Japanese Women in Male-dominant Careers: Cultural Barriers and Accommodations for Sex-role Transcendence

Japan is among those societies whose cultural ideology supports male dominance and a sharp sexual division of labor in the professional world. Japanese culture thus poses a barrier to women's career opportunities and generates strain for professionally committed women. This is amply documented by various studies of Japanese professional women (Okada, Okifuji, and Hagiwara 1967; Sekiguchi 1973; Dilatush 1976; Osako 1978). However, there are indications that part of that same androcentric tradition spills over into the female world to propel some women into career professions. It is this assumed double function of the culture with respect to women's professionalism that the present study intends to explore. Specifically, the paper describes how some salient aspects of Japanese culture can both constrain and enhance the career opportunity and commitment of Japanese women.

Career refers to an occupation involving: full-time commitment instead of transient or part-time engagement; long-range training, development and accumulation in expertise; reliance on the job as the major source of livelihood rather than its enjoyment as a hobby; and, despite the last point, identification with it over and beyond economic necessity. This definition is general enough to include both elite and non-elite professions, and does not discriminate between male occupations and female occupations, although such distinctions will become necessary as we go along.

The Japanese media display an exaggerated reaction to a series of appointments of the ‘first women’ to conspicuous public positions: ambassador, academic research institute director, train stationmaster, company executive, and the like. These appointments may suggest that a sex role revolution is under way, but they also attest to the long history of the male monopoly of elite professions. As of 1975, for example, women held only a modicum of upper positions in the national civil service (only one member of the 1,145 top-grade civil servants, only 0.4 per cent of the second grade and 0.7 per cent of the third grade, etc., in the eight grade system, were women); they comprised only 2.5 per cent of the lawyers, judges and prosecutors; 1.8 per cent of the engineers; 5.1 per cent of the research scientists; 15.6 per cent of...
The primary sample of women used in this study consists of ten currently active ‘career women’ who were contacted in 1978 in Tokyo, Yokohama, Osaka, and Kyoto. These women vary widely in their respective professions – higher education, law, government, business, and journalism; six are employed by national institutions, one by a private institution, and three are self-employed; ages range from 64 (about to retire) to 32 (still waiting for a full-fledged career appointment). Some are of national stature, while others are known only locally or within particular fields of specialization. These women were selected under consultation with my Japanese colleagues in various fields whose knowledge and judgment I trusted. The accidental nature and limited size of the sample are, I believe, somewhat compensated by its variation.

Over the years I have also interviewed many other women – professional and non-professional, elite and non-elite, urban and rural – to gather their life histories. Some of these women will be used as a secondary sample to supplement the primary one. Personal names (pseudonyms) are given to the primary sample women only. Ages are listed as of the time of the interviews, between 1976 and 1978.

SOCIALIZATION FOR DOMESTIC SUCCESSION

The first dimension considered is the domestic culture and family socialization that motivates a daughter toward a career. The traditional family system, centering around the ie, the stem-family household, first can be characterized genealogically, in terms of its transgenerational perpetuity under the rule of male primogeniture. Second, the ie, functionally defined, is a corporate body of coresidents, each performing his or her role to maintain it or promote its status. Combining these two, there emerges a domestic entity which transcends individual members of the family, as described by Befu (1962), Nakane (1967), Nakano (1968), Pelzel (1970), and many others.

As the name and status of the ie is carried on by a son or son-substitute (adopted son or daughter’s husband), the genealogical norm supports male superiority and male dominance. Sons are more likely than daughters to receive a higher education either to succeed to the house occupation or to enhance the house status by assuming a promising new career. A 49-year-old informant, after telling me how she was financially unable to go on to a girls’ high school because of her father’s death, went on to say that when her younger brother reached high school age the family moved to a city where a reputable prefectural boys’ high school was available – an extremely costly decision imposing sacrifices upon the whole family. While a poor family may pool its limited resources exclusively for the career preparation of its male successor, a wealthy or ‘honorable’ family tends to keep its daughters from taking up certain career jobs so as not to blemish its ie status, particularly those occupations which involve heterosexual contact. Thus an informant,