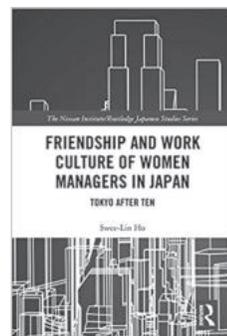


◆書評◆

Swee-Lin Ho

*Friendship and Work Culture of
Women Managers in Japan Tokyo After Ten*

(Routledge 2018, ISBN: 9781138099029, US\$155,50)



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For many years, Japan's government policies have planned for the structural improvement of women's employment and have set a quota system for female empowerment. By implementing female-friendly labor policies under the title "Womonomics" (Dalton 2017) the Japanese government is responding to concerns expressed by various international economic organizations such as the World Economic Forum, the International Monetary Fund and the OECD with regard to Japan's low gender equality scores. Obviously, Japan's workplaces and the wider society are still influenced by cultural traditions and conservative gender regimes.

The book under review provides a very detailed ethnographic account of how these traditions and gender regimes influence the lives and biographies of working women. The author is of Singaporean origin and lived in Tokyo as a corporate executive for an international company in the early 2000s. In this position she came into close contact with two female after-work

drinking groups of Japanese female managers and business women. What began as a privately fuelled curiosity about the situation of working women and after-work nightlife eventually became her graduate studies research. Given the scarcity of information in English on the lives of female white-collar workers in management positions in Japan, the study is highly appreciated for filling a gap in the literature and for providing a dense description of all aspects of the social world and cultural practices of this female demographic.

The first chapter deals with the social status of Japan's working women from an historical perspective. While in pre-war Japan women usually worked as members of family businesses, post-war Japan's gender regime has structurally discouraged women from taking up gainful employment. The social contract benefited those married couples that consisted of a male breadwinner and a female housemaker. Female jobs were mostly assigned as part-time, temporary or assisting non-

managerial work. Due to improved educational opportunities and growing labor demand the rate of regular female corporate workers significantly increased during the bubble era of the 1980s. Meanwhile ‘salaried women’ have become an indispensable asset for Japan’s corporations, but are still structurally disadvantaged in terms of payment, career prospects, job allocation and contract termination. Women who, against all odds, are able to find jobs in higher-ranking management positions, face greater challenges and struggle with cultural expectations of femininity that “engender women through their association with domesticity” (p. 35).

The remaining chapters undertake a detailed ethnography of the two female groups. Ho describes them as “leading exceptional lives” (p. 46). What make the women unique are both their positions as top senior executives as well as their status as married or divorced family women with children. Statistically, career women are usually single, and being a working mother in a demanding job in Japan is definitely one of the most challenging roles to tackle (Nishimura 2016). All of Ho’s informants define their work as their main source of identity. The main characteristic they ascribe to themselves is their being “children of the bubble” and the first generation of women who could choose a career while having children. The bubble era has brought about the nation’s most impressive economic achievements and a super affluent consumer society. Without a doubt, the “bubble identity” influences all

the groups’ after-work activities that are meticulously described by Ho. Drinking wine at special places is one of the groups’ main pursuits. Sometimes the book veers into a cultural history of alcoholic beverage consumption in Japan, which is no surprise, given the extremely high cultural worth that is ascribed to drinking liquor in this country. Alcohol consumption has traditionally been a male privilege of the higher classes, but during the Meiji era it also became associated with being modern and westernized. Meanwhile, female alcohol consumption, particularly beer drinking, has become common in Japan and is advertised regularly in television dramas for female audiences. But the drinking habits of the informants are exceptional and non-feminine, imitating to a certain degree masculine behavior. Not only is the amount of alcohol that is consumed extraordinarily high, but also the price that is sometimes paid for the products—such as US\$1,800 per bottle of French wine—is far above average. Ho analyzes the activities of these middle-aged urban professionals by applying Bourdieu’s theory of social distinction. Through the display of cultural capital, individual preferences and formulations of taste are turned into symbolic signs of social differentiation.

I appreciate the work’s coherent focus on cultural studies analysis, and due to its gender-sensitive approach the study is always well informed about the many ways social institutions and cultural traditions have an impact on the conflicting lives of women in Japan. It provides valuable

knowledge about how female professionals critically view themselves relative to others, how female economic resources are utilized to indicate social recognition and self-respect, and how career women encounter the loss of traditional gender

role models, even while new social models are not yet available to replace them. The range and scope of Ho's work makes it a valuable contribution to the academic study of working women's social worlds and cultural practices.

References:

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