

The secret joy of being a Japanese woman (no, really) | The Japan Times

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Western societies have long viewed Japan as a heavily 父権社会 (*fuken shakai*, patriarchal society), often 封建的 (*hōkenteki*, feudal) and hugely discriminatory against women. No arguments there.

One of the first things American women balk at is the amount of housework the average Japanese 主婦 (*shufu*, woman of the house) is expected to do — without a car, outsourced help or even any appreciation from her family. “How can you stand it?” wailed my friend Emily from Boston as I bent over a sink full of dinner dishes. (Emily’s arguments with her husband largely revolved around whose turn it was to stack their gorgeous energy-efficient dishwasher.) “Where’s your self-respect?”

女だから (*Onna dakara*, “Because this is what women are”) is a refrain I heard from childhood, spoken about my mother and female relatives, and later about myself, by way of explanation for the tremendous amount of 家事 (*kaji*, household chores) that fall on a woman’s shoulders, whether she happens to have a job or not.

On the other hand, in her book “Japanese Women Don’t Get Old or Fat,” Naomi Moriyama points out that working in and around the house, cycling everywhere instead of driving and caring for children and the elderly all keep the average Japanese woman alert and fit well into her 70s. And as much as we might hate to admit it, this is also true. When I got my first gym membership, there was much

eye-rolling among my female family members, who all told me with varying degrees of concern and sarcasm that I should 貯金をして床を拭きなさい (*Chokin o shite yuka o fukinasai*, “Save your money, get down on your knees and wipe the floor”) instead of paying someone for the privilege of moving about. I should add that these women were rarely sick or ever needed to go on a diet.

Yes, some components of Japan’s misogynistic 差別 (*sabetsu*, discrimination) society actually worked in favor of the Japanese woman. She could hone her social skills by dealing with the difficult and demanding men in the family. She picked up home remedies passed on from her mother and knew how to keep medical costs down. She learned about money from an early age, since household finances have traditionally been managed by women. It’s second nature for her to live frugally and sustainably, while her counterparts in the U.S., for example, are just discovering the virtues of those two concepts. She has always had low expectations when it came to men and marriage, preferring the world of fiction, manga and porn (which was sold door to door during the Edo Period) to indulge in fantasies of love and sex. Let’s not forget that 紫式部 (*Murasaki Shikibu*, Lady Murasaki) penned 源氏物語 (“*Genji Monogatari*,” “The Tale of Genji”) 1,000 years ago — even then, Japanese women who needed their dreamboat fix were a sizable market.

More recently, in the late 20th century, my grandmother (then in her early 70s) used to do some pretty elegant stuff in her spare time. She enjoyed her cigarettes, and was the first adult I knew who spoke aloud such poetic phrases as たばこをくゆらす (*Tabako o kuyurasu*, “Let the cigarette smoke seep into the air”). She listened to Edith Piaf records on a Victor stereo and had a favorite sushi place in the neighborhood where she would occasionally go alone for a small にぎり (*nigiri*, plate of sushi) and a single 徳利 (*tokkuri*, bottle of sake).

She would always read before going to sleep, and the little reading light by her futon represented both a sanctuary and a precious sliver of privacy. Watching her, I never felt that the Japanese woman was a 被害者 (*higaisha*, victim) of this

supposedly terrible society — rather, I marveled at the way my grandmother and many of the older women in the neighborhood seemed liberated from modern adult problems.

It was the men I pitied. My father and grandfather and all the salarymen I rode with in the 通勤電車 (*tsūkin densha*, commuter train) on my way to school. They had the haunted look of the 仕事漬けのサラリーマン (*shigotozuke no sarariiman*, work-drenched salaryman), exhausted and worried. Sure, they could count on a beer after work and a rare treat of 週末ゴルフ (*shūmatsu gorufu*, weekend golf), but otherwise, Japanese men seemed to get the short end of the stick.

Now more than ever, the 日本の男 (*Nippon no otoko*, Japanese male) is in a tough spot. Within 20 years, 1 out of 3 men are slated to be 生涯独身 (*shōgai dokushin*, lifelong singles), according to the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research. Nearly half of the workforce is now in 非正規雇用 (*hiseiki koyō*, irregular employment), and without having 正社員 (*seishain*, official employee) status, Japanese men lack the confidence (and income) to even look for a girlfriend.

The truth of this patriarchal society could be that it provides a lot more wiggle room for women and leaves the men precious little in terms of loopholes or options.

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