INTRODUCTION

TOWARD A COMPARATIVE SOCIOLOGY OF GENDER

1. A Sociology of Gender

Comparing several societies, we will present a sociology of gender to reveal special characteristics of Japanese and other societies in East Asia. While “sex” indicates biological differences, “gender” is used to indicate social differences established according to sex. Social roles and gender-based distribution of power may appear to be natural because they seem to be determined by biology. Using the concept of gender helps us learn that this is not the case, that relegating persons to special roles on the basis of gender is a social phenomenon.

A detailed discussion of the concept of patriarchy is presented in Chapter 1. We use the term to indicate the gender-based allocation of power and roles in a given society, and we will compare how patriarchy functions in each of the societies examined. An observable point we will look for is whether or not married women are being brought into the labor force. This is an example of the most important purpose of this book, which is to depict the gender situation in the societies studied by examining trends among housewives. Since gender pertains to relations between the sexes, making the woman’s side the primary point may seem one-sided, but we choose this focus for a strategic reason: to better describe social change. Compared to changes in women’s roles, the changes that have occurred in men’s roles are not great, and they are not as useful for describing transitions.

2. The Meaning of Comparison

We adopt comparative sociology as our method to grapple with a key question: How unique are the gender-based norms that Japanese society takes for granted? We have to use other societies as a mirror to answer this

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1 This may sound simplistic due to the frequently discussed idea on how “sex” is socially constructed, but this book will focus on how gender in each society has been constructed on the basis of “biological” differences.
question and to bring the features of Japanese and other East Asian societies into relief. My standpoint is not Eurocentric. I do not look at Western conditions as the universal pattern and then judge different conditions to be “unusual.” I choose to make comparisons from a cultural-relativist standpoint and view all differences as unique. However, if we stop there and regard everything as unique, we could end up with simple presentations of situations in various regions, merely saying that Society A has this set of characteristics, while Society B has another set, and so on. This is not the goal. An axis of comparison must be established to give greater meaning to the comparisons. The line of development we use is a systematic depiction of the stages in the emergence of the housewife and the changes occurring in her social role. Comparisons can be charted along a common line to examine the stages Western or East Asian societies are in and the direction of change.

Our final goal is to bring the features of Japanese society into relief. A given society’s uniqueness will emerge in comparisons with others. This strategy of comparisons should enable us to contribute to gender theory. Almost any society can be indicted for being sexist, and we should recognize the political effectiveness of discovering sexual exploitation to elicit anger and sympathy. However, gender research that would advance social science might be stifled if that is all we do. Our aim is to go beyond discovering and denouncing sexual oppression. We want to examine the forms it takes in different societies, to clarify how they differ, and to trace the differences along an axis of comparison. By doing this we hope to arrive at a clearer way of posing the problem and presenting an even stronger indictment of the system.

3. The Meaning of Making East Asia the Subject

Rather than Western societies, our comparisons are centered on South Korea, Taiwan, North Korea and China. The motive for this is more ambitious than simply a desire to add East Asia to areas that have been studied. Japanese gender issues are frequently studied in light of conditions in the West. Conditions in the United States are often presented as a preview of

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2 To avoid confusion and for the sake of simplicity with no political implication intended, we use South Korea rather than the official country name, the Republic of Korea. Similarly, we use Taiwan rather than the Republic of China, North Korea rather than the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, and China rather than the People’s Republic of China.