 18 and 30 and were not married. Indeed, many women wanted to work for a few years, save money and then return to the rural areas to marry and have children. Factory owners preferred women to men because they could pay them less. However, during the time they worked in the cities, they existed outside the social control of their families. This liberated women while they lived in the urban environment and to a certain extent after they returned to their villages. They returned with different expectations for their role in society and were more assertive than before. Men who worked in urban factories were similarly affected but the transition was not as great. Of course, during the many wars of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, men were conscripted by the millions and shipped to various parts of the country and the world. Those who returned were profoundly affected by their experiences. Many became lifelong pacifists and came to abhor violence in a way that their samurai ancestors would not have understood or appreciated.

These experiences helped redefine masculinity and femininity in Japanese society as the final war came to a close in 1945.

### **Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century (1950-1999)**

**New Freedoms.** The militarism of the war-time years gave way to occupation and then to a fully-functioning open, democratic society as Japan moved into the 1950s. During the occupation, Japanese still did not enjoy most of the freedoms they now take for granted. Occupation officials placed restrictions on freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, freedom to live where one pleases, freedom to travel; implemented price controls, rationing of food and all consumer goods, and the like. This means that Japanese society had endured some form of authoritarian control from the early 1930s until the early 1950s. As might be expected, in the last 24 months of the occupation, social unrest became a real concern for SCAP (Supreme Command of the Allied Powers) officials. It appeared that Japanese had begun to internalize the teachings of SCAP officials on the importance of openness in the public sphere. Finally, the occupation came to an end with the signing of the Treaty of San Francisco in 1952 and the Japanese were back in control of their own destiny.

The devastation of the war, however, was so great that Japanese were most interested in economic recovery and growth. In general, Japanese worked extremely long hours, sacrificed and saved money for the future. They spent very little on consumer goods, lived in small houses or tiny apartments and hoped for stability and a return to normality.

**Gender.** After the war and occupation, women were freed from formal social restrictions, but nonetheless mostly returned to traditional roles in society. The main breadwinner in the home was to be the husband. Women would often enter the work force as recent graduates but would resign when they married and started a family. As a result, Japanese society came to resemble a patriarchy, at least in the public sphere. When women married, they often moved into a multi-family dwelling where they were expected to care for their husband's parents as well as their own husband and children. Mothers-in-law, who were supposed to give up many of their household duties when a daughter-in-law moved into the home, often refused to step back and let someone else run the household. This caused a great deal of stress in the family then and is occasionally still a problem. In contemporary Japan, women have more freedom of choice. They can still enter the work force and increasingly are not expected to give up their careers when they marry. Still, a sizable number of women exit the workforce to care for their families.

### **Readings**

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- 4) Stephen Vlastos, *Peasant Protests and Uprisings in Tokugawa Japan*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
- 5) John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*, (W.W. Norton & Company, 2000).
- 6) Herbert Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2000).