

Flow of Gender Power and Identity: Western-trained Japanese Feminist and Australian Female Academician Meet Local Community Power Actors in Japan

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In this paper I analyze the discussion meeting between community power actors in a local community in Japan and Western-trained Japanese Feminist and Australian Female academician on the topic of gender identity and power. This discussion meeting was held when I conducted my fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation on the topic of identity and power relations from feminist theoretical perspectives in my hometown, and brought my Australian supervisor to the town.

The discussion revealed the difference between the way local actors had perceived the role divisions and power relations between the sexes according to the ‘tradition’ they claim, and the way these issues have been examined in the global feminist debate. I, who grew up in the community, and have had Western academic training, critically examine the way local actors are misled in their understanding of recent feminism issues as ‘Western influence’. I present the gap between the historical reality of Japanese women and the way local actors have perceived the transition of Japanese women as a result of Western influence. The emphasis put on the contrast between Japan versus West represents the way the transformation of Japan and women’s roles have been perceived in the context of Westernization and globalization.

I could organize the discussion meeting of community power actors, my supervisor, and myself on gender issues with the cooperation of the community power actors.

The purpose for this discussion meeting was to observe the power relations among community power actors and to elicit their view on gender roles.

It was an unprecedented event that a female researcher who belonged to a foreign academic institution requested community influentials to attend a discussion meeting with a foreign scholar for the purposes of her research. This discussion meeting was a site where the concept of gender held by the conservative community leaders was revealed in front of the Western scholar and Western-trained feminist researcher who had studied Japanese gender role from different perspectives. This site also entailed the complex power relations among men and women, and also in the polarity of Japan and West.

The discussion meeting had a delicate, political and sensitive meaning for the community powerful actors whose lives were deeply embedded in the community. Because participants were interrelated to each other in multiple ways in a complicated web of social relations in the community, diplomacy was required in their discourse. They were very careful not only in the way they spoke, but also what they said on the sensitive gender issues which are directly related to their everyday lives.

Participants in the Discussion Meeting

The female participants were Kaichô-san (the President of the YWA), Kanda-san¹ (the head of the Women's Seminar), Shimoda-san (the head of the B&S and the Women Drivers Group), Saeda-san (the President of the Ochihashiri Women's Association),

¹ Pseudonym is used. I gave names to participants in order to present the vivid scene of discussion of live people.

Toyoda-san (the vice-head of the Women's Division of the Municipal Council of Public Welfare Commissioners), Kawamoto-san (a member of the YWA), Matsushita-san (a member of the YWA), and Masuda-san (a junior college student). The male participants were Hirai-san (the head of the United Association of Self-governing Bodies), Takada-san (the head of the Social Welfare Council), Shigematsu-san (the head of the Cultural Groups Council), Umemoto-san (the head of the Council of Public Welfare Commissioners), Kaneda-san (the head of the Liaison Council of Protection and Guidance), Shirai-san (the head of the Association for the Elderly), and Harada-san (Director of the YCC).

Discussion: Sexual Division of Labor and Motherhood: Japanese Tradition?

First, I summarize the view of community power actors on gender roles, and later examine the actual roles of Japanese women in history. At the meeting, most of the male participants expressed their firm belief in the value of the sexual division of labor which they claimed as a Japanese tradition. They tried to emphasize, in the special opportunity facing the Western scholar, the significance of its preservation and their outcry for the change under what they call 'Western influence'. They had a clear-cut vision of 'Japanese tradition' – a woman's primary sphere was the domestic sphere whereas men's was the public sphere. Hirai-san said that while women were not interested in social and political issues in the wider society and did not read newspapers, men worked hard outside the home and were engaged in the social and political spheres. Based on these views of what they called 'tradition,' the male participants were concerned that the traditional value system, which was precious to them, had been degenerating in Japan under the Western influence in recent years.

Member of the older generation at the meeting, who had never questioned women's domestic roles, tended to harbor the misconception that women's participation in the public sphere was a phenomena which had been popularized quite recently, due to the campaign for equality between the sexes. They believed women's work outside home should be treated as secondary to the women's role at home. In other words, women should work outside home only when the family was in economic need. For them, the soundest way of living was a combination of men's productive roles to financially protect the family and women's contribution to the family within the household.

These negative views of women's engagement in work and other activities in the public sphere which were pursued in the name of equality were raised as a cause of social problems. Contrary to the fact that women's work in the public sphere had different significance for different classes at different times as I present later, these male members attributed the cause of social problems among children to the deterioration in motherhood roles caused by women's participation in the public sphere in the name of 'equality.' Male participants questioned equality as a concept which liberated women in a false way, because it undermined women's mission as mothers and wives at home.

I noted that the participants tended to raise the 'Japanese tradition' in their argument of preserving sexual division of labor. By claiming that sexual division of labor was a Japanese tradition in contrast with the situation in Western countries, the male participants felt that this Japanese custom needed to be protected. The discourse of both males and females in Yosugi showed their belief that motherhood and family were precious values uniquely embedded in Japanese culture and not concepts valued

in Western culture.² Umemoto-san suggested that although the division of labor in Japan was being transformed into a form similar to that of the U.S. and Europe, the time would soon come for Japanese to reexamine the division of labor of both sexes in the household and in society. For older generations, the influence of the West, and especially the United States, was a major cause of deterioration of motherhood roles in Japan.

For these male participants the sexual division of labor between the sexes in the family and society is a cultural framework that confirms identity and meaning of their lives. These male participants even appeared to be proud of their gendered identity which they believed was uniquely constructed in Japaneseness. The Japanese male participants in the meeting responded to the women who did not fit into their paradigm of the 'traditional women' by showing admiration for one kind of woman, who had only existed in a limited historical time, but was labeled by them as "traditional." These male participants used "history as a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion"³ in advocating the maintenance of Japanese women's virtues which they claimed to be traditional.

What should be noted is that historically in Japan women were not necessarily valued as mothers, but valued as wives, daughters-in-law, and also workers in family business and public sphere and actively engaged in productive roles, depending on the time in history and on their social class. Imamura (1996: 1) says Gail Bernstein's

² See also Chizuko Ueno, 'The position of Japanese Women Reconsidered', *Current Anthropology*, 28:4 August-October (1987), p.82.

³ Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, New York, and Oakleigh: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 12.

Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945 shatters the stereotypes of Japanese women, such as the idea that Japanese motherhood has been the primary role of women throughout history, that women did not work outside the home, and that women's struggle to combine domestic roles and economic independence in the public sphere emerged only after World War II.⁴ Uno (1991:40), one of the contributors to Bernstein's book, observes, "Japanese conceptions of womanhood as motherhood and of childhood as a lengthy period of economic dependence are social constructs that emerged in modern times."⁵

Furthermore, Uno argues, research on the division of reproductive labor in Tokugawa and early Meiji households signifies the pitfalls in the perspective that motherhood is women's universal and natural destiny. Fathers' contribution to child rearing in preindustrial Japanese households of all classes has been overlooked and this contribution needs to be reconsidered (Uno: 1991: 30).⁶ In the early modern enterprise households in urban and rural areas, men, children, and women participated in domestic work – cleaning, cooking, and child care as well as productive work (Kathleen Uno, 1993, p.39).⁷ It should be noted that before 1890s when school enrolment rates steadily arose, children were not dependants but were contributors of labour and income to the household (ibid p.58).⁸

⁴ Anne E. Imamura, 'Introduction', in Anne E. Imamura (Ed), *Re-imagining Japanese Women* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1996), p.1.

⁵ Kathleen Uno, 'Women and Changes in the Household Division of Labor' in Gail L. Bernstein (Ed), *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), p.40.

⁶ Ibid., p.30.

⁷ Kathleen Uno, "One Day at a Time: Work and Domestic Activities of Urban Lower-class Women in Early Twentieth-century Japan" in Janet Hunter (Ed), *Japanese Women Working* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p.39.

⁸ Ibid.

There is a total lack of awareness that the household was an economic unit of production, and of the reality that both the family business and its reproductive functions took place with the cooperation of all family members (Bernstein: 1991:3).⁹ Janet Hunter (1993: 6) also points out that in pre-industrial economies the boundary between ‘work’ and domestic responsibilities was not clear.¹⁰ Further, until the beginning of the fourteenth century Japan was a matriarchal society. Common women, belonging to classes which engaged in farming, fishing, and commerce which comprised eighty percent of the population throughout premodern times, enjoyed freedom, equality, and power, by working equally alongside men.

In the process of modernization in the Meiji era (1868-1912) the rigid class distinctions of samurai, peasant, artisan, and merchant were officially abolished, and as a result, women lost the power and equality they had enjoyed in their producer/worker status within the social classes (Iwao: 1993: 5).¹¹ Uno (1993: 37) also noted that the social basis of polarization of women’s work and domestic lives caused by separation of workplace and home which emerged during the industrialization of modern period.¹² Thus, the diversity of Japanese women’s lives should be noted more.

⁹ Gail Bernstein, ‘Introduction’, in Gail L. Bernstein (Ed), *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), p.3.

¹⁰ Janet Hunter, ‘Introduction’ in Janet Hunter (Ed), *Japanese Women Working* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p.6.

¹¹ Sumiko Iwao. *The Japanese Woman: Traditional Image and Changing Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), p.5.

¹² Uno, “One Day at a Time’, p.37.

Uno (1993: 41) noticed the engagement of piecework (*naishoku*) by many urban lower-class wives in early twentieth century.¹³ These works of manufacturing, assembly, finishing goods at home were attractive form of employment to poor women because of its time flexibility and no requirement of special vocational skills.¹⁴ Further, it was advantageous to employers for its lower labor costs and hiring flexibility.¹⁵ Furthermore, Uno's attempt to research the lives of working women of the urban lower classes – female pieceworkers, entrepreneurs, family workers, and employees is intriguing. She attempts to bridge the dichotomised view on modern Japanese women – middle-class women's domestic life and public activities versus urban lower-class women as workers and labor activities in public world.

Uno further finds that urban poor women of the pre-war era engaged in variety of occupations.¹⁶ Additionally, women's contribution to Japan's industrialization should never be forgotten. Female workers in the textile mills occupied for more than one third of the whole industrial labor force around 1910.¹⁷ Mathias further contends that Japanese women played significant role in many other occupations such as coal mines. Women accounted for more than half of the labor force in industry and mining in 1909.¹⁸

Thus, the motherhood which male participants presented as tradition of Japan totally lacks awareness of diversity of Japanese women's lives in different class in different

¹³ Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁴ Ibid. Uno referred to Tokyo-shi Shakaikyoku (Saitama-ken Gakumubu Shakaika, 1926), pp. 44-47.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Uno, "One Day at a Time", p.43.

¹⁷ Regine Mathias, 'Female Labour in the Japanese Coal-mining Industry', in Janet Hunter (Ed), *Japanese Women Working* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p.98.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.101.

times. For example, in the Tokugawa period, women's primary obligation was not child rearing. It should be noted that women were "valued as workers, wives, and especially daughters-in-law, not solely as mothers," and women's occupations were differentiated by class.¹⁹ Confucian doctrine preached that women were morally unsuited for child rearing and it discouraged the active engagement of young mothers in the rearing of their own children.²⁰

During the early stages of Japanese industrialization "employed mothers worked hard for their children – not at caring for them on a daily basis, but at earning income for their food, clothing and shelter".²¹ As pieceworkers, self-employed, unpaid family workers, or workers in a factory, lower class working mother spent little time with children at home. However, these mothers significantly took care of the welfare of the children and household by their engagement in low-paying occupations.²² Unlike the concept of motherhood which late-nineteenth-century feminists in the West defined as the "fundamental defining experience of womanhood"²³, child rearing was not the "fundamental determining experience of womanhood" for Japanese women.²⁴

It should be noted that the definition of womanhood gained legitimacy in motherhood for the first time in Meiji period. The new project of remaking the Japanese women as part of the modernization process in Meiji period is reflected in the slogan 'Good

¹⁹ Bernstein, 'Introduction', pp.4-7.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Uno, "One Day at a Time", p.57.

²² Ibid.

²³ Bernstein, 'Introduction', p.3. She referred to Linda Gordon, 'What's New in Women's History,' in Teresa de Lauretis (Ed), *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp.26-27.

²⁴ Ibid.

Wife, Wise Mother' (*ryōsai kenbo*). Just as the new Meiji state dissolved the four classes of Tokugawa society, the differentiation of women according to class in the premodern period was replaced by this powerful state propaganda which was applied to all women.²⁵ The state aimed for formal education of all women for the purpose of better service in home duties and child rearing. Besides, the new administration also promoted "modesty, courage, frugality, literacy, hard work, and productivity".²⁶ But as Nolte and Hastings warn, the ideology of "Good Wife, Wife mother" is not identical with the domestication of women which is often extolled by older generations as a Japanese tradition.²⁷ Not all women in the Meiji era were expected to devote themselves solely to housework and child rearing. For example, middle- and upper class women engaged in charitable and patriotic activities, while lower-class women worked outside the home for economic reasons.

These male participants always put 'mothers' first before 'wives' in their phrase "mothers and wives." This connoted their attachment of special meaning to 'Japanese motherhood.' They still held the view of 'sacred mother' promoted during World War II. In the Showa period (1926-1989), the ideal mother was the 'mother of the nation' in the state propaganda which was aimed at preserving the family system. This conceptualization paralleled the role of males fighting the sacred war (World War II) for the Japanese family state. Under the war women were given social recognition as mothers in carrying on the mission to protect the home front (*jūgo*) and give birth to children for the state in order to preserve the family system as a unit of

²⁵ See also p.16.

²⁶ Bernstein, 'Introduction', p.7.

²⁷ Nolte and Hastings, 'The Meiji State's Policy toward Women, 1890-1910', in Gail L. Bernstein (Ed), *Recreating Japanese Women*, pp.151-174.

the Japanese family-state. During World War II, women were expected to undertake the double burden of reproductive roles and productive roles to support the war.²⁸

Kano points out that this motherhood ideology continued in the postwar period. He argues that in the postwar period motherhood was promoted by the state in order to fully utilize men's labor force for the development of the country.²⁹

These male participants held firm views on the separate roles of the sexes, depending on the positions in the household. For example, the role of the eldest son as a representative of the household was still emphasized. Umemoto-san expressed his criticism of the irresponsibility of some of the eldest sons in Yosugi who left home and evaded the responsibility of taking care of their parents. He argued that this is the reason why some women remained in Yosugi after their marriage, and ended up taking responsibility for the care of their parents which is, normally the responsibility of the eldest son and his wife. Umemoto-san argued that the eldest son in a family had to be responsible for the continuation of household by taking care of the parents. His strong views on household composition supported the concept that a woman married into her husband's family and contributed as a daughter-in-law towards the continuation of her husband's household. He lamented over the lack of awareness of preserving the household system shown in recent public debates on allowing separate

²⁸ Yoshiko Miyake, 'Doubling Expectations: Motherhood and Women's Factory Work Under State Management in Japan in the 1930s and 1940s' in Gail L. Bernstein (Ed), *Recreating Japanese Women*, p. 269. Molony argues that female factory workers in Japan during the 1920s and 1930s constructed their identity and self-confidence as 'workers' rather than as wives and daughters. Sensitivity and gracefulness were not the most important virtues preached for women at that time. See also Barbara Molony, 'Activism among Women in the Taishō Cotton Textile Industry', in Gail L. Bernstein (Ed), *Recreating Japanese Women*, p.237.

²⁹ Masanao Kano, *Fujin/Josei/Onna: Joseishi no Toi* [Lady/Woman/Female: Question of Women's History] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1993), pp. 107-113.

last names for a husband and wife. This indicated his strong belief in the fulfillment of gender roles in the household system.

Even though Shimoda-san had worked in the community as a female leader, she held conservative view towards women's success in prominent positions. She expressed surprise and admiration for women in leading positions in elementary and junior high schools in urban areas in Japan. Shimoda-san's statement showed that there was a gap in the views about gendered expectation between the urban areas and rural areas like Yosugi. She was struck by the fact that her daughter, who lived in an urban area, was surprised with the situation in Yosugi where the principals of the schools were still all males. Shimoda-san commented, "Since I am a person from the older generation, I still wonder whether a female principal can do a proper job as a principal." Shimoda-san admired the ability of some women to undertake significant roles in the society.

Kanda-san also expressed her hesitancy for women being assigned to positions with titles in local groups where both females and males belonged. Community conventions and the opinions of others have influenced women's reluctance to be prominent in unconventional practices by men. In Yosugi most of the positions with titles in local associations and groups were occupied by men, and women were hesitant to take up these positions. Kanda-san illustrated her husband's displeasure when she took up an assignment which placed her in the position of the vice-head of the self-governing body in her ward. Her husband was displeased with her prominence. Remembering the day when she replaced the male head in her ward who was unavailable on that day and attended the meeting of the self-governing bodies in

Yosugi, she described her embarrassment at being surrounded by all the other male heads. Kanda-san said, “men should be assigned as the head because women feel odd in that kind of environment.”

Males’ advocacy of women’s full utilization of domestic skills in support of men’s public roles is interesting. Rather than positively evaluating the variety of women’s ability and skills in the public sphere, men tended to appreciate utilization of women’s domestic skills in the public sphere which men could not easily imitate due to their lack of domestic experience. For example, Shigematsu-san and Umemoto-san praised women’s cooking skills and care of the elderly, and expressed a desire for their further development in the public sphere.

It is interesting to note that discussion about motherhood revealed the different stance between sexes on this issue. As I described above, while men tend to adhere to the concept of ‘tradition’ in discussing the women’s motherhood which they themselves never undertook, women tended to accept their motherhood as social expectation, although they were not quite satisfied with the role. Women were reluctant to express their difficulties in performing the mother’s role and the obstacles to pursuing their individual choices in life, but they were not necessarily satisfied with their motherhood role as expected by the male participants.

I noted that there was a discrepancy between socially expected gender role and the actual feeling of women in their role as mother. While male participants critically expressed their concern for the deterioration of motherhood and women’s responsibility at home, no female participants deplored motherhood. The women

simply accepted their role and developed confidence in it. Kawamoto-san said, “I believe there is no husband who helps in child-rearing.” Matsushita-san also told the group that while she did all the housework and child rearing, her husband worked outside. Saeda-san undertook the entire child rearing while she assisted her doctor husband in his hospital. In her opinion men had men’s roles, while women had women’s roles. These women implied that they fulfilled their roles as wives and mothers since the society expected them to do so, although they would not necessarily have done so of their own volition. While male participants held fixed ideal for women’s motherhood without questioning mothers’ actual feelings, women’s actual feeling did not follow it. This was partly because they had a sense of shame in expressing the reality which does not always comply with the ideal.

Allison’s research which challenges the generalization of the ‘education mother’ (*kyōiku mama*) syndrome by examining real mothers who were “expected and compelled to assist their children in adapting to school” is noteworthy.³⁰ The questions raised and examined by Allison are the following: “How do the school manage, shape, and monitor a woman’s behavior in her role as mother, and how do women experience the expectations placed on them by the school system and the educational demands of Japan’s super-competitively schooled society.”³¹ She highlights the school demands that mothers become involved early in their children’s educational agenda. Allison argues that the role of *kyōiku mama* is not generated solely by the mothers themselves, but rather, “it is a relationship between mothers,

³⁰ Ann Allison, ‘Producing Mothers’, in Anne E. Imamura (Ed), in *Re-imagining Japanese Women* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1996), p.152. Allison did a research on this issue about mothers in the context of a Buddhist nursery school in a middle-class Tokyo neighborhood in the late 1980s.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp.136-137.

children, and a school system that has been situated within the political and economic relations of Japan's postindustrial labor market".³²

This reality of relationship suggests that we need to re-examine women's real feelings in performing the motherhood role. Children, mothers, and also husbands are being programmed into suitable role divisions in capitalist society for its best productivity. Joy Hendry also points out the effect of housewifely role on the wider economy of the society. Housewives complete care of the domestic life allowed the men to totally dedicate themselves to work.³³ This phenomenon was pointed out by Zaretsky who noted the correlation between the rise of capitalism, and the phenomena of turning families into units of commodity production. When there are separate 'spheres' of involvement between the function of men and women in the public and private domain, the familial role of women is idealized and women are given a much higher status within the family.³⁴

We should note the warning of Long about the confusion between the 'ideal' and the 'reality' of women.³⁵ Further, Robertson suggests that "the life and work of individual Japanese girls and women at any particular time and place needs to be reclaimed from the space between the ideal and the real."³⁶ Robertson reminds us of the significance of an awareness of difference "between discourses on female-likeness

³² Ibid., p.152.

³³ Joy Hendry, 'The Role of the Professional Housewife', Janet Hunter (Ed), in *Japanese Women Working*, p.236.

³⁴ Eli Zaretsky, *Capitalism, the Family, and Personal Life* (London: Pluto Press, 1976), p.36.

³⁵ Susan O. Long, 'Nurturing and Femininity: The Ideal of Caregiving in Postwar Japan', in Anne E. Imamura (Ed), *Re-imagining Japanese Women* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1996), p.156.

³⁶ Jennifer Robertson, 'The Shingaku Woman: Straight from the Heart', in Gail L. Bernstein (Ed), *Recreating Japanese Women*, p.107.

and the actual experiences of real females.”³⁷ In the discussion no participant expressed a view appreciating an individual woman’s right to choose a way of living to fulfill her goals. This signified how strongly gender concepts affect both sexes and control their behavior and expressions. As Imamura notes, there is a difference between the societal expectation that women should give first priority to the home and the reality that not all women find their purpose in life within the family and furthermore that individual women may feel ambivalent about their roles as women.³⁸ This awareness of difference between the ‘ideal’ and ‘reality’ gives us a clue to analyze the real power and agency of women.

The Japanese cultural ideal of female nurturing³⁹ has served as a standard for Japanese women by which the male participants measure their behaviors regarding acceptance or rejection of ‘tradition.’ Many women in Yosugi also tended to regard nurturant behavior as an ideal and measured their level of ideal women based on how much they performed nurturing role. This created tension in women who were in between the ideal and their individual choices in their true self in both the domestic and public sphere. However, I argue, while the ideal may be nurturant behavior, reality entails women’s individual choices.

For example, wife’s conceptualization of her identity according to the ideal wife was shown in the way wives perceive husband’s cooperation with gratitude. A wife tended to show appreciation of a husband who, by showing understanding and

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Anne E. Imamura, *Urban Japanese Housewives: At Home and in the Community* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), p.18.

³⁹ Long points out that the important elements of nurturing in the Japanese cultural ideal are physical proximity, the maintenance of social harmony, and paying undivided attention to the needs of the other. See Long, ‘Nurturing and Femininity’, p.176.

cooperation, allowed her to work outside the home, as Takada-san pointed out. This showed the common tendency to define women's identity based on their domestic roles. Moreover, Shimoda-san described the change of her husband's attitudes towards her community activities. When she undertook work in the Parents and Teachers' Association (PTA) twenty years ago, there was not much support for women's work outside the home. She often had to go out at night, and her husband was displeased every time she left home. However, as time passed, he started showing more understanding. She expressed her gratitude towards her husband's understanding by saying, "I was receiving a favor from him as he let me go out (*dasasete itadaku*)." This signified her stance that her husband was doing her a favor by letting her do work outside home. Except for Kaichô-san, no participant questioned the view that women's primary domain was the domestic sphere.

Long argues that the Japanese cultural ideal of female nurturing is intimately connected with the sexual division of labor in capitalist society and the way needs for production and reproduction are organized. Long says that this ideal is neither accidental nor biologically determined.⁴⁰ Under this capitalist system, the nurturing role in the domestic sphere is reinforced, and women's roles come to focus primarily on taking care of their husbands and children at home. He further notes that in Japan, whenever women claim just treatment on any issue, they are expected to pursue it as a 'mother,' not as a 'woman.'⁴¹ This pinpoints the way these Japanese male participants viewed female roles.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.173.

⁴¹ Ibid. See also Tomoaki Iwai, 'The Madonna Boom: Women in the Japanese Diet', *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 19:1 (1993), pp. 110-112. For the details of motherhood during World War II, see Yoshiko Miyake, 'Doubling Expectations: Motherhood and Women's Factory Work under State Management in Japan in the 1930s and 1940s', in Gail L. Bernstein (Ed), *Recreating Japanese Women*, pp.267-295; Kano, *Fujin/Josei/Onna: Joseishi no Toi*.

Historically, depending on the needs of the time, women's ideal roles in both the public and private spheres were skillfully manipulated by the Japanese government policy. For example, in the 1960s, the government actively encouraged the participation of females in the work-force as part of its rapid economic growth strategy, and this was effective in dampening the public criticism of working mothers.⁴²

Umemoto-san argued that the victims of the equal rights movement and the Equal Employment Opportunity Law were children. He supported this view by remarking that children whose parents were busy with their work could not communicate enough with their parents. He also mentioned the parents' anxiety about their children while they were engaged in work and had to leave their children in somebody else's care. Rather than problematizing the current Japanese corporate system in which men are required by their employers to be fully engaged with their work in the public sphere, Umemoto-san only problematized women's participation in the public sphere. For him, the lack of opportunities for a father to cooperate in child rearing was not an issue; rather he raised issues such as the reduction in a mother's attention to her children. For those who held this almost ossified view of motherhood, men's assistance in reproductive labor was against 'Japanese tradition' as they perceived it. He only raised the issue of women's roles at home as mothers and wives and how women should balance these roles if they wanted to work outside the home.

⁴² Sandra Buckley, 'A Short History of the Feminist Movement in Japan', Joyce Gelb and Marian L. Palley (Eds), *Women of Japan and Korea: Continuity and Change* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), pp.154-155.

Furthermore, it should be noted that not just men's opinion but also women's eyes have contributed to creating female gendered identity in the community. Shirai-san's description of his wife's attitudes is evident that women's observations about each other's gender role made women over-conscious of their gender role performance and this increased pressure on women to conform to the expected gender role. He emphasized the mindset of both sexes of his generation who were educated to follow the ideology of 'predominance of men over women' (*danson johi*). When Shirai-san suggested that his wife take over his job with title in the community, she refused. Furthermore, when he suggested that he would help cleaning the river in the neighborhood, his wife asked him not to, since it was shameful for her to let him do the work which was reserved for a wife. His wife was anxious about other women's criticism that 'she treated her husband disrespectfully' (*teishu o somatsu ni shita*). I argue that the reason for women's undertaking expected gender roles was not necessarily because of their approval of men's predominance over women, but because it was necessary to follow the expected gender roles in the community in order to lead a harmonious life with other women.

'Japaneseness' has been raised by some Japanese feminists as a crucial element in the analysis of the system of sexual discrimination in Japan. Ogoshi, Minamoto, and Yamashita suggest that the most significant theme of Japanese feminism today is the dissolution of the Japanese cultural climate and Japanese identity in a practical sense, which have been examined only within the context of this monolithic entity,

“Japanese culture.” Thus, the crucial issue is that the established framework, the Japanese cultural context itself, is not challenged.⁴³

When tradition and Japaneseness are raised in the discussion of equality between the sexes, it functions as a bulwark against opposition. Japaneseness is often used to justify the authenticity of sexual division of labor, family values, and motherhood by anti-feminists. The attitude of male participants in my discussion group was identical with that of conservative scholars who tended to raise Japaneseness and harmony (*wa*), and to revere ‘Japan’ as different from other countries. For the conservative male participants, what they defined as ‘Japanese traditions’ and ‘culture’ were unquestionable paradigms that needed to be maintained, out of reverence to Japaneseness. Thus, identity conceptualization was closely correlated with what the participants claimed as ‘Japanese tradition.’ Male participants, who were in their sixties and seventies, had pride in what they claimed as Japanese tradition. They argued that motherhood in the modern Japanese family and household (*ie*) system were indispensable assets that Japan had maintained throughout its history. They deplored the deterioration of motherhood and the household system where children had been painstakingly taken care of by parents and grandparents.

The president of the Yosugi Women’s Association can be categorized as a unique figure as she alone showed awareness of the cooperation between the sexes in both the public and private spheres. The President of the Yosugi Women’s Association stated that whereas the work of both sexes was divided into different spheres in

⁴³ *Femirôgu: Nihon Shugi Hihan* [Femilogue: Criticism on Japaneseness], *Femirôgu no Kai* [Femilogue Association] (Ed), (Kyoto: *Genbunsha*, 1990), p.2.

society and at home, ‘a society in which both sexes cooperate and participate’ (*danjo kyôdô sankakugata shakai*) should be aimed at. The President of the Yosugi Women’s Association expressed a sense of mission in that the achievement of this goal would protect the country. Furthermore, The President of the Yosugi Women’s Association linked this to the social problems of the aging society which now meant that women needed to contribute to the labor force while fathers had to contribute to more child-rearing and care of the elderly.

Gender Traits: Japanese Women’s Virtue Versus Strength and Power

In the previous section I demonstrated that both male and female participants had the notion of gender traits and this strongly influenced their concept of gender roles. They often connected femininity with women’s domesticity and masculinity with the public sphere.

Umemoto-san also illustrated his stereotypical assumption about gender traits. He explained how there was a difference in the way students developed, depending on whether a male or a female teacher taught them. He argued that a female teacher would make a boy grow up to be a man with sensitivity, but the boy would not become a man who ‘did something recognized widely all over the world’ (*sekai o matani kakeru*). Further, growing up to be a ‘caring, affectionate, and sensitive’ (*kokoro yutakana*) child with instruction from female teachers was not enough to make his way in the world. He defined and generalized the traits attributed to female teachers based on his notion that women’s primary sphere was the domestic sphere. Further, his attention only to male students revealed his belief that male students were

to be attentively taken care of as the future holders of the most important roles in the society.

Male participants tended to lump together the ideal characteristics of all Japanese women as gentle, subservient, and prioritizing domestic duties. Whenever they used the phrase ‘tradition,’ it referred to the codified virtues of women of the samurai class in the feudal period or of upper class women during the Meiji period.

For example, whereas samurai women were advised to be modest, courageous, and frugal in the Tokugawa period, the women in farming areas led quite different lives in an environment where hard physical labor in the fields was required.⁴⁴ The official teachings concerning gender based on the Confucian ‘six virtues for women’: obedience, purity, goodwill, frugality, modesty, and diligence were followed only by the small minority of women in the upper classes, and the reality in the rest of society was different from the socially prescribed norms.⁴⁵ The new state ideology, which was articulated by the Education Ministry and the Home Ministry, replaced the premodern differentiation of women by class with policies that applied to all women. An ideal woman in Meiji would be, by combining the cardinal feminine virtues of the various Japanese classes, “modest, courageous, frugal, literate, hardworking, and productive”.⁴⁶ During the wartime, mothers were glorified, while female workers were exploited under the mobilization of the whole nation by the state. When the family became a public site where production, reproduction, and the state’s political

⁴⁴ Nolte and Hastings, ‘The Meiji State’s Policy toward Women, 1890-1910’, in Gail L. Bernstein (Ed), *Recreating Japanese Women*, p.171.

⁴⁵ Jennifer Robertson, ‘The Shingaku Woman: Straight from the Heart’, Gail L. Bernstein (Ed), *Recreating Japanese Women*, p.94.

⁴⁶ Nolte and Hastings, ‘The Meiji State’s Policy toward Women’, in Gail L. Bernstein (Ed), *Recreating Japanese Women*, p.163, and pp.171-172.

struggles were all conducted, what these male participants called ‘women’s virtues’ were not necessarily pursued, but rather they were altered or relinquished.

The discussion of the feminine traits of sensitivity (*kimekomakasa*), gentleness (*shitoyakasa*), elegance, tenderness, and subservience which these male participants raised as traditional virtues of Japanese women, often overlooked the historical fact that these virtues were appreciated only in limited historical times by limited classes.

Although Japanese women led different lives which varied depending on historical and class factors, ideological appeals to ‘tradition’ constructed the way women had to be. These beliefs in ‘the traditional Japanese women’ created an image about the authentic identity women should aim to construct, and these male participants were critical of women who did not fit into the ‘gentle, elegant, and sensitive’ model of ‘traditional women.’ Moreover, I noticed that not only men but also women constructed the image of an ideal woman based on an emphasis on tradition. This influenced the women’s own molding of their identities as women in Yosugi and also affected their judgement of other households and other women, as to the degree with which they satisfied this ideal image.

Women’s Strength and Power

I analyze the significance in distinguishing the perception of power and the actual power women have. This suggests that stereotypical gender traits and femininity⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Definitions of femininity as characterized by “weakness, passivity, dependence, emotionality, irrationality, subservience, the body and temptation” lead to the idea that the concept of ‘power’ does not fit with femininity. See Hilary M. Lips, *Women, Men and the Psychology of Power* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1981), p.15.

have to be reconsidered, and women's power exertion has to be examined more in its specific context. The interesting point is that while male participants reveal their observation of women's actual strength and aggressiveness, they also emphasized the Japanese women's traditional virtue as modest and subservient, and they cling to it as they criticize their belief in recent change.

Whereas they are trapped by the cultural essentialist idea on Japanese women as ideal, they themselves well acknowledge the actual strength of women of their own generation. It almost revealed that the cultural essentialism was presented in a fossilized way separately from the historical reality and their own actual observation. As feminism fell into the trap of cultural essentialism to acknowledge the difference of women,⁴⁸ these male participants ended up creating the culturally essentialized Japanese women by attempting to accentuate the difference between Japan and the West.

Male participants were well aware of the difference between women's domesticity and their strength. They observed and experienced wives' strength at home and accepted the reality of women. The participants illustrated their evidence that women in Yosugi often exercised power as wives over their husbands as a dominant figure in the household.

I found that the concepts of strength, courtesy, humility, submission, and role division interacted with one another in a convoluted way. I met people from both sexes who

⁴⁸ Uma Narayan, 'Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism', in Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding (Eds), *Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial, and Feminist World* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), p.98

expressed their opinions aggressively and boldly, yet the same people could be courteous and humble in a different context. It should be noted that a person showing humility and domesticity does not necessarily mean that the person is submissive. Even the trait of 'being strong' was observable in multiple contexts. I often heard from many people in Yosugi, including both sexes, the statement that "women in Yosugi are very strong." When a woman said it, it was often in reference to some other women, excluding herself. If she made this comment about herself, she treated herself as an exceptional woman who was 'like a man.' However, the strength that I observed in women in Yosugi was not unique to limited women but was common to many women. Furthermore, as I have discussed, the 'courageousness' of women was promoted in the Meiji state ideology and women actualised it while they were mobilized for the state cause. Women's strength is not an unusual trait.

I noticed that people often used the term 'like a man' (*otoko mitai*) to describe certain characteristics. However, careful observation of the people in the community made me question what it really meant to be 'like a man' or to be 'like a woman.' 'Being like a man' does not identify simply being frank and direct. I met many women who were frank and expressed their views without hesitation, and at the same time, I met men who were humble, introvert, and not frank. I argue that by obfuscating the fact that both sexes actually have multi-faceted characteristics, people tended to make judgments about one dimension of their traits based on the established and cultural definition of the traits of both sexes. This led to a woman's view of her traits as unsuitable for the 'real woman's identity' in the community, and created a lack of confidence and a sense of awkwardness in some situations. Furthermore, these gender constructions restricted women's expression of their actual personality and

traits. I argue there was a significant difference between women's views about the way their identity should be revealed in their presentation to others and their actual inner identity which they did not necessarily reveal openly.

When Kanda-san expressed her opposition to the view that 'women in Yosugi are very strong' by illustrating her experience of forced submission to men by her parents and in-laws, Hirai-san and Shigematsu-san countered this by describing how strong and manipulative women were in their actual experience. Hirai-san gave cases where wives declined after their husbands had agreed to extend cooperation to request from the community. For example, a husband agreed to the installation of an electric pole with speaker on their small portion of land, but his wife later refused. When Hirai-san, as the head of the YUASB, visited their house with a gift to express appreciation for their agreement, the wife refused the agreement even though her husband had already agreed to the plan. Hirai-san also told how the community could not construct a bypass road due to an alliance of several women who had opposed the road and had forced their husbands not to sign the form. Hirai-san said emphatically, "There are many cases like this in which things could not be processed because of opposition to our proposals from women's alliances." It is noteworthy that he is attributing the characteristics of these women to their gender, not to the characteristics of individuals who are aggressive and dominant. I noted men tended to have dichotomous view of ideal and reality of women whereas women tended to overlook the real characteristics of themselves of being influenced by the stereotypical perception of women's traits.

Shigematsu-san further added that his experience was similar to that of Hirai-san's. When he visited houses to collect donations, usually middle-aged men said, "I will

consult with my wife.” When men in their fifties or sixties suggested holding a reunion party, few men replied in the affirmative on the spot. Most of them wanted to ask their wives before they made a decision even if the party did not involve work for their wives. Shigematsu-san further illustrated his views on his wife’s skillful strategies to manage him. He described how, although his wife pretended to obey him, in reality, he was merely dancing on her palm and was actually obeying her. His comments summarized what many husbands pointed out about women’s cunningness in manipulation of men. The silence of women after hearing Shigematsu-san’s comments was, in one way, a sign of women’s acceptance of their exercise of power at home.

Among women, only the president of the Yosugi Women’s Association did not hesitate to emphasize women’s strength based on her belief that these traits are individuals’ issues, not because of gender. Regarding Shirai-san’s view that women had been constantly taught to obey men based on the Confucian teaching of women’s submission to men, the president of the Yosugi Women’s Association strongly opposed that view. When I inquired whether women in Yosugi generally followed men, The President of the Yosugi Women’s Association remarked, “I have not obeyed men!” Her own experience as a substantial leader of the community made her flatly deny women’s submission to men.

When I asked Masuda-san, born in 1977, whether she would feel pleasure in devoting herself to her husband, she replied in the negative. Her generation had been taught about equality between the sexes, and males and females had been given equal educational opportunities in school activities. She had not been implanted with the

idea that gender was a strong factor in influencing one's role. In response to my question whether the concept of 'paying due respect to men' (*otoko o tateru*) had been disappearing in Yosugi, Masuda-san answered that she did not deny that she had been influenced by this viewpoint since she had observed her parents practicing this in daily life. Regarding this point the president of the Yosugi Women's Association argued that the concept of '*tateru*' (pay due respect) and humility should be applied to any person, regardless of their sex. In her perspective having consideration and respect for others was a mutual courtesy, and not a matter of gender. For her, both sexes had to coexist, and equality between the sexes based on mutual respect was a fundamental concept.

Conclusion

Both sexes did not doubt that they had to play the culturally specified gender roles, but they held various views about women's 'power' and 'strength.' I observed one interesting contrast: some men revealed their observations of wives' dominance over husbands, whereas one woman aggressively expressed her belief in a wife's submission to her husband. Different views about women's power suggest that it is important to differentiate the perception of one's power and the actual possession of power in the analysis of power relations.

As the male participants were unaware of the different virtues and roles expected of Japanese women depending on their class and in different historical eras, they tended to view critically women who were not 'elegant, sensitive, and submissive' which

they claimed as universal virtues of Japanese women. The general belief, that throughout history, the ideal Japanese woman has been a sacred mother and a wife who had fulfilled her femininity through domesticity, made women active in the public sphere a target of criticism. Furthermore, this affected the construction of women's identities in the community since the prevalent belief has been working as a controlling force to form gender behavior in a local community. Community eyes constantly shaped women's identities in order to ensure that expected roles were played out in Yosugi.

People in Yosugi observed women's strength and their exercise of power over their husbands in their roles as mothers and wives. I argue that women's domesticity, as part of a sexual division of labor, does not necessarily imply women's lack of power. Japanese people are often ignorant of Japanese women's historical productive roles in public sphere and their contribution to family business. Most of Japanese do not have any opportunity to learn Japanese women's history in institutional educations, unless they are enrolled in women's studies courses which have recently started being set up in universities and local community centers. This has been a cause of the misunderstanding of 'Japanese women's traditional roles' and what it means to be a 'Japanese woman.'

As Gordon Mathews points out, it is not easy to define a particular culture at this era when there is a tension between 'particular national culture' and 'the global cultural supermarket' and 'there is so much diversity and interrelation within each different

society'.⁴⁹ Under these circumstances it is not easy to define 'Japanese identity'. Mathew contends on the significance of being aware of the earlier idea of culture as "the way of life of a people" and a more contemporary concept of culture as "the information and identities available from the global cultural supermarket".⁵⁰

Simply arguing about the Japanese culture and gender practice in a dichotomy of Japan versus West is too simplistic, and furthermore, this view totally lacks the awareness of what has been inherently 'Japanese'. It is not an easy task to divide the cultural factors into the ones affected by Western influence or the original Japanese factors in this fluid, global age when people can access any kind of information on internet and global network.

As Mathew argues, culture can be shaped by the state as opposed to by the market.⁵¹ Male participants tended to mix the Western cultural influence in consumer market with the Western influence on ideologies and philosophy in Japanese culture. It should be acknowledged that the changes inside Japan for its own state cause often tended to be criticized as a result of Western influence. Future research will be needed to understand the complex constitution of Japanese culture which entails many aspects such as material, consumption, media, belief, religion, gender, race, class, ethnicity, customs, and other invisible factors. These factors have all influenced "the

⁴⁹ Gordon Mathews, *Global Culture/Individual Identity: Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p.viii.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.1.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.viii.

way of life of a people”⁵² either by its own cause or under the influence of other cultures.

⁵² M. Herskovits defined ‘culture’ in this way. See M. Herskovits, *Man and His Works* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1948), p.29.

