

CHANGES IN THE STATUS OF JAPANESE WOMEN

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Nothing in this world is static, especially cultures. Arnold W. Green (1956) writes, "Culture and the social institutions which transmit culture to succeeding generations are themselves conservative forces. Nevertheless, the moral norms and social values, the culture and social institutions, of any society, all change through time." Thus, the statuses of women in various cultures change, due to factors both internal and external, and those of Japanese women present one of the most dramatic pictures of such changes.

Japanese society was deeply steeped in feudal culture until 1854 when Commodore Perry pried open the Japanese trading gate to the sharply contrasting, industrialized Western cultures without any shock-breaking intermediary period. In the case of western European and American (U.S.) cultures, the Renaissance, the individualistic doctrines of Protestantism, Romanticism, the political rationalization of the Enlightened period and, especially in the case of America, the economic frontier conditions helped to smooth out the straining transitional period from the feudal culture to the industrial and urban culture. Japan did not have all these benefits. She was forced by circumstances to catch up with Western culture, technologically and intellectually, in less than one hundred years, a transition which the West made in several centuries. This traumatic social change was due to the rapid industrialization and modernization under Western influence; it did not leave any aspect of Japanese culture unaffected. The status of Japanese women was affected directly and indirectly, and changed consciously and unconsciously during the westernization processes. The notable changes in the women's status since 1854 shall be presented.

In the dawn of Japanese history, approximately 2000 years ago, women seemed to have had esteemed positions. The "god" who started the "unbroken and divine" emperor line and whose grandson became the first emperor of Japan was a woman, according to a Japanese myth. There is no lack of incidences of ruling empresses in Japanese history. According to one source, one empress appeared before the time of the Norman conquest and the last one around the time of the American Revolution. A great amount of literary works was produced by women's pens. However, since the Confucian teachings and ethics were introduced by Achiki and Wani around the 3rd century AD, women began to be subordinated to men. Confucius says that women must obey their fathers when little, their husbands when married, and their elder sons when old. Women's status was a life-long submission to men. The neo-Confuciansim of the 12th and 13th centuries further strengthened this position.

As the feudal system had developed during the Kamakura period (1192-1339) and became stable under Tokugawa period (1600-1868), the throwing off of the yoke of subordinate status became more hopeless. Though the Tokugawa adhered to the Confucian teachings, the Confucians' cardinal principle of relationship—that of father-son—was distorted and one's loyalty to the feudal lord became the first concern. All privileges, power and fame were concentrated in the Samurai or the warrior. Honors were definitely associated with being Samurai and Samurai became the ideal of men. In the social organization which stressed and upheld the status of warrior, women tended to be mere servants for the needs of men. The feudal society, rooted in Confucian learning and Buddhism, regarded women as a source of necessary evil and only as a means for perpetuating the family line and name, and designated the most honorable place of women in the home as submissive wife and mother to the warrior. The double moral standard merci-

lessly punished women's adultery but let men have free sex adventures. Women could be divorced for just being jealous of a husband's sex excursions. The traditional saying that "It is shameful to be jealous," kept them calm and smiling.

After 1854, under the enlightened Emperor Meiji (1868-1911), the hasty modernization of the newly consolidated country was launched. The compulsory public education system was decreed by a Rescript of 1871 and the constitutional monarchy was adapted after the British model. A modern banking system was set up and large government subsidies helped to build the industries and commerce. The national transportation and communication were under government management. Power plants were installed by the government. While the technical transplanting was pursued with great eagerness and ease, the attitudinal aspect of culture lagged behind.

Laws governing interpersonal relationships and the rights of women in particular reflected the traditional treatment of women. In spite of the feminists' cry for emancipation of women (influenced by Rousseau's "natural rights of men"), Article 5 of the Peace Preservation Law prohibited women's attending political meetings or participating in political activities. Women could own property but control was in the hands of husbands. A widow could not inherit her husband's property. Adultery by women was punishable but by men was not. As a matter of fact the court ruled that men could keep concubines as long as they were discreet enough to keep them secret. The marriage laws were such that women were in precarious positions as to the loss of legitimacy of their marriages and even of their children.

During the 1920's, the women's movement for the betterment of women's lot reaped handsome results. This is only one of the evidences of the liberal and democratic trends of the time. After World War I, Japan enjoyed a tremendous economic prosperity. She actually profited from the war by selling war goods to the Allies and capturing the markets for cotton and silk goods in the Far East while the British were busy winning the war. Along with this economic prosperity, the democratic ideologies and liberal thinking became the vogue after the Wilsonian Democracy. It was during this period that labor parties, farmer parties, and labor unions began to gain strength. The political parties, such as the Social Mass Party, the Labor-Farmer Party, and the Workers' and Peasants' Party, cooperated with the Federation of Women Association which was established in 1923, in emancipating women politically and socially. It was during these liberal 1920's that Article 5 of the Peace Preservation Law was modified to give women the right to hold their own political meetings in 1922. When the League for Realization of Women's Suffrage was organized in 1924, the Women's Associations gained the support of the proletarian parties. They began to push the movement for women's suffrage, after seeing universal suffrage (men's) enacted in 1925.

Prior to the 1920's, women were badly exploited economically. There was wage discrimination against women teachers. The textile factory girls were virtual slaves to the factory owners who had contracts with the parents of these girls. Under the government policy of rapid industrialization, the farmers were ruinously taxed and were forced to send their teenage girls to town to earn some cash for tax money. The wages were too low; the working day was around 11 hours; the working conditions were dangerous to health and the dormitories factory owners provided were pitiful. It was not uncommon for women to work in the mines and there were no provisions for expectant mothers. No labor union for women workers was permitted, but a women's department of the men's All-Japan General Federation of Labor was organized in 1917 and served the supposed function for them. Occupational opportunities were limited. There were almost no women government officials appointed by the Emperor. There were no chairs for women in the government universities. The bar prevented women from becoming lawyers, until 1938 when for the first time a woman passed the examination.

And by 1938 there were only 14 women doctors of medicine, 4 women doctors of science, and 2 women doctors of agriculture. The 1920's again brought some correction of unfair economic treatments of women. In 1929, the Washington Labor Agreement motivated the government to pass a law to prevent night shifts for girls. The factory law of 1911 was revised in 1929 to give better protection, prenatal and postnatal, for expectant mothers. The International Labor Conference was instrumental in moving the Japanese government to forbid the entry of women into the mines. However, women still were not able to organize their own labor unions for economic benefits.

As in the 1930's the conservative militarists and landowners collaborated to gain political power, obliterating the liberal, democratic trends of the 1920's, the feminists' movement encountered more obstacles. The suffrage and civil rights bills were constantly defeated at the Imperial Diet sessions. Women's labor unions were out of the question. Even a Home Affairs Ministry sponsored-bill for abolishing prostitution was defeated in 1937. So frustrated, the feminists changed their tactics and began to muckrake the municipal administration level. The result was the exposure of the corruption in city government, especially in Tokyo.

At the same time the women's movement directed its effort to the protection of motherhood. As foreseen, there was little government opposition to this campaign. Under the ultra patriotic, militaristic government, there was a wide propaganda appeal for strong healthy children, preferably boys for the service of Emperor and country. By this time the militarists in power had launched the imperialistic expansion in Manchuria and China and needed strong mothers to produce strong, brave soldiers for their dream of world conquest. Tetsu Katayama (1938) says, "It seems that they are well advised to limit their activities to 'saving the poor mothers and protecting the poor children,' if they are to carry on any movement at all; for this is the time when, due to the tide of nationalism and the introduction of a semi-wartime system, not only has the question of women suffrage been completely submerged, but even parliamentary government itself is inevitably being impeded, though temporarily, in its unrestrained function." Meanwhile the League for the Protection of Motherhood under Waka Yamada was organized and finally in 1937 a Protection Law was passed by both houses of the Diet to support needy mothers and children. Even in the efforts for the protection of women workers, the main object was not to better the lot of working women per se, but to give adequate protection to mothers for the children's sake. This unproportional amount of attention given to motherhood is definitely in line with the dominant government policy of the expansionists and with the traditional view of women as a means for the perpetuation of the family line.

During the Japanese involvement in World War II, motherhood was further exalted. Mothers with many sons were rewarded and pictured in the newspapers. And as the shortage of man power was felt in the desperate days of the War, women were encouraged to plow the fields, to operate the machines in factories, and to fill in the vacant jobs left by men. Now women became the *yamato nadesiko*, meaning "the daughters of country," and as valuable as men for the war effort. Probably the increased economic opportunities and actual testing of the women's ability to carry out men's work helped to boost women's confidence in themselves and helped them to adjust easily to the democratic ideology of American military government after the War.

The American military government landed in the Japanese islands with the best intentions to reform the "belligerent delinquent" into a more peace-loving democratic country. The task required the remodeling of the old autocratic social system into the democratic one of American type. The occupation initiated the coeducational system in the secondary schools and colleges. Changes in the curriculum for the girls' secondary schools were introduced to insure that girls would get the same professional training as boys, for in the past girls in the

secondary school were trained only to become good homemakers. In 1946 women also were admitted for the first time into the Imperial University, and the length of compulsory education was expanded from 6 years to 9 years in 1947. Women were given suffrage and thirty-nine women were elected to the House of Representatives in 1946. New job opportunities opened. Women are now elected and hold government offices. Policewomen appeared on the scene. And even a mine strike was called by a woman union leader. Finally, prostitution was abolished in 1956; women are allowed to initiate separation proceedings against husbands and to get court-granted alimony under the new Civil Law; and women can inherit property. On the surface it seems that Japanese women are making great progress toward equal status with men, but more close examination reveals a less optimistic picture.

An attractive girl in fashionable Western dress walking arm in arm with her G.I. boy friend gives the misleading impression that Japanese women have finally reached the goal of domestic freedom. This girl represents only a minority. The women in rural areas and fishing villages have changed little in their attitude toward themselves and men. Being busy in the fields and on the beach all day long, these women do not have the leisure to be subject to all the new democratic propaganda and to think about their civil rights.

Some begin to doubt the advisability of the changes in the curriculum for the girls' secondary schools. After all, most of the girls end up in marriage and all the professional education is not so useful for homemaking. More often than not, women tend to vote as husbands bid them. There is still salary discrimination against women teachers and actually there is a trend to hire men more often than women. The return of men from overseas and the economic confusions of the postwar period created an acute shortage of employment. Recently, it was noted that about 65 percent of college graduates could find any employment. As yet there is no separate women's labor union organized. It is true that now women can inherit property from husbands but as the eldest son is born the property becomes his. It is still frequently practiced that parents make contracts with factory owners or the owners of tea houses for their daughters to work for a certain number of years. It is a fact that there is an increase in women's occupational opportunities but not enough to satisfy all the newly acquired needs for luxuries and freedom.

Some people think that, after Japan resumed governing its own affairs in 1952, there was a trend toward the old conservatism. Once awed by the democratic ideologies and General MacArthur, people began to pause before they followed blindly the American models. There was great relaxing of women's time-honored chastity after the War and American romantic love and freer divorce proceedings increased the divorce rates. It is easy for girls to appear in stylishly tailored dresses and to drive a car, but the age-old traditions, entrenched firmly in every nook of the culture, will not change overnight.

It should be pointed out that there is a tendency to over emphasize the effects of the American military government policies on the Japanese women's status. Actually, the change in the women's status away from the subordination toward the equalitarian status had started even before the two World Wars. The process was a slow and strenuous one and probably the democratic policies of American military government really accelerated the already existing trend toward the equal treatment of women in Japan. However, it would be safe to be a little conservative in estimating the postwar effects on the women's status.

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