



## Commentary

“The Japanese Woman” behind the Princess and the Philosopher

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Thank you, Jan and Julia, for the two fascinating presentations. For me, a sociologist who mainly does fieldwork and interviews, the intertextual methodologies you use are tremendously intriguing. The two papers, through very careful readings of a variety of texts, show how discursive construction affects the realities we live, especially when gender is the focal matter. Now I cannot help but wish that I were sitting in the audience, appreciating this inspiring research and curious to hear what the discussants have to say.

I know this is rather unconventional but let me introduce myself and my research by reflecting on some of my past misconduct as a researcher. I teach at Tsuda University, a women’s university, and I find lecturing on gender issues in all-woman classrooms to be a joy; I can always talk to my students woman-to-woman, not bothering to care how men would interpret or misinterpret what I say.

A few weeks ago, just before the 10-day Golden Week<sup>1</sup>, I was speaking about the time when I met the Empress Michiko and Emperor Akihito—I was a recipient of a Japan-Hawaii scholarship that commemorates their honeymoon in Hawaii. I was talking about how thick the palace’s carpet was, how good the tea tasted, and how soft the Empress’s hand felt when I shook it; it was just an easy way to shake up the sleepy students right after their lunch.

Then I realized, while speaking, there could have been a *zainichi* student, someone of Korean, Chinese or Taiwanese background whose great grandparents, perhaps, migrated—or were forced to migrate—to imperial Japan during the colonial era. She couldn’t be enjoying

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<sup>1</sup> To celebrate the ascension of the new emperor on May 1, 2019, the Japanese government approved a one-time change to the spring holiday known as Golden Week, extending it from one week to ten days (April 27 through May 6).

my silly story like the other students. My smile disappeared as I suddenly tensed up. How could I have been so insensitive? I hurriedly added how ambivalent I felt actually about the extended Golden Week as the underlying reason seemed to neglect the dark history of Japanese imperialism. I cannot forget my students' puzzled facial expressions. One moment Kitamura-sensei was so happily bragging, and the next, she turned serious and started to mumble with all those big words that obscured their understanding. Yes, teaching at a women's university is great and fun, but I should bear in my mind that those women students are not all from the same background.

I have embarrassed myself like this many times. Back in the early 2000s, I was studying in Hawaii as a graduate student. My research was on Japanese women living in Hawaii, and how they encountered and negotiated stereotypes regarding Japanese women. I wanted to interview as many Japanese women as possible, and my snowball sampling was going pretty well. One day, someone I had interviewed suggested that I contact Ms. X, to whom I sent a friendly email requesting her participation in my research. She wrote back, saying that she didn't think she was the right person for me to talk to. I wrote back to assure her there was no "right" or "wrong" person, any stories would be of great interest to me. Then Ms. X replied, rejecting me once again, "There are things people don't want to talk about in their lives, although it may be hard to imagine for a Todai student like you."

I was a doctoral student at the University of Tokyo at that time, a fact that she had learned from our mutual acquaintance. Again, I got all flustered. I had naively assumed that people would open up to me because I too was a Japanese woman living in Hawaii. I had had little doubt that we would share our experiences and feelings, Japanese woman to Japanese woman. Ms. X's email shattered this false assumption. We Japanese women are not the same. The category of the Japanese woman includes socioeconomic diversity along with racial, ethnic, and many other differences.

My research has since focused on how we *cannot* speak of "the Japanese woman"—I call it an impossible ethnography. Still, as I said, I sometimes catch myself deeply buried in this "Japanese woman" mystique—imagining that my classroom is filled with the same "Japanese women." This is a personal, as well as academic, struggle.

Obviously, I specialize in neither history nor literature, and thus am in no position to comment on Jan's and Julia's work from the perspective of an expert in their fields. Instead, please indulge me and allow me to share my thoughts drawing inspiration from Jan's and Julia's papers. Specifically, I would like to focus on those Japanese women hovering in the backgrounds of Princess Michiko and Simone de Beauvoir's celebrity, so to speak.

Juxtaposing Jan's and Julia's studies, it is striking to me how Japanese women at the time seem to have celebrated two women of opposite types. On the one hand, Japanese women in the 1950s went crazy over the imperial wedding, casting a romantic hope for the modern

family that, to borrow Jan's words, "naturalized heteronormativity, fertility and race privilege." On the other hand, almost concurrently, Japanese women idolized one of the most avantgarde icons of un-femininity, Simone de Beauvoir, in their own personal pursuit of equality and liberation. In Julia's words:

Encouraged by parents, teachers, and the mass media of the 1960s to desire romantic love, but to channel those impulses into marriage and motherhood, the notion of openly pursuing love and sex outside of restrictive marriage conventions seems to have appealed to Japanese women as liberating.

The two media sensations were, come to think of it, in stark contrast to each other.

One might be led to ask: Did the first-generation of post-war Japanese women yearn to be a Princess-Michiko-like devoted wife/mother, or did they dream to be free from all those patriarchal expectations, like Beauvoir's stories embodied? Did Japanese women want to comply with the state ideology, or did they want to resist it?

In fact, this either-or style question is, while tempting, a trick question. Considering that there have always been diversity and disparity among Japanese women, it is only natural that different women lived different realities, looking up to different icons and dreaming different dreams.

Let me complicate the picture a little more with reference to *Haruko's World*, Gail Bernstein's canonical ethnography of life in a Japanese rural village in the 1970s. The main research subject was Haruko, a self-proclaimed "typical Japanese farm woman." She was 42 years old in 1974, which makes her a contemporary of the Japanese women that appear in Jan's and Julia's papers. Even as Haruko was in charge of housework, she also was the family's chief farm worker: she managed her own rice paddies and grew fruits and vegetables that the family consumed daily. She took up miscellaneous part-time jobs that were available in her community and participated in social functions with farming husbands in the village. Still, she considered herself a "housewife."

A further twist surfaces when Haruko confides to Bernstein:

"If I had my choice," Haruko said, "I would rather spend every day knitting sweaters for the children and straightening up the house."<sup>2</sup>

In response, Bernstein writes:

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<sup>2</sup> Gail Lee Bernstein, *Haruko's World: A Japanese Farm Woman and Her Community* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1983), pp.85-6

For the Japanese farm woman, the idea of women's liberation, if it means anything at all, means freedom from the economic uncertainties and physical drudgery of farming, more time to spend cooking, cleaning, and sewing, and the opportunity to help the children with their homework.<sup>3</sup>

Apparently, for Haruko the “good wife, wise mother” image was an unattainable dream. She was different from the Princess-Michiko admirer who could actually afford to pursue the bourgeois ideology of My Home-ism, and from the Beauvoir fans, those urban, middle-class, educated women who had the luxury to question and abandon such an idea. Curiously, however, it can be said that Haruko embodied a sort of “unfeminine” life in her rural village, working side by side with men and enjoying independence and freedom of her own—*à la* Beauvoir—without thinking about it in such terms herself.

What we can begin to see developing here is a wide range of economic, regional and educational backgrounds among postwar Japanese women. Some, with economic and cultural capital, would have molded themselves into the Princess-Michiko-like good wife, wise mother. Others, who fervently followed Beauvoir's feminism, including the female writers that Julia discussed today, would have used their privileged social positions to dream beyond the state ideology. Yet others, like Haruko—and my own grandmothers in Kagawa and Shiga—, lived a reality that could not be further apart from the urban, middle-class femininity that was promoted by the government or resisted by Beauvoir. The socioeconomic and ideopolitical differences—and divisions—were immense.

I would venture to point to many other—or Other-ed—women living under the shadow of the “good wife, wise mother” image: Japan's racial, ethnic, linguistic, and sexual minorities as well as *Buraku* women, women with disabilities, the list goes on. Let us be reminded that *ūman ribu*—and generally second-wave feminism around the world—is said to have failed to address this diversity and disparity among women. In Setsu Shigematsu's words, “the ways in which Japanese feminists can focus on and often limit their concerns to gender issues is a result of a structure of ethnic and class privilege.”<sup>4</sup> Not only is the category of the “Japanese woman” diverse, within it exist power, hierarchies, and even violence.

Such diversity—un-generalizability, un-categorizability—among Japanese women has been a source of conflict for feminism that continues to this day. Just recently, a public debate erupted over the trend (initiated by Ochadai) among some women's universities that are moving toward opening their doors to transgendered women. While many transgender

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.168

<sup>4</sup> Setsu Shigematsu, “Rethinking Japanese Feminism and the Lessons of *Ūman Ribu*: Toward a Praxis of Critical Transnational Feminism,” in Julia C. Bullock, Ayako Kano and James Welker, eds., *Rethinking Japanese Feminisms* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2018), p.217.

groups viewed this move positively—although, let us be cautious not to overgeneralize—, some self-proclaimed “twitter feminists,” especially some who have protested strongly against sexual violence, expressed their reservations. Some went so far as to say that they could not tolerate a (former) male body—regardless of the degree of transition—invading safe spaces for women. These heated debates are continuing today, even to the extent that mutual hostilities have culminated in verbal abuse—violence, indeed—among women.

Who are women/Japanese women? And more importantly, who are included in and excluded from the category when we speak so casually of women/Japanese women? To me, the two presentations together seem to highlight, from a historical perspective, the importance of this question at the core of feminism, and it would be great if we could take this occasion to exchange some thoughts on this long-standing question.