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Japanese Women: Lineage and Legacies

Edited by Amy McCreedy Thernstrom

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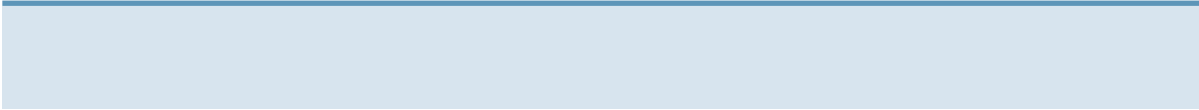
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The imperial throne of Japan is one of the most conservative of institutions, and throughout its legendary 2500-year history has rarely been mentioned in the same breath (much less paragraph) with terms such as “gender equality.”

But now the Chrysanthemum Throne has not produced a male heir since 1965, and faces extinction if the prohibition against a female emperor is not scrapped or modified. This crisis has sparked a lively discussion in Japan among the general public, media, and pundits over how it should be resolved. Even feminists, who have remained aloof from discussion of imperial matters (seeing the throne as a remnant of Japan's militaristic past), have entered the debate.

This report is one of few academic publications in English to examine the succession question—including historical origins and modern policy ramifications—and to use it as a springboard to a discussion of issues of broad significance to Japanese women. Although the cloistered royal household is often seen as remote from the concerns of everyday life, the authors in this report show how the succession issue has become an important symbol to a society still struggling to reform traditional institutions. The essays in this volume address issues such as fertility decline, the veneration of motherhood, and national pride, in relation to both the imperial system and to Japan more generally.

The report is organized in two parts. The first three essays focus wholly or partly on the issue of imperial succession. Crown Princess Masako, who gave up her position as a successful diplomat to marry the crown prince, epitomizes the choice between career and family with which many Japanese women feel confronted, and whether her three-year-old daughter will be allowed to inherit the throne has aroused broad interest. The essays here treat the succession issue with historical depth not usually found in English, and address a wide range of contentious questions: To what extent should Japan's previous eight female emperors be considered precedents in the current deliberations?

What does Japanese “tradition” consist of, and how has it been used (or manipulated) by different contributors to the succession debate? What solutions to the crisis are possible, and do they necessarily spell victory for advocates of equal rights for women?

The second section of this report looks at women’s issues more broadly, especially the topic of declining fertility. Like Masako, Japanese women are sometimes criticized by media and government officials for delaying marriage and childbirth. Depopulation will (it is claimed) lead to a labor shortage and increase the burden of Japan’s aging society. Pundits and government officials have offered a myriad of suggestions, from providing tax breaks for bearing children to establishing daycare centers. The three essays in this section help sort through these numerous policy ideas, as well as examine the motivations, challenges, and desires of working women. Are government policies effective? Why do Japanese women see a career and motherhood as incompatible? How is the Japanese situation similar to that of other industrialized countries, and can Japan look abroad for solutions?

Lineage and change: The imperial family and the debate over a female emperor

Is the idea of a female emperor too radical for a society as traditional as Japan? As explained by **Hitomi Tonomura** of the University of Michigan, women were not disqualified from the throne until 1889, a prohibition extended by the Imperial Household Law of 1947. As a historian of premodern Japan, Tonomura describes the reigns of six previous female emperors in the years 592–720, as well as two female emperors in the 17th and 18th centuries. These rulers have figured largely in the current succession debate, and in the deliberations by a 10-member advisory panel appointed by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (due to give its recommendations this fall).

According to Tonomura, the female emperors are often wrongly presented as having been mere “stop gap” rulers who abdicated once a suitable male heir came of age. In fact, there often *were* male heirs available when these women took the throne—often amid bloody power struggles—and “royal qualifications derived just as much from the mother as from the father.” Moreover, far from mere puppets, “female emperors reigned and ruled with full legitimacy and power.” Only in relatively recent history did women become “absorbed into male-centered systems of residency, economy and politics” that were part of the Chinese androcentric model, Tonomura contends.

Although Japanese leaders imported many Western systems and ideas during the Meiji era of the late 19th century, they chose to reject the example of England’s Queen Victoria amid the prevailing sentiment of *danson jōhi* (respecting males and despising females). Yet there was a lively debate at the

time. Though the “twisted exclusionist logic based on women’s inferiority is obsolete,” many of the arguments heard today (on both sides) resemble those of 1889, Tonomura explains.

Tradition and institutional stability still loom large, though today’s advisors acknowledge the crucial importance of public support. The vast majority (more than 80 percent) of Japanese people support a female emperor—and, as Tonomura asserts, “despite the near-allergic disdain among certain circles for the imperial institution, the Japanese people in general, or at least the media, seem to be highly interested in the royal family’s affairs.” Many argue that any pressure on Masako to produce an heir violates her human rights, and that the Imperial Household Law is inconsistent with the constitution, which states that “laws shall be enacted from the standpoint of the essential equality of the sexes.”

But is the core of the debate really the question of women’s rights? According to **Takashi Fujitani** of the University of California at San Diego, a close reading of the panel’s deliberations shows a remarkable absence of any discussion of gender equality, as do the reference materials provided to the advisory panel by Koizumi’s office. “While Koizumi’s advisory panel has hesitated to make an explicit connection between female imperial succession and gender equality, it has made it absolutely clear that the imperial bloodline must be preserved,” Fujitani writes. In other words, decision makers will allow female succession because they *must*, to save the imperial line from extinction. Yet a female emperor can still be used to promote motherhood and family values, as can be seen from the history of other nations in which female reigns have not necessarily coincided with increased opportunities for women.

Like the elites, the public is more split on the question of gender equality (or at least its relation to the succession issue) than is apparent at first glance, Fujitani maintains. He points out that, of those who feel a female emperor should be allowed, only about half believe that succession should go to the first born regardless of gender, while 39 percent say that preference should be given to males. “In the highly likely event that the crisis is resolved by allowing females to succeed only when there is no direct male heir, this will symbolically reinforce the second class status of women.” A female emperor would be an ideal symbol for the government, which must bring women into the workforce to offset the shrinking labor pool but wants to promote motherhood to boost the birthrate. A female emperor, in short, can signify various meanings for various people, Fujitani contends, and “a great deal of support for female imperial succession has little to do with gender equality and almost everything to do with preserving the imperial bloodline and the monarchy as a symbol of Japanese (racial) unity.”

Fujitani identifies many of the key people, both on and off the advisory panel, and where they stand in the succession debate—including “unabashed

patriarchal neo-nationalists.” He expressly avoids overestimating the impact of these nationalists, who resent the U.S. occupation’s decision to strip 51 individuals belonging to 11 collateral families of their imperial status. The right-wing solution, for which a permanent infusion of taxpayer money is necessary, is to revive these branch families and thereby expand the pool of heirs. Certainly, most people, including politicians, are unlikely to support such a plan. “I think the public will welcome an empress in the present day,” Koizumi has observed.¹ Yet Fujitani implies that the right is not without influence in invoking the “awesome weight of the past” that speaks to the conservatism of many Japanese both in and out of government.

Barbara Molony, director of the Program for the Study of Women and Gender at Santa Clara University, focuses on Japanese women’s rights activists going back to the 19th century. She discusses the reluctance of many women to involve themselves in debates related to the imperial throne—and why this may be changing. According to Molony, the decision by the Meiji government to limit the imperial throne to males came as a shock to early female activists, but they soon turned their attention to issues they considered more important, such as labor reform, educational equality, elimination of prostitution and civil rights. After World War II, they were occupied with widespread hardship, and saw the imperial system as a holdover from the despised prewar regime. However (Molony contends), nowadays many Japanese women see their own lives mirrored in that of Crown Princess Masako. Masako’s complete renunciation of her successful diplomatic career and her anxiety under (alleged) pressure to produce an heir awaken Japanese women’s sympathy and even outrage, while reinforcing the belief that “marriage and career are so incompatible, that marriage and especially motherhood should be postponed as long as possible.” And for many Japanese feminists, according to Molony, the succession issue is very much about gender equality: “If women can hold any job... why not the throne as well?”

And yet Molony agrees with Fujitani that the imperial family can symbolize different things to different people, so that Masako’s situation can invoke veneration for motherhood as well as concern with the derailment of women’s careers. In the 19th century, most women—farmers and urban poor—worked as hard as or harder than their husbands, and “motherhood often took a back seat to productivity in determining the worth of a wife.” Yet in the 20th century, esteem for motherhood grew, and is still powerful today. In fact, Molony argues, Japanese female activism often displays a strong streak of “maternalism.” Many Japanese women have chosen to rally for *boken* (mothers’ rights) instead of *joken* (women’s rights), Molony contends, and have rejected the careerist focus of professional men. Thus, even politically active women are often more “traditional” in their ideology than a Western feminist might expect.

As symbols, the members of the royal family are removed from the ordinary business of politics, since they are not engaged in charity work or “causes” as are many of their foreign counterparts. They are, to a great extent, protected from the messiness of balancing conflicting responsibilities. The starkness of Masako’s situation—the complete renunciation of her chosen profession and previous activities and the primacy of her reproductive function—is extreme compared to the multiplicity of roles most mothers face. Yet, this very extremity lends poignancy to Masako’s plight, making her (in Molony’s words) representative of the “modern Japanese gender dilemma” to many women in many different ways. And her daughter’s inability by law to inherit the throne by reason of her sex—the very explicitness of the prohibition—is different from the jumble of disincentives, pressures, self-imposed limitations and prejudice that most women deal with. Yet ordinary women feel that, like Aiko, they are constrained by the legacies of the past.

The next three essays of this report turn from symbols to statistics, from the succession dilemma to the multiplicity of difficulties faced by ordinary “modern” women—working women in their 20s and 30s among whom the birthrate has drastically declined.

The “modern” woman and motherhood

No other country in the world faces a demographic dilemma like Japan’s, which combines low fertility with the fastest-aging population and longest-living seniors on the planet. How will fewer workers manage to support the increasing financial burden of a graying population? Japanese women are sometimes blamed for their part in creating the dilemma, and are exhorted by politicians and media to have more children. Just one example: In June 2003 politician and former Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori contended that women who “enjoy freedom but do not produce any children” should be ineligible for pensions.² Yet, since they are still under-employed compared to men, their participation in the workforce in coming years is the best hope for offsetting the shrinking labor force—barring widescale immigration, which is unlikely in Japan. Therefore policy makers feel they must encourage both motherhood *and* meaningful participation in the workforce.

Chikako Usui of the University of Missouri at St. Louis contends that nonetheless, Japanese women are “withholding investment” from both family and work. The fertility rate of 1.29 babies per woman is well below replacement level (2.08), and the average age of first marriage climbed to 28 for women (29 for men) in 2003. The number of “parasite singles” living with their parents has risen to an estimated 42 percent of those in their 20s and 30s. Because their parents can support them in a comfortable lifestyle, Usui points out, “today’s young women are the first to face downward mobility after mar-

riage.... marriage offers fewer benefits, while society increasingly accepts their single lifestyle and sexual freedom.”

Meanwhile, Usui asserts, female labor force participation as a whole decreased from 50.2 percent in 1994 to 48.3 percent in 2004, while the concentration of women in part-time work increased and the wage gap between full- and part-time work widened. Full-time employees are expected by their companies to work late, socialize with colleagues after hours and forgo vacations. Part-time work, by contrast, is based on explicit contractual agreement and is free from compulsory overtime, and hence easier to combine with family obligations. However, once women leave full-time positions, reentry is difficult, Usui argues—thus, “the vicious cycle of women’s concentration in low-paying, low-status positions is perpetuated. Neither women nor corporate personnel decision makers want to invest in the other.”

At times, Usui criticizes policies that steer women into part-time work. For example, she laments a tax system that offers more family support if the wife stays home or works only part-time. She admits, however, that working mothers, especially of young children, themselves prefer a part-time schedule (in an endnote, she cites surveys to this effect). Therefore, Usui argues the importance of measures that decrease the “dead end” nature of such work. She praises the Netherlands in particular, which has minimized differences between part-time and full-time work by increasing wages and benefits. Unfortunately, Japanese employers tend to ask for “commitment to work first and family second,” and sometimes encourage married or child-bearing women to quit by moving them to inconvenient job positions or company locations.

The Japanese government has recognized that family-friendly policies are necessary to help women balance work and family, but (Usui argues) the “system is plagued by weak legal enforcement and problems of accessibility and affordability of child care services.” Moreover, progress in implementing such policies is simply too slow. For example, there is a shortage of conveniently located childcare facilities that offer extended hours and high-quality infant care. Usui maintains that Japan can learn much from those European countries where maternity benefits and childcare are generous.

Margarita Estévez-Abe of Harvard University argues that not only women but employers, too, suffer from women’s under-utilization. She points to evidence (not yet conclusive, she notes) that companies perform better if they base wages and promotions on performance rather than seniority. Such a system rewards women who take a full or part-time hiatus from work to care for children. Moreover, Estévez-Abe contends, companies that provide women-friendly (and family-friendly) environments will be able to attract younger workers—increasingly scarce resources.

In utilizing women, Japan lags behind other industrialized countries, Estévez-Abe contends, citing indices developed by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). In general, countries that score high on the Gender Development Index (invest in women's human capital) also tend to score high on the Gender Empowerment Index (benefit by taking advantage of women's talent). In other words, countries that invest in educating and employing women end up nourishing highly successful female leaders in business and politics, and are thereby better off. However, Japan stands out by its deviation from this trend: "No other country demonstrates such a big gap between human capital investments in women and the overall level of female achievement within the society. This gap largely signifies Japan's failure to efficiently take advantage of its human resources."

Why are Japanese women so marginalized? Estévez-Abe discounts cultural explanations, which argue that Japanese are more "traditional" in their expectations and therefore are quick to quit work upon marriage and pregnancy. It is true that, according to survey data, more Japanese people (45.2 percent) agree with statements such as "being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay" than do respondents in other industrialized countries. But on other issues they are far less conventional. Japanese respondents are more likely to respond positively to statements such as "a working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with children as a mother who does not work," or "both men and women should contribute to the household income." Instead of cultural explanations, Estévez-Abe emphasizes institutional factors that explain the under-utilization of Japanese women. Like Usui, she laments the lack of flexibility in the Japanese labor market, in which most hiring takes place at the entry level, and higher job categories are filled by internal promotions. Also like Usui, she laments that working part-time is a "one-way ticket," and that "regardless of their abilities, education and job experience, mothers who quit their jobs once will be permanently kept out of the 'good jobs.'"

In other words, those companies that provide family-friendly environments will reap advantages. This conclusion is supported by a recent survey of Japanese women published in the *Mainichi* newspaper.³ When asked what would prompt them to have more children, the most common answer (43 percent of respondents) was "places where it's easy to work, even for people with children." Politicians seldom address this concern, focusing on other issues that received less attention in the survey, such as wait-free nursery school or kindergarten. There seems to be a perception gap between women and the government on what would most greatly slow the nation's declining birthrate.

In the final essay in this collection, **Merry White** of Boston University mentions another role of Japanese women—taking care of elderly relatives—that further constrains their ability to balance work and children. Women are

the “sandwich filling” that holds together the multi-generational family. At the same time that women are exhorted to slow population decline by becoming mothers, they are expected to shoulder the burden of upholding “Japan’s beautiful family system,” White argues: “Pulling out all the Confucian stops might increase social pressure to support one’s own family, but the pressure adds to the load of work and guilt on working women’s backs.”

Instead of giving statistics to show women’s position in society, White, an anthropologist, offers profiles of women in contemporary families. For example, she cites the examples of “Chieko,” a divorced mother of one daughter who works as a copywriter in an advertising agency, and “Shoko,” who contemplates quitting work when her daughter approaches the all-important college entrance exams. White suggests that looking at individual cases makes women “less demonizable” and dispels stereotyped images of women who pursue their own interests at their families’ expense.

Like Tonomura and Molony, White discusses the Japanese government’s promotion of the ideal of “good wife, wise mother” beginning at the end of the 19th century. The Meiji Civil Code, she writes, “put women in their place in many ways.” Traveling throughout the Japanese countryside, government researchers were “horrified at what they found: matriarchal households, women with several husbands and freely divorcing, cohabitation without benefit of registration—these things made them ashamed for Japan.” The Meiji government looked abroad for social models for Japan’s development—for the “modern family” of Victorian England and Prussia to which Japan should aspire. Thus, the “traditional” Japanese family was something pushed, at least in part, by government propaganda. Society was remodeled so that men, not women, spoke for the family, and women could not own property, divorce, or “own” their children. Thus White joins other authors in this report in arguing that government constructs beliefs of what is “traditional” that often mask the true situations of women. The image of the “traditional” submissive wife has been used to misrepresent both female emperors and farm women—eroding authority and freedoms that women once enjoyed.

What do women want?

White points out that just as Masako has been seen as putting the Imperial House at risk by marrying late and having only a single daughter, “women overall are thus in a backhanded way made very important, crucial in fact, to the state and to its citizens.” To slow population decline and at the same time expand the workforce in coming years, the government is trying to see women’s point of view more than ever before, especially since exhortations to behave for “the good of Japan” have not worked. The government’s efforts do not necessarily stem from support for the principle of gender equality, but

from a certain degree of desperation—as in the case of changing the Imperial Household Law to prevent the imperial line’s extinction. They need women to help offset the shrinking labor force as Japan’s economy recovers.

What do women want? Are they really “on strike,” resisting family life and the legacies of past generations? One point that surfaces throughout the essays in this report, but perhaps deserves more attention, is that the decline in fertility is an unstoppable worldwide trend. Japan-specific “solutions” should be met with some skepticism. The drop in fertility cannot be reversed, though it can, perhaps, be slowed.

Another point that emerges (especially in Molony’s essay) but deserves greater emphasis is that Japanese women do not necessarily care to emulate men. Many women do not want the “good jobs” if the price is conformity to a careerist culture. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center shows that Japanese women report far greater satisfaction in their lives than do Japanese men. In fact, this gender gap in self-professed happiness is wider than in any other country surveyed, except Pakistan.⁴ Young women are as unlikely to join Japan’s “workaholic” culture as to return to the fertility rates of their mothers’ generation. And (as mentioned above) working mothers prefer part-time hours if they want to work at all. Thus, maternity leave and daycare centers that stay open through the evening, supported by some Japanese pro-feminist politicians, are not the whole answer for many women. As mentioned, promoting family-friendly environments and making part-time work more desirable (less of a permanent, one-way ticket out of the workforce) could be more effective in improving women’s lives and persuading them to balance family and careers.

Whether quickly or slowly, Japanese society is changing, and women have more choices than ever before. Flexibility and openness are increasing women’s options (if not their families), and will be appreciated by those of Aiko’s generation—and perhaps are not too late even for Masako’s.

Notes

1. “Koizumi says public would accept female on throne,” *Japan Times*, Dec. 3, 2004, accessed September 19, 2005, at <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/print/news/nn12-2004/nn20041203b3.htm>.

2. “Lawmakers’ comments becoming aggressive regarding history, juveniles, women,” *Asahi Shimbun*, July 15, 2003, 2.

3. “Poll on low birthrate: Women want workplaces easy to work for mothers,” *Mainichi Shimbun*, August 22, 2005, 1.

4. Nicole Speulda and Mary McIntosh, “Global Gender Gaps,” Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, May 13, 2004, accessed September 20, 2005, at <http://people-press.org/commentary/display.php3?AnalysisID=90>.

Lineage and Change: The Imperial Family and the Debate over a Female Emperor

Royal Roles, Wider Changes: Understanding Japan's Gender Relations from a Historical Perspective

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Japan's royal family is suffering a crisis of succession. This problem has provoked a public debate on a range of issues such as male-female equality, gender roles, and the significance of tradition. Faced with a dearth of future male heirs (eight girls have been born to the royal family since 1965), a government-appointed advisory panel is debating the possibility of new legislation to either allow a female to inherit the throne or to otherwise extricate the imperial system from its exigency. One practical question is whether or not Aiko, the three-year old daughter of the crown prince, will inherit the throne in the future.

In revising a system as steeped in tradition as Japan's imperial family, much is made of precedent, and Japan's premodern female emperors have received considerable attention in the current debate. In this essay, I discuss the context in which these women ruled, and how their position has been misconceived in modern times since the Imperial Household Law of 1889 disqualified women from the throne. Women's involvement in political affairs is not as alien to Japanese history as is frequently supposed, and the Meiji government "domesticated" women (including royal women) to a degree that obscures an earlier, wider scope of female activity. As a historian of the premodern period, my aim is to shed light on an aspect of the succession debate that is not usually examined with accuracy or sufficient consideration. But before turning to the premodern female emperors, I will explore the current successional crisis, and some of the main points of debate raised both now and at the time of the Imperial Household Law of 1889.

Despite the near-allergic disdain among certain circles for the imperial institution, the Japanese people in general, or at least the media, seem to be highly interested in the royal family's affairs. This fascination was fuelled 46 years ago by the current emperor's storybook wedding to a commoner, Shōda Michiko. Having survived the 1970s—an activist period with plenty of anti-imperial buzz—the crown regained popularity when Crown Prince

Naruhito wed Masako, another outsider, about the time that the immediate postwar left-leaning, generation lost its earlier zeal for oppositional politics. Prince Naruhito, unwittingly or not, added fuel to popular anxiety over Masako's condition with the now infamous statement that "There have been developments that have denied Masako's character and career," on May 10, 2004, as he was about to depart to Europe without his wife, a former diplomat.¹

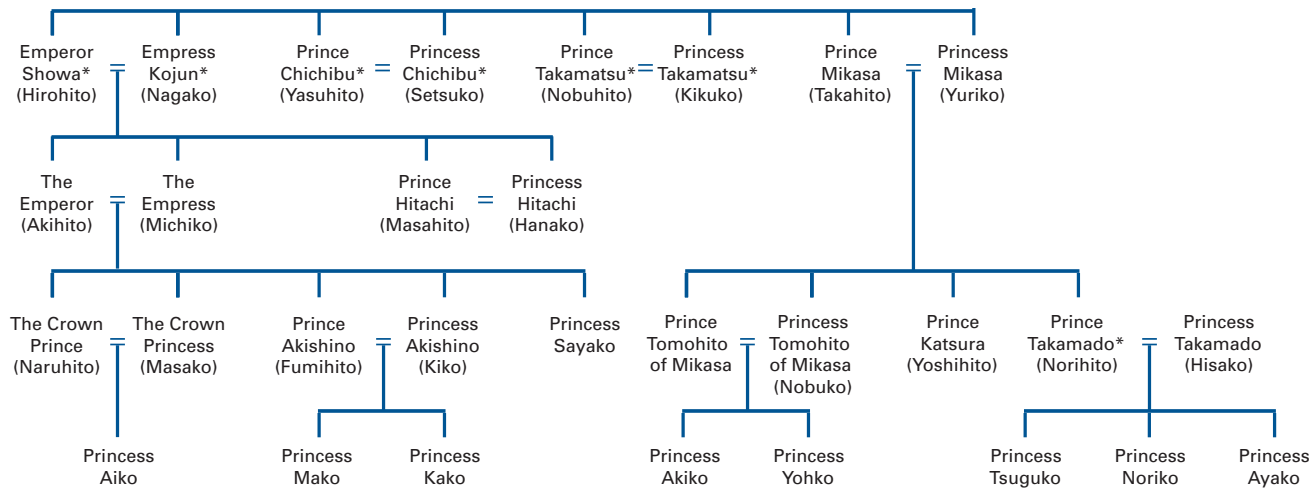
The diplomat-turned-princess Masako seems to hold the attention of her female fans, whether or not she is appearing publicly. Masako and her daughter Aiko were the topics of lead stories in 20 out of 36 weekly issues of *Josei jishin* (*The Woman Herself*), one of the most popular women's magazines in Japan, counting arbitrarily from November 2, 2004, through August 2, 2005.² Headlines include "Aiko-sama will enter the Gakushūin kindergarten next spring," "Masako-sama's five hopes for 'complete recovery,'" and "Horse-riding is her only comfort; Illness keeps Masako-sama sealed in for thirty days." Aiko's "ice skating debut" supposedly comforted her mother during a relapse. The frequency of such stories, which suggests their popularity, beat that of all other newsworthy items such as the latest on certain Korean actors' undiminished "love" for Japan's fanatic female followers.³

After her first child, Masako seemed under renewed pressure to create another. Mr. Yuasa, the grand steward of the Imperial Household Agency, said in June 2004, "I believe there are many citizens who wish for a second child." Why such pressure? For the first time since 1889—when the institutional prohibition against the enthronement of a female first came into being—there is no male heir.

The 1947 Imperial Household Law carries on the legacy of the 1889 prohibition, and would prevent Aiko from inheriting her father's position. Article 1 of the current law stipulates that only a son of a male member of the imperial family may ascend the throne. Article 2 spells out the order by which male members are prioritized for accession.⁴ Under the current system, Crown Prince Naruhito will succeed the current emperor, Akihito. If Naruhito and Masako never produce a son, Naruhito's younger brother, Prince Fumihito (39 years old), the last male born in his generation, will succeed him. As Fumihito also has no sons, Prince Hitachi, the emperor's younger brother, will be next in line, followed by Prince Mikasa, the emperor's uncle, and his sons. But these sons also only have daughters. Because Article 9 of the law also prohibits adoption in the imperial family, the imperial order could be nearing extinction after a millennium and a half of its history. This is why all eyes are on Masako's womb.

It is in this context that suggestions to allow a female emperor have surfaced. In late 2004, newspapers began reporting on discussions among policy

Genealogy of the imperial family



* Deceased

Source: *Imperial Household Agency*.

makers to consider the revision of the current Imperial Household Law (*Kōshitsu tenpan*). Since then, the government has set up a special advisory panel to investigate the pros and cons of the possible revision. The ten-member panel includes two females (Ogata Sadako and Iwao Sumiko) among other well-known men. On July 26, 2005, it was reported that, at its tenth meeting, the panel decided to continue the discussion along two lines of revision: 1) to enthrone a distant (collateral line) member of the imperial family who was legally excluded in 1947, or 2) to allow female emperors. The panel hopes to come up with a solution that assures public support while maintaining tradition and institutional stability.⁵ A survey conducted by a major newspaper shows that, as of February 2005, 86 percent of those polled endorsed having a female on the throne.⁶ Political parties also support this idea. The upper house advisory panel on constitutional revision issued its agreement in April that a female emperor may be enthroned, and Prime Minister Koizumi expressed personal support as early as 2001. However, the issues are many and complicated, as they combine present-day concerns with justifications that are embedded in historical precedents and their various interpretations.

The Imperial Household Law of 1889

The term excluding women from the imperial office was introduced in the 1889 Imperial Household Law, as Japan sought to reconstitute itself in the

**The imperial order
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womb.**

West-dominated world order. Thus, the term was less a product of Japanese history than a modern invention that required justification. Historically, eight female emperors occupied ten reigns. Therefore, the adoption of the exclusionary term involved a fierce debate ranging over numerous perspectives and interpretations.⁷ One exclusionist, Shimada Saburō, for example, classified advocates of female emperors into two categories: first, experts of national literature who thus valued ancient customs and, second, experts of Western literature to whom banning female emperors would mean a step backwards in the new civilizing trend and which went against Japan's historical tradition. Shimada reviewed the family relations of each female emperor and the reason for her enthronement. Was she an emperor's spouse? Was there a crown prince for whom she filled the position? Had she herself a child? The heart of Shimada's exclusionist argument was that, in all cases, female emperors maintained the patrilineal descent. Opposition to enthroning a female fundamentally stemmed from concern to preserve the myth of a single paternal line of descent—and to prevent a female emperor's sons from gaining the throne in subsequent generations. Other arguments against enthroning females reflected the prevailing custom of *danson jōhi* (respecting males and despising females). For example, what would be the role of a female emperor's husband? Would not he wield political power at the expense of his wife, who would (naturally) be virtuously docile?

The pundits also argued that a female emperor would be inconsistent with the general position of women at the time, who possessed no political rights. They held that it would be contradictory to allow a woman to hold the throne—which embodied the highest political authority—while denying women in general the right to vote. Furthermore, they expounded that the imperial line had continued for 2500 years; therefore Japan need not model itself after European examples that elevate female royalties. Moreover, they pointed out, Europe was also the home of the Salic Law, which was occasionally invoked to prohibit women from taking the throne, for example in France and Spain.

Against these ideas, opinions of advocates were based on pragmatic concerns for the possibility of crises of succession. They did not contradict the general low position of women, but argued that the imperial family differed from others and could not be compared to the hierarchy that characterized non-royal Japanese. Regardless of gender, people would respect the figure on the throne. Excluding women from imperial rule not only went against the classical basis of the country, but also greatly injured people's *kokoro* (hearts). In Japan, customs existed to elevate men over women in general and, at the same time, to elevate royal women to the throne. As for the emperor's husband, any interference from him in the country's politics would be a repudiation of the

constitution, and thus could not occur. Regarding European models, Japan should follow the example of Henry VIII, whose son Edward reigned first (though he was the youngest), followed by Mary and Elizabeth. This arrangement was possible because England did not adopt the Salic Law.⁸

Today's debate

More than a century later, Japan is again debating the question of a female emperor, but under considerably different circumstances. The Meiji discussion took place when the imperial authority, after centuries of obscurity under warrior rule, was suddenly raised to the helm of a new constitutional monarchy. The supremely masculine emperor was empowered and militarized, as women (including the emperor's wife), were "domesticated" and denied political rights.⁹ Today, by contrast, the emperor exercises no political authority, and his duties are ceremonial, though his position carries symbolic meaning. In Meiji Japan, the imperial institution was deemed absolutely necessary to run the country, but today the institution's extinction is logistically plausible. In the case of the Meiji imperial family, male heirs were more plentiful, since the law allowed the emperor multiple wives, but the 1947 law limits him to one wife only. Also, the size of the imperial family was reduced dramatically in 1947 by eliminating its collateral lines and prohibiting adoption.¹⁰ The 20th century has also seen a shift in women's status and the guarantee of equality of the sexes by Article 14 of the post-war constitution.

The debate has thus changed substantially. Certainly, the twisted exclusionist logic based on women's inferiority is obsolete under the current situation of legal equality. The argument that a female emperor is, by her very nature, inappropriate is heard rarely (although some have questioned her ability to perform certain rituals during her time of "impurity"). The debate has shifted to social ramifications. How will her elevated status affect others in the imperial family? Her husband will likely be a commoner, since there are no eligible royal males. Will the Japanese people accept a male commoner as a member of the imperial family? Will he have to give up his surname and thus his own lineage? (The imperial family does not have a surname.)

Related issues have to do with Article 12 of the Imperial Household Law. Female members, upon marriage, forfeit their royal status. The imminent case is that of the emperor's daughter, Sayako, who will lose her imperial status irrevocably when she marries Mr. Kuroda, a commoner, this fall. Allowances are provided only to women who marry male members, such as Michiko and Masako, not to males such as Mr. Kuroda. Given these rules, if a female emperor should marry a commoner and continue to remain royal, what about other royal women? Will they also be allowed to bring their spouses into their household? Even more importantly, can the child of a female emperor and a

male commoner be enthroned, since that would diversion from the patrilineal principle? These are questions of broad, deep, and practical significance to a society that is also debating a change in how its citizens, including the “household head,” are listed in each “family registrar” (*koseki*)—the most fundamental and essential document to shape Japan’s gendered relations of power. In addition, these questions relate to Japanese citizens’ sensitivity as to how their tax dollars are spent. Beyond funding the operation of the imperial institution as a whole, the budget allowed 30.5 million yen (\$300,000) for each prince and princess in fiscal year 2004. The total allowance for imperial family members amounted to 299.8 million yen (nearly \$3 million).

Besides such practical matters, ideological issues are also at stake. For example, some advocates argue that the principle of Article 14 of the constitution (guaranteeing the equality of the sexes) makes the current imperial system unconstitutional. In fact, this argument can be turned around: if the system was established outside the framework of the constitution, is not the constitutional equality of the sexes irrelevant? Some take this opportunity to suggest terminating the imperial institution altogether. They argue that requiring a woman who marries into the imperial family to bear children (in the way Masako seems to be pressured to do) is a violation of her human rights. However, others add, the imperial institution is not built on basic human rights to begin with, as illustrated by the lack of freedom of its members to choose their professions or earn livings beyond what is provided to them. Some advocates look to the West for models, as did the Meiji thinkers, and point to the monarchies of England, the Netherlands, Denmark, Luxemburg, and Sweden that have (or will have, this century) a female sovereign. One of the most substantive debates, however, focuses on the historical fact of ancient female emperors and its significance on the shaping of what is regarded as Japan’s tradition.

The classical foundation of the Japanese imperial institution

Between 592 and 720, in what could be called the most constructive period in the entire history of Japan, six female emperors occupied eight reigns: Suiko, Kōgyoku, Saimei (same person as Kōgyoku), Jitō, Genmei, Genshō, Kōken, and Shōtoku (same person as Kōken). Whether or not one supports the enthronement of female emperors in the twenty-first century, this historical precedent cannot be ignored. The suggested revision of the Imperial Household Law to allow a female emperor would mean a “return to tradition,” instead of an innovation, in the long history of the Japanese imperial family.

But in the dominant historiography, these female emperors’ reigns have been discredited in two ways. First, many people claim that they filled the position as “intermediaries,” who occupied the throne between two male

reigns. Second, some have contended that their ruling authority derived from their capacity as “shamans,” who served as intermediaries between humans and the divine. In other words, they were not real “rulers” with administrative or diplomatic functions, but were women who completed the male line of emperors by filling in gaps. These “textbook” interpretations were invented precisely as the Meiji government sought to promote the ideology of “one imperial line unbroken and eternal” that descended along the male line. This powerful ideology promoted the myth of continuous and unbroken succession—beginning with Emperor Jimmu (r. 660 BCE–585 BCE), a descendant of the Sun Goddess—which legitimated the Meiji monarchy that was to preside over Japan’s modernization after centuries of obscurity.

Until the Meiji law, no legal proscription against female rulers existed. Although the “period of ancient female emperors” ended in 770, the possibility of female rule existed throughout premodern times. There was a proposal to enthrone a woman in the late 12th century, for example, and two female emperors did reign in the Tokugawa period. But exclusionists are reluctant to give the same recognition to female emperors that they do to male emperors, frequently maintaining that premodern female emperors were mere “stop gap” rulers, and that each abdicated once a suitable male descendant in the male line of imperial descendants became available.

Based on a close examination of kinship and marriage patterns, recent scholarship has shown the weakness in this argument by contending that royal qualifications derived just as much from the mother as from the father, and there was no established rule of patrilineal succession before the end of the eighth century. Without the established rule that dictates patrilineal succession, there can be no concept of an “intermediary” or “stop-gap” figure. In other words, during the period of female reigns, each reign, whether male or female, resulted from complex power relations among the members of the imperial and ministerial families. It is important to remember that during the reigns of female emperors, Japan was centralizing for the first time in its history by borrowing, often via Korea, many aspects of China’s centuries-old political system, including conceptions of the universe, geomancy, the calendar, law, bureaucracy, taxation, household registration, philosophy, history-writing, capital city centralization of government and architecture, and even fashion. But the Chinese model was necessarily reshaped greatly to accommodate major differences between the social conditions of China and Japan including, most saliently, the absence in Japan of the fully male-centered family or lineage system. While constructing the new governmental structure, early emperors, male and female, energetically put forth new measures and sought to promote Japan’s international position in the China-centered world order, but also vied to preserve their own power, often by ruthless means and in collaboration with ambitious ministerial families.

The suggested revision of the Imperial Household Law to allow a female emperor would mean a “return to tradition,” instead of an innovation, in the long history of the Japanese imperial family.

The 170 years during which women frequently took the helm was the monumental period of Japan’s state-building.

The “intermediary” argument is far too simplistic; it ignores the fact that male candidates *were* available in most cases when female emperors took office. Modern scholarship also tends to attribute contributions made by female emperors to men around them. Likewise, an abdication committed by a female emperor is read as a resignation of power, thus “proving” the stop-gap character of the reign. A male abdication, however, becomes a purposeful act for yielding power behind the throne, unfettered by restrictions attached to the formality of the office.

In order to disprove the “intermediary” theory, we need to provide a bare-bones description of the ways in which members of the large royal family filled the supreme office. The story is rarely simple, as it is embedded in the structure of “family” in which endogamy was rampant and men tended to have several wives, creating both increased royal resources and seed for competitions. There also was no rule regarding a lineal route through which succession should flow, such as from father to son. The only point that mattered was that the candidate be royal, as defined through his or her father or mother. (Although imperial names are given posthumously, I use them in the description below for the sake of clarity.)

We begin with Suiko (r. 592–628), the first of the six ancient female emperors, who was enthroned in 592 at 39 years of age. Her nephew, Prince Umayado (later called Shōtoku), was her assistant. After reigning 36 years, Suiko died at the age of 75, without designating a successor; her nephew-assistant, as well as her own son, died before her. She was succeeded by the grandson of her late husband (Emperor Bidatsu) and his other wife. If gender was the primary factor in the selection of an emperor, the choice of Suiko makes no sense. Prince Umayado, the son of a previous emperor (Suiko’s brother) was 18 when she ascended the throne. Why was Suiko chosen over this mature male candidate? In terms of her accomplishments, close examination of historical sources shows that Suiko was actively engaged in much political decision-making, including diplomatic exchange with China, but modern textbooks typically attribute every measure during her reign to Prince Umayado and sometimes fail to mention her name even once.

When Suiko’s successor, Emperor Jomei, became ill and died thirteen years later, there were at least three men competing for the throne. Instead, Jomei’s wife, whose mother and father were both grandchildren of emperors, was chosen at age 48. She, Emperor Kōgyoku (r. 642–645), abdicated the throne to her brother (Kōtoku, r. 645–654) after he helped engineer a major palace coup involving contentious policy lines on state adoption of Buddhism. After much political infighting and Kōtoku’s death, Kōgyoku once again assumed

the throne, this time as Emperor Saimei (r. 655–661). Again, there was no shortage of male candidates. Her deceased brother's son, her own son, or others could have been enthroned instead, had gender been the primary consideration. She died at age 67, far from the capital while commandeering troops to dispatch to Korea. Tenji (r. 668–671), one of her sons with Emperor Jomei, succeeded her.¹¹

The female Emperor Jitō (r. 686 or 690–697) was Tenji's daughter. She also was a wife of Tenji's brother, Temmu (r. 672–686), who succeeded Tenji. After proving herself adept at deadly infighting, Jitō took the throne herself after her son died, instead of yielding to her husband's son by another wife. Jitō implemented major reforms before abdicating the throne to her deceased son's son (Emperor Mommu, r. 697–707). She continued to wield power with the new title of "Abdicated Emperor." Jitō, therefore, was a self-initiated sovereign who also established the pattern of "abdicated emperor" that would become a common method of maintaining real power behind the symbolic throne in later centuries.

The early years of Japan's literate history were rife with bloody rivalries among family members, including murders, false accusations and forced suicides. There is not room in this essay to describe these competitions at length. Often, an imperial reign began in an unruly manner, and succession was by no means as orderly as the "intermediary" argument suggests. For example, Genmei (r. 707–715) was the daughter of one emperor, and step-sister and daughter-in-law of two others; she succeeded her son and was succeeded by her daughter, Genshō (r. 715–24).¹² A couple of generations later, Kōken (r. 749–758) ascended the throne partly through the influence of her mother's powerful ministerial family, who pushed for her at the expense of other eligible male candidates. Kōken became the historically first crown princess at the age of 21. Her father yielded her the throne (at the expense of his son by another wife) when she was 32 years old and unmarried. She maneuvered to enthrone the seemingly weak Junnin (r. 758–764), and then later opposed him—he was exiled, and she resumed the throne as Shōtoku (764–770).

Shōtoku was the last of the great female emperors. A woman did not rule again until 1630, even at times when the installation of an "intermediary" figure would have been useful in times of imperial crisis. The two later female emperors, Meishō (r. 1630–1643) and Gosakuramachi (r. 1762–1770), though highly literate and virtuous, reigned in the shadow of the Tokugawa shogunate and do not compare with the ancient female emperors in terms of authority and power. The same can be said, however, of male emperors, all of whom had to live by the rules set by the shogunate. Meishō was a visible product of political alliance. She was elevated to the throne at the age of seven

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when her father abdicated in protest against the *bakufu* (military government). Meishō remained single and reigned nearly fourteen years before yielding the throne to her step-brother. Gosakuramachi was enthroned by imperial ministers at age 23 because her five-year-old nephew, the crown prince, was too young. She was a capable and generous emperor who excelled in poetry writing, and lived 43 years beyond her reign. Though clearly male emperors were preferred, there obviously was no rule against enthroning a female even in the Tokugawa period. When women were enthroned, the act of enthronement itself was not explained in terms of a “stop-gap” measure. In fact, there was no official vocabulary for such a measure.

In reality, female emperors (like male emperors) reigned for strategic reasons, which no one pattern can describe. Some had spouses who had been emperors, others had two or no husbands; some had children and others did not. As with male emperors, some were more politically active than others. Nonetheless, the period of female emperors saw Japan's first centralization. The female emperors conducted diplomacy with China and Korea, constructed a bureaucracy, instituted a taxation system, promulgated laws, established the capital, and compiled national histories, among other measures. These female emperors' active engagement can be viewed as a continuation of the still earlier prevalence of female rulers and chieftains, a pattern recorded in Chinese chronicles before Japan had the means to write, and evidenced in archaeological remains.

If the female emperors were legitimate rulers, why were none enthroned after 770, save for two occasions in the Tokugawa period? Conventionally, historians have pointed to Shōtoku's moral failure in getting deeply involved with a priest/lover. More recent work attributes the dearth of female emperors to a larger rhythm of social transformation—the diminishment of women's level of economic and familial independence between 592 and 770. Women became absorbed into male-centered systems of residency, economy, and politics, and ceased to live in their own quarters. Society gradually moved from bilateral descent toward patrilineal descent. Female emperors participated in the efforts of centralization and state-making, but once the structure was established and society moved closer to the Chinese andro-centric model, Japan no longer recognized female royals as a source of independent political authority.

Japan before and during centralization

Ancient Japan before centralization (third–sixth centuries):

- Prevalence of female rulers and chieftains (archaeological and documentary evidence)¹³

- Much contact with Korea and China
- Rulers, male and female, with spiritual, diplomatic, and administrative capacity¹⁴
- Bilateral descent among elites

Ancient Japan during centralization (seventh–eighth centuries):

- Infusion of Chinese ideas, institutions, laws¹⁵
- New systems of taxation, history writing, household registration, etc.¹⁶
- Creation myth written down, with Sun Goddess as the supreme god and ancestral deity of the imperial family¹⁷
- Shift from bilateral descent to patrilineal descent among elites

Concluding remarks

A factor in today's debate over the continuation of the imperial family is the historical consciousness of the Japanese, colored deeply by the tradition of female emperors. The myth of Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess from whom the imperial line descends, and other real and legendary powerful female figures stirred the imagination of women long before our time. Activist Hiratsuka Raichō (1886–1971), famously stated in 1911: “In the beginning, woman was the sun; she was genuine. Now she is the moon; she lives by relying on others, shines when shone upon, and possesses a pale-blue countenance as if sick.” By referring to the sun and its association with “the beginning,” Raichō invokes the Sun Goddess (Amaterasu). She implicitly compares women's position in her own time with Japan's ancient past during which female emperors ruled.

In ancient Japan, female emperors reigned and ruled with full legitimacy and power, albeit with variations among them. In the times of Raichō, Meiji and beyond, thinkers have attempted to discredit their legacy by labeling them as “intermediary” fill-ins whose expertise was in shamanistic mysticism. Recent scholars have shown that this one-dimensional characterization does not hold up against the evidence, and reflects the thinkers' own understanding of gender relations rather than the actual historical sources. But female rule ended as society moved toward increasingly male-centered structures and values, which female emperors themselves had helped to institute.

Ancient female political authority reflected the changing dynamics of the times. Each historical period and its particular social and political circumstances have shaped the ways in which female emperors reigned and ruled. Today's debate about the imperial institution necessarily reflects the rapidly changing structure of Japanese families and expectations about gender roles both at home and public places. Although the imperial institution now lacks political authority, what it represents could be symbolically relevant to larger questions of Japanese women's social position and role. If female, the country's

symbolic and ceremonial head can be the emblem of maternal domesticity just as easily as it can be an icon of international diplomacy. The actual historical past suggests multiple possibilities for how Japanese women and men are situated in Japan's future.

Notes

1. The comment was given in the following context: "Princess Masako, giving up her job as a diplomat to enter the Imperial Household, was greatly distressed that she was not allowed to make overseas visits for a long time. . . . [She] has worked hard to adapt to the environment of the Imperial Household for the past 10 years, but from what I can see, I think she has completely exhausted herself in trying to do so. It is true that there were developments that denied Princess Masako's career up to then as well as her personality driven by her career. Recently she has taken time off from her official duties, and she spends the days encouraged by the fact that lately she can do things for our child." The entire speech can be accessed at <http://www.kunaicho.go.jp/press-crown/prince2004-0510.html>.

2. According to the publisher's website, readers of *Josei Jishin* are predominantly female (98.6 percent), in their 20s (75.8 percent), and married (66.7 percent). Forty-six percent are full-time housewives, and 18.3 percent work full time. Less than 20 percent are graduates of four-year colleges. Accessed July 30, 2005 at http://www.j-magazine.or.jp/FIPP/FIPPJ/E/1/f_kobun_jisin.htm.

3. Recent stories of the magazine can be found at http://www.kobunsha.com/CGI/magazine/back_number.cgi?id=001&class=w&sl_cd=2 Accessed on July 30, 2005.

4. First in line is the eldest son of the reigning emperor; second, the eldest son of the reigning emperor's eldest son; third, other (male) descendants of the reigning emperor's eldest son; fourth, the second son of the reigning emperor, and his son or grandson; fifth, brothers of the emperor and their descendants; and finally, uncles of the emperor and their descendants. See <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/1947con.html> for the English-language translation of all articles. The law prescribes: "The Imperial throne shall be inherited by males in the male line of Imperial descent." Chapter 1, Article 2 of the 1947 constitution stipulates: "The Imperial Throne shall be dynastic and succeeded to in accordance with the Imperial Household Law passed by the Diet."

5. "Panel ponders an imperial dilemma," *Asahi Shimbun*, July 27, 2005, <http://www.asahi.com/politics/update/0726/003.html>; <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200507270133.html>.

6. "Changing royal rules: 86 percent OK with woman on throne," *Asahi Shimbun*, February 2, 2005. Ninety-one percent of respondents in their 30s approved, compared to 76 percent of those aged 70 or above. <http://www.asahi.com/english/politics/TKY200502020142.html>

7. Hirobumi Ito, *Commentaries on the constitution of the empire of Japan*, trans. Miyoji Ito (Tokyo: Igrisu-horitsu gakko, 22nd year of Meiji, 1889). The text can be found at Hanover Historical Texts Project, <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/1889con.html>, scanned by Jonathan Dresner, Harvard University.

8. "Josei wo tatsuru no kahi" in Tōyama Shigeki, ed., *Tennō to kazoku (Nihon kindai shisō taikai 2: Iwanami Shoten, 1988)*, 276-99.

9. For the transformation of the emperor from a feminized aristocrat to a masculine military figure, see T. Fujitani, “The politics of gendering and gendering of politics,” in *Splendid Monarchy: Power and Pageantry in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

10. Previously, the imperial family used two systems: 1) concubines, ended in the Taisho period, and 2) designated collateral lines, of which there were four in the Tokugawa period (1600-1868): Fushimi, Katsura, Arisugawa, and Kan'in. The Katsura and Arisugawa houses died out in 1881 and 1913. The Fushimi house was the progenitor of nine other cadet branches of the family during the Meiji period, but was reduced to commoner status in 1947.

11. After Tenji, the throne would pass to his brother, Temmu (r. 673-86), who defeated Tenji's son in a battle of succession and forced him to commit suicide. Tenji's son was not recognized as emperor in early historical records, but in 1870 came to be officially counted as the 39th Emperor Kōbun (r. 671-72), in order to uphold the notion of “one continuing line.”

12. Genshō's father, i.e., Genmei's husband, was not an emperor. For this reason, some argue that the throne descended matrilineally from mother to daughter. But others argue that Genshō's father's parents were both royal (Emperors Jitō and Temmu), and therefore, it is not correct to call the descent matrilineal.

13. Among many examples, the most famous is the case of Himiko and Iyo, recorded in a Chinese chronicle, the *Wei Zhi* (*The History of the Wei Dynasty*). The Wei-dynasty emperor bestowed upon Himiko a golden seal and the title of “King of Wa, Friendly to Wei” in 239 CE to 266 CE. David J. Lu, *Japan: A Documentary History* (New York: M.E. Sharp, 1997), 11-14.

14. Recent scholarship illustrates the participation of male chiefs in spiritual endeavors and the involvement of female chiefs in administrative and military matters, thus refuting the idea of the dichotomous, gendered division of authority between the spiritual and administrative, as shown in the *Wei Zhi*. The *Chronicle of Japan* also mentions a number of female regional chiefs. The story of Jingū, who after the death of her husband-emperor, Chūai (r. 192-200 CE), is recorded to have ruled for 70 years, during which she led expeditions against Korea while pregnant. The legendary Emperor Keikō (r. 71-130 CE), for example, encountered a female chief in Suwo “whose followers were exceedingly numerous. She was the chieftain of that whole country.” W.G. Aston, trans., *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697* (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle, 1980), 192-93.

15. Including the law that imperial daughters must not marry non-imperial members. But imperial sons were permitted also to marry aristocrats.

16. Outside the imperial system, there was more gender parity in Japan, as evidenced by problems in creating the household registration system upon which taxation would be based. The problems arose because the Japanese had yet to construct a definable form of marriage—unlike the Chinese, who practiced patrilineal descent, patrilocal marriage, and patriarchal household headship. Yet the regime imposed a Chinese-style registration system on a population whose children probably tended to live with their mothers. Unlike in China where women received no land, however, the Japanese women received allotments of land, albeit two-thirds the size of men's.

17. These myths are in *Nihon shoki*, compiled in 720, and to a greater extent in the *Kojiki*, or *Records of Ancient Matters*, compiled in 712, Japan's oldest extant “history” that traces the creation of the universe, gods, and emperors by interweaving stories and myths

from various regional homes of the then ruling elites. In the origin myth, the naming of Amaterasu (the Sun Goddess) as the ancestral deity of the imperial line also suggests an early history of female political authority.

18. Ide Fumiko, *Seit no onnatachi* (Seishinsha, 1975), 7.

Imperial Succession Panic: The Politics of Gender, Blood and Race in Contemporary Japan

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By now media throughout the world have reported that the Japanese imperial household is facing a succession crisis. The gist of the problem is that while Article 1 of the Imperial Household Law stipulates that the emperorship must “be succeeded to by male descendants in the male line of Imperial Ancestors,” the imperial family (*kōzoku*) has not produced a male child since the birth of Prince Akishino (Crown Prince Naruhito’s younger brother) in 1965. In other words, all of the reigning emperor’s three grandchildren are females, as are the five grandchildren of Prince Mikasa (the reigning emperor’s uncle). These eight females literally represent the end of the male imperial line, at least insofar as the Imperial Household Law now defines membership in the imperial family. According to current law, their future children will not be eligible to succeed the emperorship because succession is supposed to pass through the male line. Upon marriage, these eight females would relinquish their status as imperial family members. In short, this means that unless Crown Princess Masako (born 1963) or Princess Akishino (born 1966) produces a male child—which no one in a position of responsibility would wish to bet on at this point—or the Imperial Household Law is changed, the supposedly longest reigning monarchy in the world will come to an end.

Of course, the government will not allow the monarchy to perish, at least anytime in the foreseeable future. In December 2004 Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirō¹ established a 10-member advisory panel (*Kōshitsu Tenpan ni Kansuru Yūshikisha Kaigi*, hereafter “panel” or “advisory panel”) to consider changes to the current Imperial Household Law, with a special focus on the question of succession. The panel is made up of leaders in education and science, law, business, and government. Two members are women. Koizumi charged the panel with presenting a report on their findings by fall 2005, and it is expected that the report will have a significant impact on legislation that could come as early as 2006. As of early July 2005, the panel has met a total of eight times between January 25 and June 30, 2005, and heard testimony and

recommendations from eight experts (none of whom were women) on various matters relevant to stabilizing procedures of succession.²

Thus far the panel has made no public commitment to recommending that the law be changed so as to allow female emperors (*josei tennō*), or to permit succession to pass through female lines (*jokei keishō*). An example of the latter would be for a male or female born in the future to Princess Aiko, the only child of the crown prince and princess, to assume the throne without Aiko herself necessarily having become emperor. However, unless the government gives in to the far right, a possibility that cannot be completely discounted, there is strong likelihood that the law will be amended so that succession is not strictly limited to males and/or the male line. This likelihood is indicated by the tenor of public discussion up to the present, statements made by government leaders, the majority view of experts called in to testify to the panel, and (if we can believe public opinion polls) strong support from the general public for allowing a female emperor. There are a number of ways in which the Imperial Household Law could be revised in this direction. For example, one highly likely scenario, similar in a way to the British system, is that a female will succeed in the event there is no direct male heir. Another less likely possibility is that the first born will ascend the throne. There are several variations on these alternatives as well. In any case, membership in the imperial family is also likely to be expanded so as to increase the pool of possible successors. One method of doing this would be to end the requirement that women born into the imperial family relinquish their status upon marriage. If succession were allowed to pass through female lines, the children of these women would provide additional succession candidates.

The aim of this essay, however, is not to conjecture about how the crisis will eventually be resolved. In fact, any guessing about the future will probably be a moot exercise by the time this chapter is published and read. Some clear decision is likely to have already been made. Instead, my main purpose is to analyze the recent discourse on succession in order to clarify what has been at stake in discussions about the gender limitation. My hope is that this essay will be of use in understanding the debate and the significance of the outcome of the imperial succession crisis, whatever that might be. One central question this essay asks is, is this centrally a debate about women's equality? If the Imperial Household Law is changed to allow female imperial succession—by which I mean succession of a female emperor and/or succession through female lines—will this mean progress for women? Roughly stated, my point will be that while the debates have been explicitly about gender, such discussions have been very deeply and tightly bound up with understandings of blood and race. Indeed the panic about blood continuity and allegorically racial continuity has been a far more determining factor in the move toward

female imperial succession. This means that any change in this direction is likely to have little or nothing to do with promoting gender equality. Indeed, changing the law to allow female imperial succession may have exactly the opposite effect.

Patriarchal neo-nationalists versus advocates of gender equality?

Neo-traditionalist ideologues who have been resisting the move toward a female emperor and succession through female lines certainly give the impression that this is a fairly straightforward split between the unabashedly patriarchal right wing foes of women's rights and equality, on the one hand, and moderates, on the other, who propose that the imperial family better reflect gender equality. Academic spokesmen of the right such as Ōhara Yasuo (Kokugakuin University) and Yagi Hidetsugu (Takasaki City University of Economics and president of the neo-conservative organization, the Japanese Society for the Reform of Textbooks)—both of whom spoke at hearings before Prime Minister Koizumi's advisory panel—stress that the authority of the emperorship derives in large part from the unbroken transmission of the throne through the male line.³ As Ōhara put it at the sixth meeting, the “consistency of the principle of male succession had been the source of the imperial household's authority to unify the people of the nation.” These men admit that according to the official imperial genealogy there have been eight female emperors who have ascended the throne on 10 different occasions, beginning with Suiko (reign, 592-628) and ending with Gosakuramachi (reign, 1762-1770). However, they maintain that these women were born into the male line and were no more than interim figures (*nakatsugi yaku*), filling in while an appropriate male successor from the male line could be chosen or groomed for the role. They invoke what for them is the awesome weight of the past and warn that any decision to relax the gender requirement, especially to open up the possibility of succession through females, would be to overthrow at least a 2,000 year tradition. They refuse to take the issue of gender equality into account when considering the succession issue.⁴

Moreover, in order to counter public opinion polls which show that over 80 percent of the population now supports a female emperor, they tend to dismiss the views of the general population. As Kobori Keiichirō, another academic author in this camp claimed in a recent article in the conservative journal *Seiron*, “when politics fawns on the masses, objectively speaking, it falls to the lowest level.” Without mentioning her by name, he also berated the Koizumi government for putting Professor Iwao Sumiko (Musashino Institute of Technology) on its advisory panel. As he put it, “Among [the panel members] is an extremely suspect female academic who worked tirelessly to plan and realize that notorious Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society.”⁵ The 1999

Queen Victoria reigned without apparent contradiction over an expansive empire at the same time that the British state denied women the vote.

law, incidentally, is a moderate set of basic principles and a general plan to promote gender equality.

Writing for the same journal, Nishio Kanji, Yagi's predecessor as president of the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform, declared that the "democratic method cannot and should not be applied to selection of the emperor's successor." For him choosing an emperor is not the same as picking a prime minister, and sounding in many ways ominously like prewar fascist and earlier postwar right wing monarchists such as Mishima Yukio, Nishio explicitly embraces the emperorship as an institution that transcends both reason and mass mediated popular thought. According to him, it is the weight of history (or what Mishima called "tradition") that should guide Japan in resolving the succession issue, and that history is one of succession through the male line. Appropriate measures to deal with the succession crisis should emerge out of the collective wisdom of all the Japanese through the ages, not the "unreflexive sentiments (*mujikaku no kanjō*)" of today's citizens.⁶

Furthermore, behind this reactionary posture is what might be described as a wounded masculinity that remembers and resents the radical downsizing of the imperial family under U.S. military occupation. These men charge that had it not been for the occupation's decision to force 51 individuals belonging to 11 collateral families to relinquish their imperial family status, thereby drastically limiting the pool of possible imperial successors, the imperial household and the nation would not be facing its current crisis.

While we should not discount the influence in government of these unabashed patriarchal neo-nationalists, it is clear that in recent years the dominant view among prominent elected officials, leading representatives of major political parties, and the public at large has shifted away from their extreme views on imperial succession. As early as 1995, current Prime Minister Koizumi, then campaigning for president of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), expressed his support for modifying succession procedures. "I don't think it would be a bad thing for a female to become emperor," he said. "The Imperial Household Law can be changed at any time. I don't necessarily stick obsessively to the male in the direct line." Koizumi reiterated this position in May 2001, not long after the Imperial Household Agency released news of Princess Masako's pregnancy to the public and he has maintained this view. Around the same time spokesmen for other major parties also publicly affirmed legalization of female emperors.⁷ Today patriarchal neo-nationalists like Kobori and Nishio make Koizumi and those close to him a major target of attack on the female succession issue.⁸

Many public statements in support of female emperors have been couched so as to suggest that such a move would be in keeping with the ideal of gender equality. As Yamasaki Hiraku explained in 2001 when he was secretary-

general of the LDP: “Given the recent gender-equal society, it would be appropriate for a female emperor to be allowed.”⁹ Following the birth of a girl to Crown Princess Masako, another LDP power holder, former executive secretary Katō Kōichi, apparently felt compelled to gesture toward the principle of gender equality. Though the casualness with which he made his remarks betrays a lack of serious thinking about women’s issues, he stated that he was in favor of keeping an open mind about the possibility of a female emperor. Based on his understanding that there had been historical precedents in Japan for female emperors he concluded that “compared to us, people in the ancient period might well have been more spontaneous about equal rights for men and women.”¹⁰ Even at the local level, when the Koganei City Assembly in December 2001 passed a resolution supporting the succession of a female emperor it gave three reasons for doing so: the historical precedents of female emperors, the example of other nations, and gender equality.¹¹

And yet, a close reading of the summaries of the Prime Minister’s current advisory panel meetings, the many reference materials and bureaucratic commentaries provided to the panel, and the testimonies of the experts—all these documents reveal the panel’s remarkable lack of attention to the connection between imperial succession and gender equality. Whatever one might think of Yagi’s views, he was correct in observing that by the time he came before the advisory panel at the end of May 2005, the body had decided not to make any deliberations based upon the principle of gender equality.¹² In fact, at the press conference following the panel’s fourth meeting on April 25, Chair Yoshikawa Hiroyuki (former president of the University of Tokyo) had told the media that the panelists agreed that if a female emperor were to be allowed, such a decision would “not be based upon the idea of the ‘equality of men and women.’”¹³ Takahashi Hiroshi, currently a professor (Shizuoka University of Welfare) and for decades a journalist who covered the imperial household, strongly advocated succession by the first born in the direct line regardless of sex. He did not mention the need for gender equality even though he has done so in the past.¹⁴ Of all the academic experts called in to address the body only Yokota Kōichi (Ryūtsū Keizai University), who will be discussed in more detail later, expressed strong concerns about equality and its opposite, discrimination.¹⁵ Also adding some complexity to the supposition that support for a female emperor or female succession lines coincides with at least a moderate position on gender equality, Takamori Akinori parted company with fellow patriarchal neo-nationalist experts Ōhara and Yagi by clearly advocating recognition of female emperors and female lines of succession. Takamori, it should be noted, is vice-president of the neo-conservative organization headed by Yagi, the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform.¹⁶

None of the reference materials provided by Koizumi’s office to the pan-

elists deals in any significant way with the ideal of gender equality. For instance, the panelists could have been provided a copy of the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society. Only some brief references to male/female equality can be found buried among examples of arguments made in 1946 in the Diet during debates on what became the current Imperial Household Law. From these citations it is possible to learn that there were a number of Diet members at the time who advocated the possibility of female emperors for various reasons, including the principle of “gender equality” and the fit with the “spirit of the new constitution.”¹⁷ However, the summaries of the meetings do not reflect any discussion of such positions.

So to return to one of our original questions, if the Imperial Household Law is changed to allow a female emperor and/or succession through female lines, will this mean progress on gender equality? Most likely not. In the first place, from the history of monarchies in other nations there is little to suggest that the reign of a female monarch necessarily coincides with increased opportunities for women. Queen Victoria reigned without apparent contradiction over an expansive empire at the same time that the British state denied women the vote, and a widespread “cult of domesticity” promoted the roles of middle-class women as limited to those of wife and mother. Women did not gain suffrage in Great Britain until 1928. Moreover, as theorists of the relationship between gender and modern nationalism—such as Maurice Agulhon, Lynn Hunt, and George Mosse—pointed out long ago, in modern times the sex that has dominated politics and government has been quite happy to allow female symbols like Britannia, Germanica, and Marianne to represent its nations.¹⁸

Second, as we have seen, while in recent times there have been some attempts to draw parallels between gender equality and female imperial succession, the current advisory panel has been conspicuously silent on this connection. As I have mentioned, even the neo-conservative Takamori, conceding to the practical necessity of preventing the imperial blood line’s extinction, urged the panel to recommend recognition of female imperial succession. Furthermore, if in the highly likely event that the crisis is resolved by allowing females to succeed only when there is no direct male heir, this will symbolically reinforce the second class status of women, whether in the imperial household or as citizens and workers in society at large. This is evident from the explanations given by Tokoro Isao (Kyoto Sangyo University) and Takamori. Advancing a logic so often seen in employment practices, which combines a formal position of non-discrimination while establishing a glass ceiling, Tokoro reasoned that the Japanese emperor’s most essential qualification is not, “a matter of male versus female, but whether the public duties as a symbol of the state and of national unity can be thoroughly performed.” But,

he continued, “in view of this fact, such weighty duties of the emperor should in the first instance be given to males in the imperial family rather than females, who upon marriage are likely to have the great responsibility of such duties as childbirth.” Similarly, Takamori clarified why he proposed that males rather than the first born should be given priority in succession. In addition to the small number of female emperor precedents, he explained, he had considered the “balance between the official public duties of the emperor’s position and the bodily and physiological conditions of women.”¹⁹

The logic separating the issue of female imperial succession from broader attempts to promote gender equality has some fairly deep roots in postwar history. Consider, for example, former Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro’s statements at a meeting of the Liberal Democratic Party’s Research Commission on the Constitution (Kenpō Chōsakai) in the mid-1950s. Nakasone advised that the emperor and the imperial family needed to become better integrated into the everyday life of the national masses. If a female emperor could help in this regard, then it would be appropriate “to recognize a female emperor.” Anticipating what would become the pressing matter of determining the criteria for selecting Crown Prince Akihito’s future marriage partner, Nakasone aired his real concerns about women in the imperial household. He advised that in order to increase the imperial household’s popularity it would be necessary to look for potential brides beyond the narrow pool of blood relations of former peers (*kazoku*) or graduates from Gakushūin, the university that began as a school for the court nobility and then from the late 19th century became known as the university for the peerage and members of the imperial family. He concluded, “to put it in an extreme way, if she is intelligent, healthy and a representative Japanese, even a country peasant girl is qualified to marry [the Crown Prince].” In this pithy statement, Nakasone revealed not only his class prejudice about rural Japan (“even a country peasant girl”) and an implicitly racial understanding about the nation’s citizens (“representative Japanese”); he also showed that his view of women was limited to an instrumentalist one in which they might serve to enhance the popularity of the national symbol and to produce children (“healthy”). For Nakasone, women’s rights and gender equality had nothing to do with female imperial succession.²⁰ Some women have also sometimes taken this position. The woman writer Takagi Nobuko expressed this in very stark terms when in advocating succession by a female emperor she explicitly denied that she was “an advocate of women’s rights.”²¹

What the documents and statements generated by the advisory panel do reveal is a near consensus about the importance of blood and, except for the testimonies of the patriarchal neo-nationalists (Ōhara, Yagi, Takamori), a concern that the panel’s recommendations and the government not depart too

In the highly likely event that the crisis is resolved by allowing females to succeed only when there is no direct male heir, this will symbolically reinforce the second class status of women.

far from the views of Japan's citizens at large. I will return to the blood issue in the next section, but here let me consider the significance of the panel's and the government's care to make clear that it is committed to respecting public opinion. Just after the body's first meeting, panel chair Yoshikawa announced at a press conference that the panel intended to premise its deliberations upon "the opinions of the citizens, the average views of citizens."²² The official summary of the day's discussions further notes that it would prioritize the importance of "presenting a proposal that would satisfy most people," rather than simply weighing various academic arguments against each other. The panel also linked this logic to Article 1 of the constitution, which holds that the emperor derives "his position from the will of the people with whom resides sovereign power."²³ Although not all of the experts called to the hearings were as adamant about reflecting the will of the people—perhaps because as academics they felt it was their mission to educate the masses rather than to reflect their views—at least some of them agreed on its significance. Takahashi, for example, who has long advocated measures to increase the people's sense of intimacy with the imperial household, maintained that the very key to the symbolic monarchy and to succession procedures is whether they are "widely supported by the people."²⁴

It could be argued that the advisory panel's announcement that it would reflect the average views of Japan's citizens is an endorsement of gender equality since public opinion polls seem to show that support for a female emperor increased dramatically in the 1990s, in tandem with the movement to eliminate gender discrimination and to provide more opportunities for women. Since 1975 the Japan Association for Public Opinion Research, one of Japan's leading pollsters, has on nine occasions queried the public on the issue of female emperors. Interviewers have posed the question: "Do you think that emperors should be limited to males, or do you think that females should be allowed?" In the first year 54.7 percent of respondents picked the option, "limited to males" while 31.9 percent chose "females should be allowed." Others were "not particularly concerned," "didn't know," or had "other" views. In 1984 and 1987 the percentage of those who thought "females should be allowed" dropped further to 26.8 and 29 percent, respectively, and returned roughly to the 1975 level when 32.5 percent chose this response in 1992. In the meantime, the proportion of those who felt that the emperor "should be limited to males" decreased gradually to the level of 46.8 percent by 1992, even as this group still far outnumbered the female emperor supporters. From the mid-1990s, however, the percentage of female emperor supporters began to surpass the male only interviewees, and by 1998 roughly half (49.7 percent) of those polled indicated that they approved of a female on the throne, while less than a third (30.6 percent) favored only males. In the latest

March 2005 poll a remarkable 81.3 percent of interviewees placed themselves among female emperor supporters, while a miniscule 4.9 percent still believed in preserving the gender limitation. Some analysts have in fact linked this statistical reversal to changes in social and governmental attitudes toward gender equality, as was manifested in discussions about and finally passage of the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society in June 1999.²⁵

Among the major problems with polls such as those conducted by the Japan Association for Public Opinion Research, however, is that they lack precision. They do not allow us to determine why interviewees chose to support or reject the idea of a female emperor. While there were undoubtedly many who favored female emperors in the spirit of gender equality, we have already seen that the “females should be allowed” position can be taken for other reasons, some of which are extremely regressive on the gender issue. Moreover, according to an *Asahi Shimbun* telephone poll undertaken at the end of January 2005, of the 86 percent who agreed that “it would be better to make it possible for females to become emperor,” only about half (52 percent) thought that succession should go to the first born regardless of gender while 39 percent said that preference should be given to males.²⁶ In fact, the polls themselves can be seen as a political technology that has blurred the reasons and the stakes involved in supporting female emperors. In this sense they have been an ideal mechanism for the government, which is torn between the need to increase women’s opportunities outside the household and to launch campaigns for this purpose because of the shrinking labor pool—otherwise the economy would collapse—and to continue to promote motherhood and family values as measures to increase the birthrate and frankly, protect men’s customary privileges. By extension, a female emperor would be an ideal symbol for the current government in that she could signify various meanings for various people, including gender equality for some and gender inequality for others.

Gender versus race

While Koizumi’s advisory panel has hesitated to make an explicit connection between female imperial succession and gender equality, it has made it absolutely clear that the imperial bloodline must be preserved. In fact, the panel’s records are thoroughly saturated with blood talk. For example, the summary of the panel’s second meeting states in no uncertain terms that “in considering the problem of imperial succession, what is most important is the blood tie, the blood lineage.”²⁷ Similarly, the summary of the fifth meeting contains a section which notes that while the practice of imperial succession through the male line cannot be ignored, it is most crucial not to hold a narrow view of what is called tradition but to transmit its essence over time. And for this panel, that essence is blood. As the summary states about the postwar

shift in ultimate political authority from the emperor to the people, “sovereignty underwent a change with the establishment of the current constitution. However, the constitution admitted and attempts to continue to cherish, as a symbol, the presence of an emperor who is connected by one blood.”²⁸ Among the experts, all mentioned the significance of blood transmission in one way or another—but only Yokota with some significant skepticism. These views ranged from what can only be described as the vulgar biologism and pop genetics proffered by Yagi—who argued that the Y chromosome found in the first emperor Jimmu could only have been passed on through the male line—to Yamaori Tetsuo’s more sophisticated suggestion that even though blood is important, there is a strong fictive quality to the idea of imperial blood transmission.

It is possible to understand this obsession with blood as simply a concern about the biological continuity of the imperial line that has nothing to do with race. It could be argued that the panelists and public commentary more generally have simply been concerned to uphold the spirit of the constitution, which stipulates in Article 2 that imperial succession must be “dynastic” (or more literally, “hereditary [seshū]”). Yet such a narrow and literal reading would ignore the fact that in modern times, both before and after the second world war, the emperor and the imperial household have so often symbolized the racial and cultural unity of the Japanese people. Whether openly acknowledged or not, maintenance of blood continuity within the imperial line has usually been an allegory for the blood continuity of the Japanese people. Today, open declarations about the racial unity of the emperor and Japanese people are sometimes avoided; but as Etienne Balibar²⁹ and others have noted, now culture often stands in for biological understandings of race, and it does so with the same effects. In the Japanese case, the common assertions that the emperor represents “traditional Japanese culture” or “Yamato culture,” often connote race as well as culture. When Nakasone unreflexively referred to the “representative Japanese” in the passage cited above, it is difficult to deny that there is a strong suggestion that the term “representative” connotes race, as much as culture and upbringing.

More recently, when Yokota Kōichi in 2004 testified before a subcommittee of the lower house that from the standpoint of normative law the emperor should be considered a symbol of the unity of “various peoples (*shomin-zoku*)” making up the “multi-ethnic nation of Japan (*taminzoku kokka Nihon*)” and not simply of the “Japanese ethnic people (*Nihon minzoku*),” LDP representative Shimomura Hirofumi chastised him, saying that he could not agree with a view that distinguished between the emperor as a “symbol of the unity of the Japanese ethnic people” and as “symbol of the unity of the Japanese people.” For him, apparently, the Japanese nation and the Japanese ethnicity or

race was one and the same. At the same hearing Morioka Masahiro, another LDP representative, expressed his worry that if marriages of imperial household members were treated like the marriages of common citizens it would be “possible for them to marry foreigners, and this would be inappropriate from the perspective of Japanese identity.”³⁰

While I could give many more recent examples of the racial thinking underlying dominant discourses on imperial succession, let me also consider a representative discussion that appeared in the magazine *Shokun* in the late 1980s. One of the main points that the two well known scholars Ichimura Shin’ichi and Eto Jun made about the Japanese imperial household, was that what had distinguished the Japanese monarchy from its counterparts throughout the world had been the “unity of the ethnos (*minzoku*) and the imperial household” throughout history. As counter-examples, they argued that China had been ruled by non-Han dynasties such as the Mongols, and in Europe intermarriages between royal families had resulted in monarchies that were not of the same ethnicity or nationality as the people over whom they reigned. Thus George I, ruler of the small German kingdom of Hanover, became king of England while barely even able to speak English. In contrast to Europe where “the nation, the royal line, and the ethnos had been doubly or triply layered,” in Japan “the ethnos, the nation, and the royal line had been roughly the same.” Completely forgetting that oceans can be bridges to human interaction rather than barriers, they maintained that in part because Japan had been an island nation, it had taken the form of a “pure nation.” In their reasoning, hereditary royal succession had been the key to preserving the unity of the monarch and the nation’s people (*kokumin*). What they meant was that by limiting succession to the Japanese throne by blood, it had been possible to maintain the singular ethnic identity of the Japanese people and the Japanese imperial household.³¹

Thus regardless of how the debate around imperial succession is resolved on the gender issue, the male or female Japanese emperor will continue to symbolize, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly through the language of culture, the Japanese people as a unique race. In the event that a female emperor ascends the throne, even if she might obliquely signify gender equality for some, this “victory” for “Japanese” women will be bought at the price of a symbolism of blood that will continue to nourish a system of discrimination against those considered marginal or outside what is imagined to be a racially homogenous Japan. A female Japanese emperor, for example, will do nothing to counter discrimination against minority men, nor against women such as Korean women who are the descendents of former colonial subjects, nor against new immigrants to Japan, regardless of their gender. Furthermore, the female emperor is likely to perpetuate a system of discrimination by class since

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she would surely be fashioned so as to represent the type of person that Tokoro thought would make an ideal marriage partner for a future emperor—namely, someone “noble and high-born (*kōki na katagata*).”³²

Among the experts called before Koizumi’s advisory panel, only Yokota reminded his listeners that even if female imperial succession were allowed, a more fundamental question about the constitution’s guarantee of human equality would remain unresolved. While Yokota’s remarks ranged fairly widely, his most relevant remarks may be summed up in the following way. First, the constitution (Article 2) states that imperial succession must be hereditary and has nothing to say about gender. It is the Imperial Household Law that limits imperial succession to males and the male line. Since the Imperial Household Law is subordinate to the constitution and the latter’s fundamental principle of equality, the Imperial Household Law’s gender specific provision on imperial succession is unconstitutional and should be considered invalid. Yet revising the law to allow female imperial succession will still leave intact the constitution’s stipulation that imperial succession should be determined by heredity. This is problematic because the principle of hereditary succession “deviates from” or is “in contradiction with constitutional principle.” Not only does privileging heredity blur the fact that sovereign power is supposed to inhere in the nation’s citizens, “from the perspective of respect for fundamental human rights, it contradicts the [constitutional] principle of equality.” As he put it in no uncertain terms: hereditary succession “recognizes discrimination based upon birth, and in this limited respect it may be said that the constitution of Japan is a discriminatory constitution.”

While Yokota recognizes that there is an alternative legal interpretation which holds that the emperor is a legitimate exception to the constitutional principle of equality, he places himself in the camp of legal scholars who contend that the law requires deviations or exemptions from fundamental constitutional principles to be minimized, including those that concern the emperor. This means that for Yokota, simply reevaluating the gender provision of the Imperial Household Law and thereby resolving the imperial succession crisis is insufficient. For him the fundamental question that must be addressed is not how to stabilize procedures for imperial succession, but why imperial succession is necessary. Why, for example, is it necessary to “maintain an emperor system as a constitutional system when it is in contradiction with constitutional principles?”

This is a question that some feminist scholars and activists, such as those belonging to the Society for Research on Women and the Emperor System (*Josei to Tennōsei Kenkyūkai*) have also been asking. They do not regard female imperial succession to be a symbol of gender equality, but yet another measure to preserve a patriarchal family system that relegates women to the

primary tasks of childbirth and childrearing. For them, a female emperor will only serve to perpetuate gender inequality and, through its fixation with blood, discrimination more generally.³³

Concluding thoughts

Throughout its modern history the Japanese imperial household has been periodically reinvented so as to represent dominant norms of sexuality, gender and family. Following the Meiji Restoration (1868), the emperor who had conventionally been kept hidden from view, became a visible sign of military masculinity and patriarchy. Mimicking the contemporary practices of European monarchical masculinity, the Meiji emperor took on facial hair (not a practice in the politics of fashion in the pre-Meiji Court since at least the early 17th century) and began to dress in tight fitting military clothing when in public view. Despite the uncomfortable fact that the crown prince (later Emperor Taishō) was not the biological son of the emperor, Meiji was represented in the media as a monogamous husband, father, and patriarch while the empress became the embodiment of the official norm for women, “the good wife and wise mother.” In the meantime, the Constitution of the Empire of Japan (1889) for the first time in history legally excluded females from imperial succession.

After the war the Imperial Household Law, a product of U.S. and Japanese collaboration, continued to maintain a type of patriarchal authority by excluding women from imperial succession. In the late 1950s Crown Princess Shōda Michiko became the darling of the media and achieved a starlike quality, but she also became a sign of postwar motherhood and domesticity. Her non-noble “commoner” (actually high bourgeois) background represented the newly democratizing Japan, and also lent credibility to attempts to make her appear at times like the “everywoman” of the salaried worker family. The media told the public, for example, that one of the dishes she enjoyed preparing for her family was the all too common “curried rice.”³⁴

Today Japan’s imperial household stands at the crossroads of conflicting expectations for women. On the one hand, the declining birthrate has made it impossible for the men and parties who dominate government to ignore the compelling necessity of increasing opportunities for women. The only alternative would be to loosen immigration restrictions, and the political and business elite within Japan find that a far less palatable alternative. This is certainly the reason why some unlikely members of the LDP have sometimes gestured toward linking the female succession issue to the broader goal of a “Gender-Equal Society.” On the other hand, the new movement toward gender equality has touched off a fierce reactionary movement as is represented by men such as Ōhara and Yagi, analyzed above. Their ardent advocacy of exclusively

male imperial succession is tied to their broader campaign to reinforce patriarchal authority in society at large.

What this means is that if the patriarchal neo-nationalists succeed in preventing female succession, this will signal a victory for reactionary forces on gender issues. It would be hard to read such an outcome as anything but a statement about Japan's lack of resolve in establishing gender equality. However, the reverse will not hold true because a great deal of support for female imperial succession has little to do with gender equality and almost everything to do with preserving the imperial bloodline and the monarchy as a symbol of Japanese (racial) unity. Thus even if the Imperial Household Law is revised to allow for female emperors and/or succession through the female line, this need not symbolize a progressive stance on gender equality, particularly if males rather than the first born are given preference. Furthermore, not even legislation enabling succession by the first born will necessarily symbolize Japan's commitment to equal opportunities for men and women. A great deal would depend upon how changes to the law are worded and the spin with which government spokespersons and the media explain the revision. In any case, it is difficult to imagine that the government—made up of reluctant feminists at best and dominated as it is by the Liberal Democratic Party with its strong patriarchal neo-nationalist wing—would allow its ambiguity on gender equality to spin out of control.

I will end by reiterating that regardless of the final decision on female imperial succession, the imperial household will continue to be at the center of a system of discrimination. For proponents of equal opportunity without regard to gender, much more would be gained by focusing on placing women in positions of real power and influence, such as in the seat of the prime minister, rather than enthroning a female emperor. After all, a female emperor would be taking on duties that the constitution has explicitly divorced from formal politics—"he shall not have powers related to government" (Article 4)—and where the obsession with blood line will continue to make childbirth her first duty. Finally, any emperor, male or female, whose authority and legitimacy depends upon hereditary status as symbolized in blood, will only continue to contribute toward discrimination against those imagined to be at the margins of Japan's supposedly homogeneous society.

Notes

1. The names of individuals who reside in or have primarily resided in Japan are rendered in the conventional Japanese order of surname first, given name second: thus, Koizumi Junichirō, rather than Junichirō Koizumi. Insofar as I have been able to find them, I have used the official or approved translations of the names for laws, committees,

institutions, organizations, and so on, even though these are sometimes awkward or non-literal translations

2. Information about this panel is taken from its website: <http://www.kantei.go.jp/sing/kousitu>. The website does not give an official English translation of the panel's name, but its literal meaning is "distinguished (or learned) panel on the Imperial Household Law." The site includes many reference materials relevant to imperial succession, summaries of panel discussions, and the full testimonies of the academic experts. Unless otherwise noted, all materials located at this site were accessed on June 30, 2005.

3. For the Ōhara and Yagi testimonies: <http://www.kantei.go.jp/sing/kousitu>, 6th meeting (May 31, 2005). Ōhara is an expert on Shinto, particularly on state and religion issues, but has been very active in a range of neo-nationalist activities. For example, he is one of the authors of a book, published bilingually in Japanese and English, defending Japan against charges that its troops committed the Nanjing Massacre: Takemoto Tadao and Ōhara Yasuo, *Saishin "Nankin daigyakusatsu": sekai ni uttaeru Nihon no enzai* (Tokyo: Meiseisha, 2000). The English version of the title is *The Alleged "Nanjing Massacre": Japan's Rebuttal to China's Forged Claims*. Yagi Hidetsugu is a specialist on constitutional law who recently became head of the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform. This is the organization that has been much criticized for its recently government-approved middle school history textbook, which denies or omits such wartime atrocities as the Nanjing Massacre and the system of sexual slavery known as the "comfort women" system, and which generally seeks to minimize the suffering inflicted upon other peoples by Japanese colonialism, imperialism, and militarism. In addition to his stance against female imperial succession (for example, in his book "*Josei tennō yōninron" o haisu – ronshū gendai Nihon ni tsuite no kōsatsu* [Tokyo: Ryūtsū Shuppan]), Yagi is also well known for his attack on separate surnames for married couples and his stance against the "gender-free" movement. The latter is a feminist movement that seeks the elimination of gender bias, for example in education.

4. In a technical sense Yagi stated that he would not completely foreclose the possibility of considering female emperors and succession through female lines once every other avenue to secure male succession has been exhausted. However, he adamantly spoke against changing the law in the near future to allow this, and his suggestions for radically expanding the pool of possible male successors would make female succession and succession through females a virtual impossibility.

5. Kobori Keiichirō "Josei tennō no sokui suishin wa kōshitsu to Nihon koku no iyasaka ni tsūzuru ka," *Seiron* 396 (May 2005), 137.

6. Nishio Kanji, "Chūgoku ryōdo mondai to joteiron no miezaru teki," *Seiron*, April 2005, 124–37; for the quotes, 131 & 132. Mishima's key essay is, "Bunka bōeiron," in *Mishima Yukio zenshū* vol. 33 (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1976). Written originally in 1968, the title of the piece literally translated is, "In Defense of Culture."

7. *Tōkyō Yomiuri Shimbun* May 9, 2001; *Asahi Shimbun*, May 9, 2001, evening edition.

8. For more detail on this and other matters concerning the future of the imperial household see, T. Fujitani, "Shōchō tennōsei no mirai ni tsuite," in Amino Yoshihiko, et al., ed., *Nihon no rekishi 25: Nihon wa doko e yuku no ka (A History of Japan Vol. 25: Whither Japan?)* (Tokyo: Kōdansha), 233–78.

9. *Tōkyō Yomiuri Shimbun*, May 9, 2001.

10. *Mainichi Shimbun*, December 2, 2001.

11. *Asahi Shimbun*, December 21, 2001.

12. <http://www.kantei.go.jp/sing/kousitu>, 6th meeting (May 31, 2005).

13. *Tō kyō Yomiuri Shimbun*, April 26, 2005.
14. For example, in “Ima koso kōshitsu tenpan no kaisei o,” *Bungei Shunjū* (January 2002), 142-48.
15. For the Yokota and Takahashi testimonies: <http://www.kantei.go.jp/sing/kousitu>, 6th meeting (May 31, 2005).
16. For Takamori’s testimony: <http://www.kantei.go.jp/sing/kousitu>, 7th meeting (June 8, 2005). See note 2, above, for more on the Society. Incidentally, it may be noted that while the panel heard the views of only eight scholars, two of them are leading figures in this one neo-conservative/neo-nationalist organization. Yagi is president and Takamori is one of the vice-presidents.
17. <http://www.kantei.go.jp/sing/kousitu>, 2nd Meeting (February 18, 2005), document 2-1, 8-11.
18. Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne Into Battle*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); and George Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).
19. For Tokoro’s testimony: <http://www.kantei.go.jp/sing/kousitu>, 7th meeting (June 8, 2005).
20. The above quotations are cited in Watanabe Osamu, *Sengo seijishi no naka no tennō sei* (Tokyo: Aoki Shoten, 1990), 212. Nakasone continues to support recognition of female emperors from a position that can hardly be linked to gender equality. As he stated recently on television, “I personally believe it would be fine to allow female emperors. It should just be written [into the Imperial Household Law] that a male has priority and that a female can become emperor in the event there is no male.” (Quoted in *Tō kyō Yomiuri Shimbun*, January 29, 2005).
21. *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, December 17, 2001, evening edition.
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23. <http://www.kantei.go.jp/sing/kousitu>, 1st Meeting, “giji yōshi” (January 25, 2005).
24. For Takahashi’s testimony: <http://www.kantei.go.jp/sing/kousitu>, 6th meeting (May 31, 2005). For his general views about the symbolic monarchy see, for instance, *Shōchō tennō* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1987).
25. Kunii Masahiro of Kyodo News, which is one of the major organizations that supports the Japan Association for Public Opinion Research, makes this argument in “Josei tennō no yōnindo,” *Shin Jōhō Sentaa*, <http://www.sjc.or.jp> (accessed July 2, 2005). The data in this paragraph is taken from Kunii’s article.
26. *Asahi Shimbun*, February 1, 2005.
27. <http://www.kantei.go.jp/sing/kousitu>, 2nd Meeting, “giji yōshi” (February 18, 2005).
28. <http://www.kantei.go.jp/sing/kousitu>, 5th Meeting, “giji yōshi” (May 11, 2005).
29. For example, Etienne Balibar, “Is There a ‘Neo-Racism?’,” trans. Chris Turner, in Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class* (New York and London: Verso, 1991), 17-28.
30. The subcommittee, Saikō Hōki toshite no Kenpō no Arikata in Kansuru Chōsa Shō-iinkai uses the awkward English translation, Subcommittee on Ideal Constitution as Supreme Law. The information on this meeting relies on the publication of the Research Commission on the Constitution, “Shūgiin kenpō chōsakai nyūsu,” H16.2.6, vol. 63 (2004), p.1-3 (available at http://shugiin.go.jp/index.nsf/html/index_kenpou.htm).

31. Ichimura Shin'ichi and Etō Jun, "Tennō," *Shokun* (December 1987): 26-50, esp. 28-30.

32. <http://www.kantei.go.jp/sing/kousitu>, 7th meeting (June 8, 2005).

33. Various statements by the Society, including its letter of protest to Koizumi and his advisory panel, can be consulted at <http://www.geocities.jp/jotenken>.

34. I have written more on the history of gender and family in the imperial household in such publications as, *Splendid Monarchy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) and "Shōchō tennōsei no mirai ni tsuite."

Why Should a Feminist Care about What Goes on Behind Japan's Chrysanthemum Curtain? The Imperial Succession Issue as a Metaphor for Women's Rights

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Crown Princess Masako's life course—a career followed by becoming the mother of a single child—makes her a symbol of the modern Japanese gender dilemma. Masako was a rising star in the Foreign Ministry, courted for years by the Crown Prince Naruhito before she agreed, at age 30, to marry him. In many ways, this was a typical pattern for young professionals.

Masako had additional reasons for hesitating to marry; unlike other professional women, she would not just be compromising her career, she would also be subjected to the imperial family's need to produce an heir. This she has not done. Her three-year-old is a girl, Princess Aiko, and the Imperial Succession Law of 1947 stipulates that only a son born to a male related to an emperor may inherit the throne. (Naruhito's brother Fumihito is married, but both of his children are girls, and any children his sister Sayako may have when she marries in November 2005 cannot under current law inherit the throne).

In January, 2005, a blue-ribbon panel of eight men and two women, all but two in their 70s (the other two are in their 60s), was appointed to study changing the law. A decade ago, only 33 percent of the Japanese people supported a female emperor; now 87 percent do.¹ This may very well reflect desperation; without a female emperor, the institution will die out. Of course, some people question why a democracy needs a monarch, although this sentiment, while common in the past, has dissipated lately. For others, the notion that any job is limited by gender is outmoded. If women can hold any job—an opinion espoused by most Japanese though not practiced in business or politics—why not the throne as well? Here we see the intersection of several gender dilemmas: first, the clash between the modern feminist attitude that Japanese men and women should be able to hold any job, on the one hand, and what some people view as “tradition,” that is, the male principle in inheriting the throne, on the other; and second, the belief held by many modern women, as we have

seen above, that marriage and career are so incompatible that marriage and especially motherhood should be postponed as long as possible. Crown Princess Masako and her daughter Aiko embody both of those dilemmas.

Although Japanese women continue to be stereotyped as passive about women's rights, agency, empowerment, and equality in the workplace and in the civic arena, nothing could be further from the truth. To be sure, most women in Japan would not call themselves feminists any more than do women in the United States. And yet gendered advocacy—attempts to better women's status and conditions through focus on gendered identity—is at the heart of most definitions of feminism, and many Japanese women fit that model. Such Japanese women include feminist scholars in the academy;² activist lawyers working to overturn discriminatory legislation and practices that remain in place despite constitutional guarantees of equality;³ advocates of a workplace free of gender bias;⁴ self-described “housewives” (a term that has very different meanings from those we assume in English) who use their role as preservers of the home to agitate—through both civic and electoral means—for a more humane society;⁵ and advocates for peace and reparations for Asian women harmed during World War II as comfort women and after the war by sex tours undertaken by businessmen from Japan and other countries.⁶

While an important strand of women's rights advocacy in Japan, as elsewhere in the past century, has called for granting identical rights to men and women—a concept labeled, as early as the 1880s, *danjo byōdō* (male-female equal rights)—other strands have stressed *joken* (women's rights) or *boken* (mothers' rights).⁷ Unlike “equal rights,” “women's rights” and “mothers' rights” define women and men as different both in body and in the social aspects of gender roles. Although these two approaches appear to be fundamentally at odds, both have been employed by those who wish to empower women. The difference approach (that is, the stress on women's rights or mother's rights) may appear to some observers to be a problematic type of feminism, as it resembles a frequently used justification for inequality of the sexes. Nevertheless, many supporters of women, including those who regard their role as housewives as humane and nurturing in contrast to the careerist focus of professional men, believe the difference approach can best achieve humanitarian, feminist goals. To outsiders, such women may appear to be “traditional,” but they often express the desire to transform society.

Another segment among Japanese women—professional women active in the workplace—also conduct their lives as if women and men were different physically and socially, although they do not espouse social change from the platform of the nurturing, humane housewife. This group of modern women seems to epitomize a rejection of what is often considered the woman's “traditional” lifestyle as a wife and mother. Marrying late, if at all, and having few

or no children while remaining in the work force, these women at first glance seem to be making a statement in opposition to the notion that men's and women's roles are very different. Though some observers consider such women to be just like men, most of these women themselves do not, in fact, attempt to emulate men's life paths, which have usually combined marriage and children with careers. Indeed, like housewives who work to better the lives of their families and society, women who marry late and have few children suggest that being a housewife and mother is so all-consuming a task that it is almost impossible to pursue a professional career, as married men are able to do. (What is a new point of view, however, is that women can lead fulfilled lives without marriage and motherhood.)

Mean age of first marriage in Japan

Year	Male	Female
1950	25.0	23.0
1955	26.6	23.8
1960	27.2	24.4
1965	27.2	24.5
1970	26.9	24.2
1975	27.0	24.7
1980	27.8	25.2
1985	28.2	25.5
1990	28.4	25.9
1995	28.5	26.3
2000	28.8	27.0
2001	29.0	27.2
2002	29.1	27.4
2003	29.4	27.6

Source: Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare

Rather than trying to blend motherhood and a professional career and to balance home and work responsibilities with a husband, significant numbers of women, especially Tokyo women, decide those things are not possible. The median age of marriage in 2003 was 29.4 for men and 27.6 for women throughout Japan.⁸

More than a third of all Tokyo women in their early 30s are not married, though this number drops off to a quarter of all Tokyo women in their early 40s.⁹ The rate of non-marriage for Japanese males is even higher—43 percent of men in their early 30s and 15 percent of men in their late 40s. Late- or non-marriage patterns are not unique to Japan. They characterize Europe and the rest of Asia as well, though the reasons vary greatly by country. Japanese women tend to be increasingly disenchanted with marriage, and many prefer to live with their parents as what is called, pejoratively and not particularly fairly, “parasite singles.”¹⁰ In Japan, unlike many other countries, late marriage or non-marriage affects the birth rate, as unmarried Japanese women generally do not have babies. Japan’s fertility rate was 1.29 in 2003—Tokyo’s was just 1.0—compared to 2.1 for the United States, 1.7 for Australia, 1.6 for Britain, and 1.3 for Germany and Italy.¹¹ (To keep the population from shrinking, a fertility rate of 2.07 is necessary.)

While unmarried Japanese women may be too busy with their careers and enjoying life to be activists for a cause, they certainly are creating a new discourse on adult womanhood. They may be said to be living a kind of feminism, albeit one that appears very different from that of the socially committed housewife, while not actively promoting it. Pundits worry that Japan will decline in international importance if its population reaches 64 million in 2100 (it is currently 127 million) and that the number of young people in the work force will be insufficient to support Japan’s rapidly aging society (Japan also has the world’s highest longevity).¹² Policies that allow husbands to take tax write-offs for dependent wives and that exempt from taxation the incomes of married women below a low threshold—an indicator of poorly paid part-time work or no employment outside the home—have been attempted to persuade women to stay home and make babies.¹³ But tax policies that encourage married women toward low income are counterproductive to the goal of encouraging childbirth; if anything, they reinforce the notion that career success and marriage are incompatible, thereby frightening some professional women from marrying. Positive incentives that remove the penalty of marriage and motherhood would be far more effective.

What goes on behind the chrysanthemum curtain has been closely linked to the lives and hopes of feminists and other women in Japan for over 100 years. A brief historical view of gender and the modernizing state can help explain current issues. Japan embarked on a program of rapid transformation

The Imperial House Law, stipulating male gender, came as a shock to Japan’s feminists. While we might consider their dismay to be naïve, it was by no means a foregone conclusion in the late 1880s that the emperor had to be male.

of the political order, society, economy, diplomacy, and culture following the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Models for reform in a wide variety of areas were sought throughout the world. Among other things, new political institutions were crafted, and examples of various European state systems as well as linkages with Japan's past were discussed. The most obvious link to the past was the imperial institution, because the political change of 1868 itself was carried out in the name of the emperor. Though politically impotent before 1868, the emperor was, nonetheless, a powerful symbol that could be manipulated for any political end. Eventually, the "emperor system" was created, and it was used as a superordinate abstraction under which authoritarianism and militarism would later develop. In order to create this system, the head of the imperial family had to be constructed as the reification of the state, and religious tools were a handy way to do that in Japan. Though the emperor had not been actively venerated for centuries, Shinto symbolism was readily available to reestablish the veneration of the emperor. Thus, when discussion of the imperial family resumed after World War II, religion was always in the background, rendering any discussion somewhat more tied to "tradition" than it would have been if the emperor had simply been an organ of the modernizing state.

But the emperor was, in fact, a part of Japan's modernity. In the 1880s, when all things old and new were up for lively discussion in Japan, the nature of the state was heatedly debated. Members of the People's Rights movement, some of whom were students of the women's rights movements gathering steam in the United States, England, and elsewhere, called for a representative form of government. Women's rights advocates—the term "feminist" was not used in Japan until 1910—demanded education reform, the elimination of prostitution and concubinage, and gender equality before the law.¹⁴ Few mentioned the rights of full citizenship such as voting; to be sure, no women anywhere in the world had the vote at that time. But the possibility of social reform looked promising for feminists in the late 19th century, as the structure of the Japanese state was still being debated and formed.

In the late 19th century, most women were farmers or urban poor, and all worked as hard as or harder than their husbands. In farm villages, formal marriages were often not registered, and serial monogamy was common. Motherhood often took a back seat to productivity in determining the worth of a wife. Heirs could be adopted, but a productive wife was necessary for the continuity of the family.¹⁵ Family relations were different among the urban higher classes. Descended from samurai or wealthy merchants, these families put greater stress on the married woman's role as a child bearer, and eventually that role was inculcated throughout Japanese society. The imperial family was even more focused on reproduction. The empress and several concubines

existed to bear a male heir. One feminist of the 1880s, Kishida Toshiko, summoned to serve as a tutor to the empress, left the court in disgust after just a few years, as she believed the sexual license there was horrifying.¹⁶ The Meiji emperor's son was, in fact, the son of a concubine. But there was no written requirement that the emperor be male until 1889. As part of the creation of the modern state, the Meiji government promulgated a constitution and a series of laws to carry out the constitution in 1889. The Imperial House Law, stipulating male gender, came as a shock to Japan's feminists. While we might consider their dismay to be naïve, it was by no means a foregone conclusion in the late 1880s that the emperor had to be male. European models, used liberally for Japan's modernizing institutions, offered good examples of female monarchs, not the least of whom was Queen Victoria of England. Moreover, there were precedents of women monarchs in Japan. There had been eight reigning empresses in previous centuries.

Feminists abandoned discussion of the gender of the emperor in the decades that followed, and took up a variety of issues, including labor reform, educational equality, elimination of prostitution and venereal disease, and civil rights for women. Appeals for women's rights were made to the elected officials, and little feminist thought was given to what was going on in the court. Perhaps they should have given more attention, as some contemporary Japanese feminist scholars contend.¹⁷ While feminists were struggling to be accepted as full citizens of the state, that state was becoming increasingly authoritarian and expansionistic, and carried out ignoble deeds in the name of the emperor. Some post World War II feminist scholars hold their foremothers guilty for not having opposed the rise of the oppressive emperor system. In this, they joined many other scholars who questioned why a democracy should have a monarchy at all.

Occupied by American forces after the War, Japan embarked on its reconstruction under the auspices of the United States and its officers. The revised constitution (1947), which permitted the retention of the emperor, was written by a team of Americans. The debate over the retention of the emperor was complex and bitterly fought, both among Americans and among Japanese, and is well analyzed by many scholars, most recently John Dower in his masterly work, *Embracing Defeat*.¹⁸ For this essay, what is most interesting is the issue of male gender. The constitution of 1947 described the role of the emperor, but it was the Imperial Household Law of 1947 that mandated that only males whose ancestors included emperors on their father's side could inherit the throne. Japan's leading feminists during the difficult postwar years were focusing their attention on using women's new civil rights, getting milk for starving children, and trying to retain jobs for women who had been forced to leave the workplace to make room for returning soldiers. Rather

Many women, even those with part time jobs, define themselves as “housewives” because they do not wish to compromise what they see as a life of serving their families and serving society by selling out to an employer, as they see their husbands do.

than demanding that women be part of an institution with ties to the recent and despised war, many feminists paid little heed to the issue of imperial succession. Besides, emperor Hirohito had sons and brothers and other males who could inherit the throne. The imperial family was really beside the point.

But there has been no male born to the imperial family since 1965, and what seemed unimportant to many Japanese has taken on greater import—and has even entered feminist discussions. There will be no imperial family without female succession. Discussion about the imperial family has opened up lively discourse about women; and that can only be a good thing for those concerned with improving the status and conditions of women.

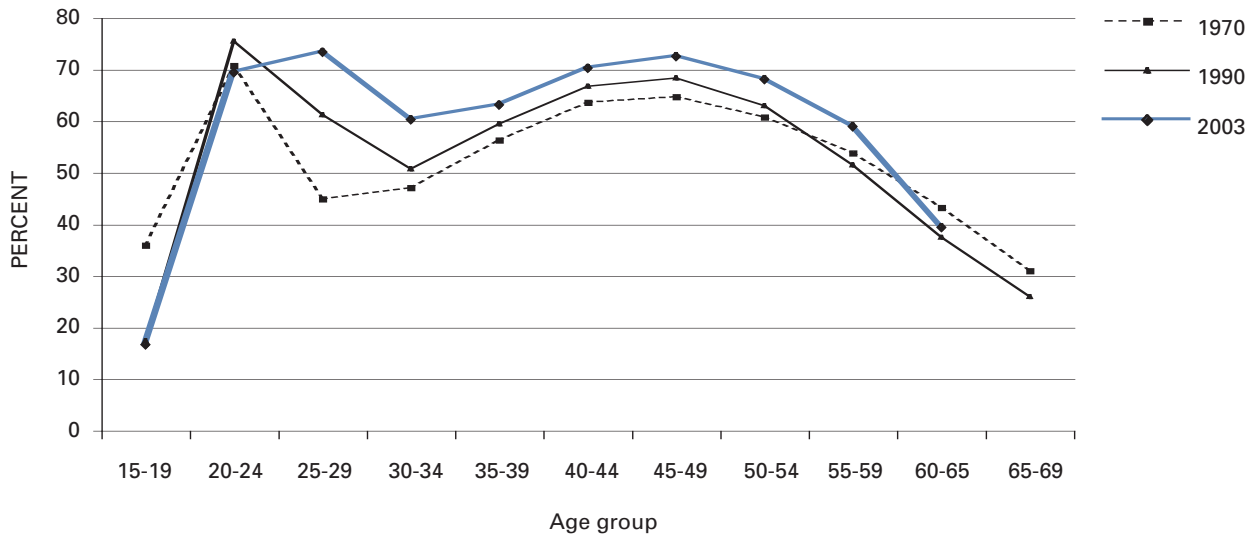
As noted above, Japan has had feminist activists since the late 19th century. The liveliest period was between the world wars. Then, as now, many would not have called themselves feminists, and in fact some, especially socialists who worked hard for protective labor legislation for the legions of female factory workers, criticized advocates of equal civil rights as “bourgeois.” Then, as now, some women saw themselves as best serving humanity by focusing on children, poverty, and other social issues, while others worked for equal civil rights with men as a route to achieving reforms through the vote and elected office. Then, as now, the question could be framed as focusing on women either as different—perhaps more ethical and certainly more in need of society’s protections—or as the same as men. Granting full civil rights to women, as in the 1947 constitution although not in Imperial Household Law, derives from the equality side of the debate. Seeing women as different and as contributing differently to society and the body politic derives from what some scholars call the “maternalist” side of the debate. Many Japanese women—and I would venture many American women as well—are at heart maternalists. As early as the World War I era, Japanese feminists argued that women deserved the vote because they were mothers; by World War II, motherhood had been elevated into a venerated state.¹⁹ While women had been valued as productive wives early in the 20th century, they came to be most esteemed as mothers—and derived their social meaning as mothers—by mid century.

The definition of the mother as the backbone of the family, with a husband who should ideally work extremely long hours in loyal service to his company—a real dichotomization of the roles of husbands and wives—is, thus, a creation of the mid-century. The departure of men during World War II had much to do with that, but even more important, after the war, the government worked with businesses to develop a system that best served the rebuilding of the war-torn country.²⁰ There was nothing traditional about that. Indeed, throughout the 1950s, despite efforts to return women to the home, many stayed in the workplace. By 1975, the repeated message that women should return to the home had finally taken root. Japanese women and men

came to see their life courses in vastly different ways—husbands to work and wives to the home, where they would focus on their children. The notion that the birth mother alone should take care of babies and toddlers supplanted earlier practices of care by fathers, siblings, and other family members in addition to mothers (though, interestingly, this has nothing to do with Confucianism, as divergent patterns of early childhood care in other Asian countries today indicate). The year 1975 was, coincidentally, the United Nations International Year of the Woman, which kicked off the Decade of Women and later, the UN’s passage of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). A “second wave” of Japanese feminists had started to make their voices heard in the early part of the 1970s, but they had been ridiculed. In 1975, however, establishment figures like Diet politician Ichikawa Fusae, Japan’s leading suffragist in the prewar era, used her clout and elderly respectability to lead a large coalition of housewives’ groups, feminist organizations, teachers’ groups, and many others to force public and parliamentary awareness of the demands of women.²¹ At the same time, the anti-pollution and anti-war movements were attracting and politicizing many housewives. The struggle for an Equal Employment Opportunity Law drew in yet other women to feminist activities.²² By the 1980s, society appeared to be in rapid flux.

And yet, many women continued to behave as if combining work and family life were difficult. The attitudes of unmarried women cited above are a clear indication of that many women believed they would lose the benefits of the single lifestyle if they married young. Clearly, the way to rectify that would be to make marriage more attractive by easing the demands of both work and parenthood and convincing men to take advantage of the Child Care Leave Act of 1991.²³ (Only 0.55 percent of eligible men took child care leave in 2001).²⁴ Many women, even those with part time jobs, define themselves as “housewives” because they do not wish to compromise what they see as a life of serving their families and serving society by selling out to an employer, as they see their husbands do. As noted above, “housewife” does not carry the same connotation in Japan today as in the United States; a Japanese housewife is the “female head of household” (*shufu*) and can be employed, though she also is in charge of the children, a time-consuming task. The term *shufu* has a long history, originally implying the top woman of a household that might contain daughters, daughters-in-law, maids, and concubines.²⁵ By the late 19th century, the term was modernized when the nuclear family with one husband, one wife, and unmarried children increasingly became the norm. Then, the *shufu* was modeled as a “good wife and wise mother” whose primary focus was maintaining the prosperity of her family, whether that included work, politics, or most likely, cooking, shopping, cleaning, and

Percent of Japanese women in the workforce by age group



Sources: National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, Japan, <http://www.ipss.go.jp/index-e.html>; and Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications, Statistics Bureau, Labour Force Survey, http://www.jil.go.jp/english/laborinfo/library/documents/2004_2005jwlp.pdf.

child care. As scholars have noted, today’s “housewives” have gone into politics to represent the humanitarian, ethical “housewife” point of view—clearly a gendered notion.²⁶ While they might not call themselves feminists, their actions are feminist. No one questions whether these women have a right to express themselves in the public sector.

In addition to the increasing numbers of late- or non-marrying women, we see that even married women have developed new approaches to their roles. While Japanese women still show a lower rate of employment in the prime child-bearing years—scholars call this an M-curve—the dip is shallower and occurs later in life (see graph). The peak of women’s employment, at almost 75 percent labor force participation rate, is among 25–30 year old women, dropping to 60 percent among 30–35 year old women, and recovering to over 70 percent among women over 40. Thus, women are increasingly remaining in the work force and trying to blend that with maternal roles. Middle-aged women also confront the need to care for elderly relatives. Most women who return to the work force after their children are born work part time, and Japanese firms are not set up to accommodate them. Those women who wish to have a professional career postpone or forego marriage.

Here we return to Princess Masako. For some, she is the symbol of Japan’s

declining fertility due to postponing marriage. For others, especially younger women, she is an unfortunate case of a career derailed by the demands of her husband's family to have a baby. And for others, she is the nexus of all sorts of concerns—equality of rights, veneration of motherhood, and the conflicting pressures of the careerist workplace and demanding motherhood.

Notes

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10. The term was coined by sociologist Yamada Masahiro in 1997 and disseminated widely in his book, *Parasaito shinguru no jidai* (The age of parasite singles) (Chikuma Shobō, 2000). The media jumped on this topic. Many singles are not "parasites" by choice but rather because of the high cost of housing.

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20. Andrew Gordon, "The New Life Movement in Postwar Japan," in Molony and Uno: 423-462; and Jan Bardsley, "Discourse on Women in Postwar Japan: The Housewife Debate of 1955," in *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 16 (1999): 3-47.
21. Succinct treatments of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s include Yumiko Ehara, "Japanese Feminism in the 1970s and 1980s," in *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 4 (1993): 49-69; and Kazuko Tanaka, "The New Feminist Movement in Japan, 1970-1990," in Fujimura-Fanselow and Kameda, eds., *Japanese Women*, (New York: Feminist Press, 1995): 243-252.
22. Molony, "Japan's Equal Employment Opportunity Law," 281-282.
23. Molony, "Japan's Equal Employment Opportunity Law," 298.
24. Noriko Tada, "The Japanese Government's Dilemma: The Declining Birth Rate," poster session at Association for Asian Studies Conference, April 2005.
25. Yasuko Imai, "The Emergence of the Japanese *Shufu*: Why a *Shufu* is More than a Housewife," in *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 6 (1994): 44-65.
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The “Modern” Woman and Motherhood

Japan's Frozen Future: Why Are Women Withholding Investment in Work and Family?

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Japan has become the “poster child” for the graying of industrialized countries, as the result of its life expectancy (the world’s longest), falling fertility rates and low levels of immigration. Since these trends are driven by women’s reproductive choices, women are at the center of Japan’s so-called demographic dilemma.

The population growth rate has declined for the last 30 years and is currently at zero. Japan is projected to lose about 20 million of its population, which will shrink from 127.7 million in 2004 to 105 million in 2050.¹ The “aged dependency ratio”—the number of actively working people divided by the number of “aged dependents”—is a common gauge of the burden of a graying society. In 2000, there were 3.9 active workers in Japan supporting each person 65 years or older. By 2010, there will be fewer than three workers, and by 2025 the figure is predicted to drop to two active workers for every “aged dependent” member.

Changes in the female labor force and fertility can change this ratio.² For example, greater participation by middle-aged women will increase the size and productivity of the labor force. Meanwhile, family-friendly policies can help slow decline in the fertility rate, if not reverse the trend. Thus, since the mid-1980s, government and corporate reforms have worked to remove impediments to women’s employment and to make it easier for young families to have children.

This paper examines current women’s choices in regard to work and family, and examines obstacles for change in the early 21st century. My conclusion is that Japanese policies—both government and corporate—fail to address the fundamental conflict between employment and parenting, thus removing women’s stake in a future of labor market mobility and family careers. At the same time, corporate employment practices integrate working women only as secondary workers, forcing them to forgo marriage or children in order to have work careers.

Women's employment patterns

The M-curve of female employment has been the canonical description of how women favor family roles over work. It illustrates women's employment patterns, which include entry into the work force after graduation from school; first withdrawal for marriage or childbearing; re-entry after children have entered schools or passed critical educational levels; and, finally, a second exit to care for aging family members or permanent retirement. This institutionally reinforcing pattern, shaped by traditional family division of labor, employment practices, and family (child and elder) care needs, still characterizes women's roles. The M-curve is not only a description of women's past patterns of employment but also presents women with a probabilistic calculation for their investment in the labor market and family and child rearing. The probability of success in the labor force and the family is increasingly linked in women's minds to their investment in both.

Despite women's potential to ease demographic challenges through labor force participation, their employment conditions have only deteriorated in the 1990s and early 21st century. Female labor force participation as a whole decreased from 50.2 percent in 1994 to 48.3 percent in 2004, while the concentration of women in part-time work increased, and the wage gap between full-time and part-time work further widened. In 2004, the proportion of part-time workers (defined as those working fewer than 35 hours per week) grew to 23.6 percent of total employed workers (male and female combined), up from 18.8 percent in 1994. During the same time period, women working part-time increased from 32.5 to 39.9 percent. Meanwhile, women's part-time wages fell to 68.4 percent of their full-time wages, down from 70.6 in 1994. In 2004, women's wages were still on average 67.6 percent of male wages (up from 62.0 percent in 1994).³

Conflict between work and family

The challenges to holding a full-time job and raising a family are so familiar that Japanese women may be seen as resisting investment in both. It is common to attribute low levels of job mobility and high levels of non-regular (such as contractual or part-time) positions among women to institutional barriers or discrimination in the labor market as well as to the lack of family-friendly policies and the M-curve female employment pattern.⁴ In addition, lengthy commutes to work, demands of full-time work, family responsibilities, and Japan's tax system all constrain and direct married women's decisions and aspirations in their efforts to balance the needs of work and family. The tight institutional configuration of work and family roles (including children's education and elder care) reinforced by cultural norms leads women to underinvest in their job mobility and withdraw from work or switch to part-time

employment after marriage or childbirth. Thus, in spite of the high percentage of married women aged 25–34 willing to work, a much smaller percentage of them actually do.⁵ College-educated married women are less likely to be employed than women without college education because they tend to have husbands with high incomes. These patterns are pronounced among married women over age 40.⁶

Difficulties of balancing full-time work and family careers are further exacerbated by long commutes. The national average commuting time among married women stands at over an hour each way (68 minutes), while it is longer in large cities (85 minutes in the Tokyo area and 105 minutes in the Kanagawa region). There is an inverse relationship between commuting time and married women's employment rates, with married women in the largest urban areas working the least.⁷

More important, Japanese corporate culture dictates that workers demonstrate a commitment to work first and family second. Companies impose overtime and job transfers on full-time, regular workers. Even when overtime is not explicitly compulsory, workers hesitate to decline such requests for fear of reprisals in the future (such as demotion or assignment to unattractive tasks). For example, Japanese workers are reluctant to leave the office at 5:00 P.M. while others are still working. Many workers still go for after-work socializing with their peers rather than go home for dinner. Moreover, there has been an increase in the number of employers failing to pay appropriately for overtime as specified by law (25–50 percent), and the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare is in the process of tightening its regulation.⁸ Most Japanese employees (full-time regular workers) only use about 50 percent of their paid vacation time each year due to busy work schedules and peer pressure. Again, workers are concerned with making their coworkers work extra hours for them and reprisal on the part of their employers. Such corporate culture and practices, as well as peer pressure, make the balance between work and family only tenuous and encourage married women to give up regular full-time positions.

In contrast, nonregular positions and part-time work are based on explicit contractual agreement and free from compulsory overtime, thus making it easier for women to control hours based on their family needs. The reality of Japan's employment practices and working environment leave little choice for married women but to resort to part-time work or a flexible work schedule.⁹ Once they leave regular full-time positions, however, re-entry to regular positions only becomes harder. Mid-career hiring remains limited, and regular positions with flexible work schedules are scarce. As women are relegated to temporary contractual full-time or part-time work, they are further removed from jobs with career development and future promotions. In this way, the vicious cycle of women's concentration in low-paying, low-status positions is

Japan's tax system is designed to support the traditional family and effectively precludes women from investing in their labor-market value.

perpetuated. Neither women nor corporate personnel decision makers want to invest in the other.

Tax system

Japan's corporate culture (and the accompanying calculation by actors involved) is further reinforced by Japan's tax system, which is designed to support the traditional family and effectively precludes women from investing in their labor-market value. Japanese government and corporate family policies are based on a traditional conception of a gendered division of labor. The national income tax deduction for a dependent spouse and children introduced in 1961 (and revised in 1987 and 2002) provides more income support if the wife stays home or works only part time. There are four main categories of tax deductions: a basic allowance, a spousal allowance, a special spousal allowance, and an allowance for dependents (children and elderly parents). Each of these deductions is worth about \$3,167 (¥380,000), or \$4,417 if a child is aged 16–22. Thus, a traditional family consisting of a male wage earner with a nonworking wife and two children can write \$12,667 off their income.¹⁰ However, if the wife earns more than about \$8,000 (about ¥1 million), the family loses the deduction for the wife.¹¹ Moreover, national old-age pension and health insurance premiums are configured so that the wife does not pay any premium as long as her own annual earnings do not exceed about \$10,833 (¥1.3 million).¹² The National Long-Term Care Insurance introduced for the elderly in 2000 also gives a dependent wife special treatment. These policies encourage married women to remain housewives or work only part-time to stay under annual earnings limits.

Policies to support working women and their families

Researchers have long suggested that family-friendly policies would make child rearing easier for working women and their families, and thereby offset the future shrinking of the working population. Although Japan's government policies for maternity and child care leave are formally generous, legal enforcement is lacking and access to benefits is limited. The Japanese government enacted the Child Care and Family Leave Law in 1992 and introduced the Angel Plan in 1995–1999 to increase the number of child care centers and improve the maternity benefit system. The New Angel Plan (2000–2004) further lifted target values, and the revised New Angel Plan (2005–2009) improves family-friendly policy features. Japanese maternity benefits, in existence since 1972, are provided for 14 weeks at 60 percent of wages (increased from non-paid leave in 1992, to 25 percent in 1995, 40 percent in 2001, and 60 percent in 2003).¹³ There is a Childbirth and Lump Sum Grant of about \$3,000 (¥366,000) for each child. In addition, Japan introduced the Child Care Leave

Employers still discriminate against women who take maternity leave and child care leave.... Even if they stay on the job and take leave benefits, women (and men) experience silent pressure from employers and peers.

Law in 1992, allowing leave for either parent until a child is one year of age. The leave pays 40 percent of wages.¹⁴ Between 1995 and 1997, only 8 percent of women who gave birth took advantage of child care leave.¹⁵ And although 70.6 percent of women who were eligible took the leave in 2004 (up from 64 percent in 2002), mothers who took maternity and child care/family leave constituted only 0.2 percent of the female work force in 2004.¹⁶

Why the gap between formal opportunity and women availing themselves of these benefits—between formal prescriptions and informal norms? Despite the government’s efforts, the actual system is plagued by weak legal enforcement and problems of accessibility and affordability of child care services. Employers still discriminate against women who take maternity leave and child care leave.¹⁷ Employers sometimes move women to inconvenient job positions or company locations to encourage them to quit work upon marriage, pregnancy, or childbirth. If the women voluntarily quit, they lose their entitlement to the above benefits.¹⁸ Even if they stay on the job and take leave benefits, women (and men) experience silent pressure from employers and peers, and are considered “nuisances” if they avail themselves of one-year child care leave. Pressure becomes even stronger with a second child. Moreover, there is still a shortage of conveniently located childcare facilities that offer extended hours and high-quality infant care, especially in cities. Over 30,000 preschoolers were on the waiting list in major urban areas in 2003, and the costs of infant-care services are out of reach for average-income families.¹⁹ Even if a woman takes one year of leave and wants to return to work, where can she place her one-year-old child? She must quit or retire. In addition, women who are not regular workers (part-time, contractual, or temporary) are often excluded from such benefits.²⁰

Postponement of marriage, parasite singles, freeters, and NEETs

The issue of population “hyper-aging” is intertwined with women’s postponement of marriage, which contributed to a fertility rate of 1.29 babies per woman in 2004. Demographers project that the proportion of people who never marry will increase from 7 to 22 percent for men and from 5 to 15 percent for women between 1975 and 1995. It is estimated that by 2010 close to 20 percent of men and 8 percent of women aged 45–49 will be unmarried.²¹ Japan’s fertility level remained at the replacement level, which is 2.08, until the mid-1970s, but fell to 1.81 in 1984 (at that time similar to the level in the United States, the United Kingdom and France). It declined further to 1.42 in 1995, 1.36 in 2000, and 1.29 in 2004. In developed countries as a whole, the fertility level was 1.56 in 2004, and in Europe it was 1.38. Thus, most developed countries, not just Japan, are facing a baby drought (the United States and New Zealand are the only exceptions with a fertility level of 2.0). The

Japanese women increasingly see marriage as a burden rather than a source of satisfaction.... Today's young women are the first to face downward mobility after marriage.

drought was acute in Germany (1.32), Italy (1.2), Spain (1.12), and South Korea (1.17).

As in other advanced countries, today's young women are better educated than in the past, and have new opportunities for enrichment outside of marriage. Japanese women increasingly see marriage as a burden rather than a source of satisfaction.²² Moreover, the choices of young men and women are influenced by their parents' willingness to house and support them well into adult life. Births outside of marriage remain extremely low relative to many other industrialized countries (where they continue to increase). In Japan, only 1 percent of births occur outside of marriage, compared to 33 percent in the United States, 38 percent in the United Kingdom, 47 percent in Denmark, and 55 percent in Sweden.²³

Throughout the 1990s there was a significant rise in "parasite singles"—young persons who are voluntarily unemployed or underemployed and lead carefree lifestyles supported by parents. Living with parents lowers costs, increases discretionary income, and reduces motivation to marry. According to one estimate, parasite singles constitute 42 percent of those in their 20s and 30s (up from 35 percent in 1995).²⁴ Another report indicates that 94 percent of single women aged 22 and older lived with parents in 1998.²⁵ During the bubble economy of the 1980s, Japanese youths experienced more life options and celebrated a diversity of single lifestyles that included higher education, hobbies, and leisure. Those who pursued low-skilled employment and unstable job positions were dubbed "freeters," which (it is estimated) number 2-4 million in the 15-34 age bracket, excluding students and housewives. Most recently, an increasing number of young men and women are called "NEETs"—not in employment, education, or training. As the years of living as freeters or NEETs lengthen, prospects to start a steady work career or to marry dwindle (for both males and females). Such lifestyles contribute directly to Japan's lower fertility.

The current generation of parents is the first willing and economically able to support their children in perpetually dependent adulthood. Also, today's young women are the first to face downward mobility after marriage. Thus, marriage offers fewer benefits, while society increasingly accepts their single lifestyle and sexual freedom. In 2002, 54 percent of women aged 25-29 were single, compared to 18 percent in 1970.²⁶ In Tokyo, the bellwether of Japan, over 65 percent of women aged 25-29 and 38 percent of women aged 30-34 remained single. The average age of women at first marriage increased to 28 in 2003 (29 for men) from 24 in 1970. In Tokyo, it was 29.²⁷

When asked why they remain single, the parasite singles point to "financial benefits of living with their parents" and "no merit in marriage."²⁸ Women expect financial security and comfort at least equal to that provided to them by

their parents; the search for ideal men who can meet these expectations is lengthening. The Japanese institution of *omiai* (arranged marriage) has all but disappeared, and marriage is no longer considered necessary for the survival and succession of the *ie* (family). Instead, marriage is seen as the union of two individuals based on romantic love and happiness. Women avoid marrying eldest sons who are expected to care for aged parents; meanwhile men still prefer to marry women who are somewhat younger and less educated than themselves. As the pool of marriageable partners narrows, women stay single longer.

When men and women do marry, they desire a high standard of living, and—in the economically stagnant conditions of the past several years—deem it necessary to have two incomes. Even when a woman is willing to enter a two-earner family and marry a man who wants to share family responsibilities, the man's company-centered life makes it difficult to share family roles. This situation increases pressure on those women who desire to have a family and work full time. The high costs of raising children and the competitive nature of Japan's education system—which places heavy financial and emotional burdens on families—are further incentives to avoid family life and limit the number of children. Women know that family responsibilities will fall disproportionately on them when men's work-driven corporate lifestyle hinders them from participating in child rearing. Government policies have not addressed adequately the fundamental challenge of these costs and role relationships.

What is the solution?

To date, Japanese public policies to slow demographic aging are aimed at raising marital fertility (childbirth within marriage) and helping married women and their families balance work and family. For example, to create a more family-friendly work environment, the government will award a cash bonus of about \$10,000 to small- and medium-size firms (employing fewer than 100 workers) when their first female or male worker returns to work after taking child care leave for six months or longer. The policy will go into effect in 2006. Other efforts include job training and counseling for NEETs. Some prefectures have organized events for singles. However, there are no public policies directly aimed at helping young men and women find future marriage candidates.

As mentioned, Japan is not unique in experiencing a precipitous fall in birth rates and women's postponement of marriage. No advanced country (with the exception of the United States and New Zealand) has been successful in restoring a replacement fertility level. However, there are variations in the level of fertility and rate of its decline among advanced nations, due to family policies and social organization of employment. That is, fertility levels vary with how well women are able to balance work and family careers. The Luxembourg Income Study (1985–87) of 14 European and Nordic countries

found that maternal employment is clearly correlated with the generosity of maternity leave policies and child care services.²⁹

With a birth rate around 1.7 in the 1980s, western European countries introduced family-friendly policies to ease the conflict in women's roles. Countries with generous maternity benefits but few child care services, such as Germany, Spain, and Italy, experienced acute falls in fertility. Other countries with generous maternity benefits *and* child care services that benefit 95 percent of children age three to five—most notably France and Belgium—did not experience drastic declines in fertility. Among Nordic countries, Sweden has successfully maintained its fertility level at 1.6 with extensive family service programs.

Each of these countries has taken its own approach to integrating women into the labor market. Sweden, for example, has followed a two-earner family model developed in the 1970s and 1980s, in which a high level of women's employment is harmonized with gender-equal family policies. The labor market is highly professionalized with few low-paying, dead-end jobs.³⁰ The Netherlands, which also has avoided precipitous fertility decline, has developed highly paid part-time work, with generous maternity leave but limited child care. Thus, it has minimized differences between part-time and full-time work, thereby reducing conflict between work and family roles. Disparities in wage and benefits between full- and part-time work disappeared, and by 1997 close to 40 percent of female Dutch employment was accounted for by part-time work.³¹

Japanese policies for married women were modeled after such a European employment pattern, in which high employment among married women was to be anchored by part-time work with generous employment and family benefits. However, corporate and government employment policies did not produce the desired results, owing largely to the traditional gender division of labor, economic stagnancy during the 1990s, and weak enforcement of public policies. It bears repeating that Japan, Italy, and Spain—countries with acute fertility decline—are also those which emphasize traditional gender roles. Such countries make only partial or ambiguous commitment to women and families, by offering generous maternity leave benefits without extensive child care services.

Conclusion

Japanese policy makers have made progress in making it easier for married women to balance work and family needs, but this progress is slow at best. Not only government and corporate policies, but also company culture and practices, integrate women only as secondary—not full-time—workers based on the traditional division of gender roles. Policies do not solve the fundamental

tension between gender roles in employment and family commitment. Another reason progress for women is slow is that Japan is a “network society” where men and women are embedded in institutional and cultural networks built on the traditional boundary between work and family careers. The degree and consequences of embeddedness vary among groups.

Subordinate groups, like women, find that society mutes their criticism, limits their aspirations, and paralyzes their activities to combine employment mobility and child rearing. Japanese institutions do not provide women with motivation to invest in the labor force and in their family futures, nor provide them access to recruitment and training for responsible (career) jobs or to national policy-making.³²

It is my contention that Japanese women, embedded in institutional and cultural norms, calculate rationally their future success in work and family.³³ Government and corporate policies remove women’s stake in a future of labor market mobility and family careers, and so women withhold their investment from such a future. Women put off marriage and child rearing and either enter the auxiliary work force or withdraw from the full-time labor force upon childbirth. Thus, my interpretation departs from the view of Japanese women as “cultural dopes” who are ineffectual and unconsciously imprisoned in a patriarchal system, while the costs and constraints go on behind the backs of Japanese women. Rather, this paper recognizes that women are guided by their families and socialized by the experiences of their mothers, older sisters, and friends to recognize the costs and probability of satisfactory participation in work and family.

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Notes

1. United Nations, *Replacement Migration* (New York: United Nations, 2001), Table 2 and appendix, 112-43; Yoshiko Yamada and Tetsuhiko Inami, “The Project to Promote Global Partnership on Aging” (Tokyo: Japan Aging Research Center, March, 2005).

2. Chikako Usui, Suzanna Rose and Reiko Kageyama, “Women, Institutions, and Leadership in Japan.” *Asian Perspective* 27, no. 3 (2003), 21.

3. Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, *Hataraku josei no jitsujō* (Current Situation of Working Women) (Tokyo: Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, 2005), 5-7; Kezuka Katsutoshi, “Legal Problems Concerning Part-time Work in Japan,” *Japan Institute of Labor Bulletin* (Special Topic) 39 (September, 2000), 1, accessed August 25, 2005, at

<http://www.jil.go.jp/bulletin/year/2000/vol39-09/06.htm>.

4. Chikao Usui, "Women's Roles," from Allan Bird, ed., *Encyclopedia of Japanese Business and Management* (London: Routledge, 2002), 474.

5. For example, among women age 25–34, 72.9 percent wish to work but 62.4 percent actually do, according to the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (2005).

6. Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (2005), 15.

7. Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (2005), 12.

8. Ames Gross and Rachel Weintraub, "2004 Human Resource Trends in Japan," SHRM Global Forum 2004, 8, accessed August 25, 2005, at <http://www.pacificbridge.com/Publications/JapanDec2004.htm>.

9. Results of national surveys have consistently shown that married women with small children prefer to stay at home or work only part-time. For example, the latest survey taken in 2004 found that 46.4 percent of married women with small children (less than six years old) preferred to be full-time mothers, while 20.4 percent preferred to work only part time. Close to one in three (32.3 percent) chose full-time work (Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, 2005). In another survey, mothers of children 7th grade or higher preferred full-time employment, but with the condition of no overtime.

10. Takahashi Hiroyuki, "Prospects for Personal Income Tax Reform in Japan," *Japan Economic Institute Report*, No. 24 (June 26, 1998).

11. Sechiyama Kaku, "Shifting Family Support from Wives to Children," *Japan Echo* 28, No. 1 (2001), 35–42. The tax system was again revised in 2003 (went into effect in April 2004), eliminating a special spousal allowance. This revision does not alter the fundamental structure in supporting the traditional family ("Haigusha tokubetsu kojo" [Special tax allowances for dependent spouses], *Mainichi Shimbun*, January 13, 2003, 11).

12. Kezuka, 5.

13. In contrast, Germany pays maternity benefits for 14 weeks (with 100 percent of wages paid), France for 16–26 weeks (100 percent wages paid), and Italy for 20 weeks (80 percent wages paid). In the United States, the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 provides a total of 12 weeks of unpaid leave and applies to companies with 50 or more workers. (International Labor Organization [ILO], press release of February 12, 1998).

14. Nagase Nobuko, "Balancing Work and Family in Japan: Inertia and a Need for Change," *Issues for the 21st Century Think Social Harmony* (Canada-Japan Social Policy Symposium, 2001), 18.

15. Nagase, 19.

16. Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (2005), 5.

17. "Umitai? Umenai? Dankai Junia" (Women of childbearing age want to have more children but cannot afford them), *Asahi Shimbun*, June 9, 2005.

18. Women find it difficult to take maternity benefits and child-care leave because they need their employer's consent, and small firms are often excused from honoring these benefits (Nagase, 19). Lawsuits over unfair treatment after becoming pregnant or giving birth have increased in recent years (Gross and Weintraub, 6). Compliance with the 1985 Equal Employment Opportunity Law is voluntary, not mandatory. The law stipulates that employers not discriminate against women in job training, fringe benefits, mandatory retirement age, resignation, and dismissal, and "requests" equal treatment in recruitment, job assignment and promotion. The law was revised in 1997 to widen the scope of discriminatory treatment to include sexual harassment, and abolished overtime, holiday and late-night work restrictions for women. In addition, sanction by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare against violators was tightened.

19. Ogawa Naohiro, "Japan's Changing Fertility Mechanisms and Its Policy Responses," *Journal of Population Research*, May 1, 2003, accessed August 25, 2005, at <http://static.highbeam.com/j/journalofpopulationresearch/may012003/>.

20. Temporary workers are legally entitled to these benefits as the result of the 1997 revision of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, if they have had the same employer longer than one year. Thus, employers terminate their contracts and (perhaps) rehire them to avoid honoring these benefits. See *Asahi Shimbun*, June 9, 2005.

21. David E. Horlacher, "Aging in Japan: Causes and Consequences, Part I: Demographic Issues," *Interim Report, IR-01-008/February* (Laxenburg, Austria: International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, rev. ed August 2002), Figure 12, 14, accessed August 25, 2005, at <http://www.iiasa.ac.at/Publications/Documents/IR-01-008.pdf>.

22. In a cross-national survey of advanced countries, Japanese women with children aged 0-14 who reported that they derive satisfaction from child rearing was 9 percent. In other countries, the figure was as high as 40-70 percent (Horlacher, 56). According to a 1998 survey conducted by the Japanese Prime Minister's Office, 19.8 percent of women say they enjoy taking care of children, as opposed 49.8 in the United States and 70.9 percent in Britain (Akiko Yamanaka, "Changing Roles of Japanese Women," paper presented at WAPPP Weekly Study Group, November 18, 1998, accessed June 15, 2005, at <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/wapp/happen/yamanaka.html>). According to another survey conducted by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare in 2003, over 40 percent of Japanese mothers living in nuclear households reported lack of confidence in their child-care abilities ("Tokyo no kodomo to katei o meguru jokyo" [Current Conditions of Families and Children in Tokyo], Tokyo Metropolitan Government Office, 2, accessed August 25, 2005, at <http://www.fukushihoken.metro.tokyo.jp/syoushi/news/presssyoushi050425.html>).

23. SURVEY: JAPAN, "Consensus and Contraction: Social Conventions and Demography Add to the Sclerosis," *The Economist*, April 18, 2002; Chikako Ogura, *Kekkon no joken* (Terms of marriage) (Tokyo: *Asahi Shimbun*, 2003), 14.

24. Yukiko T. Ellis, "Japan's Aging Population: What Does it Mean for Working Women in the Workforce?" (presentation given at the Japan-America Society of the State of Washington, February 25, 2005).

25. Ogawa, 4.

26. Ogura, 14.

27. Ogura, 17.

28. Ellis, 13.

29. Janet Gornick, Marcia Meyers and Katherin Ross, "Public Policies and the Employment of Mothers: A Cross-National Study," Luxembourg Income Study Working Paper #140, June 1996, accessed August 25, 2005, at <http://www.lisproject.org/publications/liswps/140.pdf>.

30. Gösta Esping-Andersen, *Welfare States in Transition* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 1996).

31. Omata Naohiko, "Recent Employment and Income Conditions in Japan," *Tokyo Mitsubishi Review* 5, no. 9 (September, 2000), 4, accessed March 2004 at http://www.btm.co.jp/html_e/databank/rev0009e.htm.

32. Japanese policy makers have focused on the problems of marital fertility more than the issues of marriage postponement. Thus, a September 2002 advisory committee organized by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare consisted almost entirely of married

members with children. The lone unmarried female committee member noted that discussion was based on the traditional norms of gender division of labor, and did not touch on lack of interest in marriage or the role of single men in infertility. See Sakai Junko, *Makeinu no toboe* (The howl of the losing dog) (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2003), 53-55. For general overview of problems of women's access to decision-making positions, see Usui, Rose, and Kageyama, 85-123.

33. Mary Brinton portrays Japanese families as rational decision-makers for their children's future success in *Women and the Economic Miracle: Gender and Work in Postwar Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

Feminism as Industrial Policy in Japan

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It has been 20 years since Japan legislated the Equal Employment Opportunity Law in 1985. This legislation marked the first systematic effort by the government to recognize and overcome the pervasive discriminatory hiring and promotion practices in Japanese enterprises. (A typically job advertisement until the mid-1980s would state something like the following: receptionist needed, good-looking women between the ages of 18-22 should apply.) The legislative change coincided with the onset of the “bubble economy,” which caused a serious labor shortage of young college graduates. Encouraged by better labor market prospects, an ever-growing number of young Japanese women made it into four-year colleges and then into workplaces in strides. Around this time, *joshi daisei*—female university students—became the hottest commodity on late night TV shows. They featured prominently on these shows, answering quizzes or talking about their daily lives. Suddenly, it was *cool* for girls to attend universities rather than women’s junior colleges.

It has also been roughly about 15 years since a shock wave went through Japan when the fertility rate hit the record low of 1.57 in 1990. The average number of children born to Japanese women took a big plunge. The Japanese referred to this as “the 1.57 shock” or women’s “baby strike.” This rate was well below the rate of 2.1 necessary to maintain the current population size. It was hence expected that Japan would not only experience a labor shortage in a near future but also the historically unprecedented speed of demographic aging. A shrinking population also meant a decline in national economic power; and the ever-graying population meant an unavoidable pressure on fiscal and societal resources. Conservatives lamented that educated women were not interested in having babies. They blamed women for becoming too ambitious in their career aspirations and “selfish” in neglecting their natural duties. Feminists, in contrast, cheered that Japanese women had finally jabbed the male-centered Japanese society.

What happened since? Has the initial cohort of *joshi daisei* succeeded in changing the status of women in Japan? At the individual level, women are increasingly better educated and their labor market attachment has become stronger. The political climate has certainly shifted in women's favor during the past decade. However, despite all these changes, Japanese women remain the world's most under-utilized resource. Women only constitute a tiny minority of Japan's economic and political leaders. When compared to women in other advanced industrial societies, it becomes clear how little progress Japanese women have made in advancing into positions of power. Some people might argue that this is because Japanese women have chosen to stay home. It is difficult to justify the relative absence of women in leading positions on the grounds of their preference for domesticity, because Japanese women *are not* thriving in the domestic realm as wives and mothers. Japan's fertility rate continues to drop. Many Japanese women either decide not to have children or decide to have fewer than they would have liked. Furthermore, even the very idea of marriage seems have lost its appeal. The number of single people has been on the rise. Japanese women thus appear to be foregoing childbearing and marriage without gaining much in terms of their standing in the society at large.¹

A systematic analysis of well-being of Japanese women and the mechanism behind declining fertility rates is beyond the scope of this short essay. Instead, this essay tries to explain why Japan continues to underutilize women, and pays special attention to the nature of labor market institutions to explain the dearth of women among corporate managers in Japan. The rest of the essay is organized in three sections. The first section describes the Japanese paradox. In Japan, greater human capital investments by women have born little fruit. This is paradoxical because women's greater human capital investments are generally associated with their higher status within the society. The second section discusses limits of cultural explanations for this paradox. The third section presents institutional hurdles that Japanese women face. The fourth, and final, section speculates on the role of feminism as a new industrial policy for Japan.

The Japanese paradox: under-utilization of highly educated human capital

Japan falls far short of other advanced industrial countries in utilizing the talent of its women. Let me illustrate this point by comparing three indices developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The table compares, from left to right, the *Human Development Index (HDI)*, the *Gender Development Index (GDI)* and the *Gender Empowerment Index (GEI)*.² HDI and GDI both measure the degree to which different countries invest in their human capital. HDI looks at life expectancy at birth, adult literacy, and

gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, while GDI zeroes in on how much is invested in women's human capital such as women's share of school enrollment and labor force participation. GEI, in turn, measures the degree to which women have achieved positions of power in their respective societies to influence economic and political decision-making.

Japan's under-utilized women

	Human Development Index (HDI)	Gender Development Index (GDI)	Gender Empowerment Index (GEI)
Norway	1	1	1
Sweden	2	2	2
Australia	3	3	8
Canada	4	4	10
Netherlands	5	5	5
Belgium	6	7	7
Iceland	7	6	6
United States	8	8	14
Japan	9	12	38
Ireland	10	14	16
Switzerland	11	11	12
United Kingdom	12	9	18
Finland	13	10	4
Austria	14	17	13

Source: United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Report 2004

The table shows a general trend: countries that invest in women's human capital (i.e., higher GDI) also take advantage of their talent (i.e., higher GEI). Japan stands out for its deviation from the general trend. Japan ranks 12th in

The Japanese are not necessarily always more traditional—or content with traditional gender roles—than are people in other industrial countries.

GDI, but its ranking drops down to 38th in GEI. When we disaggregate the GEI, it basically means that Japan has fewer female politicians than other advanced industrial societies and fewer corporate leaders. No other country demonstrates such a big gap between human capital investments in women and the overall level of female achievement within the society. This gap largely signifies Japan's failure to efficiently take advantage of its human resources. Why have Japanese otherwise well-educated women achieved so little?

The 1980s and the 1990s witnessed a rapid and steady improvement of women's educational attainment. When it comes to education, Japanese women have been rapidly and steadily catching up with men. Furthermore, in the past decade, the political climate has also shifted in women's favor. The kind of tug-of-war that existed between conservatives and feminists concerning the 1.57 shock in 1989, no longer exists. (Conservatives blamed the shock on "selfish women," and feminists blamed it on "male chauvinists.") Today, policymakers and commentators of all political persuasions agree that Japanese women are not happy and something has to be done about it. Even the conservative politicians agree that the government should do more to help alleviate the burden on women. The government has taken the lead in educating its population on wide-ranging issues that concern women. As a result, the general level of awareness over gender issues such as sexual harassment has also improved significantly. In any decent company, men realize that sexual jokes at the expense of female fellow employees are no longer permissible.

I would also emphasize that the decade of "political turmoil" that began with the 1993 break-up—and the subsequent temporary ousting—of the Liberal Democratic Party has been beneficial to women. The non-LDP coalition government headed by Prime Minister Hata Tsutomu drafted the "Angel Plan Prelude" to enhance the state's role in childcare services. The LDP's coalition government with the Japan Socialist Party inherited the plan and implemented it. As a result, government spending on public childcare began to rise significantly from fiscal year 1996 onward.³ Prime Minister Koizumi Juichiro further boosted the spending in 2001 by promising to eradicate a long waiting list.

Given all these positive changes, one would expect to see a lot more women in high-status positions in Japan. However, that has not been the case. Better female human capital and a better political climate make Japan's under-utilization of women even more perplexing.

The serious under-utilization of women has taken a toll. Young women that took advantage of greater educational and job opportunities in the 1980s and the early 1990s gradually learned that men still had much better economic prospects than they did. As these women enter their late 30s and early 40s, younger cohorts of women are weighing the pros and cons of traditional and non-traditional choices. The picture does not look good.

A recent Japanese bestseller, Junko Sakai's *Makeinu no Tooboe*, captures the mood of Japanese women nicely. Sakai provocatively defines women in their 30s and beyond without children or husbands as “losers.” The Japanese use the term “losing dogs (*makeinu*)” to refer to “losers.” Sakai's title thus can be translated as “Howling of Losing Dogs.” The book talks about a whole new cohort of women that pursued economic independence and freedom and now find themselves unmarried and childless. The author, herself one of such women, admits that she may have chosen the losing strategy. Those women who never aspired for extra and were content with what the society expected of them, she continues, may be the ultimate winners after all.

Japan's under-utilized women: limits of cultural explanations

Why has Japan marginalized its women so badly? Many turn to Japanese culture for an explanation: The Japanese are more traditional in their expectations about gender roles than their counterparts in other advanced industrial societies, and this is why more Japanese women quit work upon marriage or pregnancy to become housewives. Does this explanation hold? International opinion surveys permit us to see if the Japanese are really more traditional than others.

According to an international survey, for instance, 29.4 percent of Japanese respondents *strongly* agree with the statement “a job is all right, but what most women really want is a home and children.”⁴ No other advanced industrial country in this survey scores so high. In the United States, 12.6 percent of respondents strongly agree with the statement, while the figures for Australia, Austria, former West Germany, the United Kingdom and Sweden are 5.6, 9.3, 7.3, 3.8 and 5.6 percents respectively. Similarly, 45.2 percent of Japanese respondents strongly agree with the following statement: “being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay.” 29.1 percent of American respondents also strongly agree. When we turn to Australia, Austria, former West Germany, the United Kingdom and Sweden, the figures drop to 14.5, 16.1, 13.2, 8.8 and 6.5 percents respectively.

Three problems, however, exist in attributing Japan's dismal record in utilizing its women to its cultural norms. First, when we look at international surveys, Japan is not necessarily always an outlier. A large number of American respondents are as traditional as the Japanese—in a stark contrast to Europeans. Moreover, the “traditional versus non-traditional” dichotomy masks the fact that citizens in “progressive gender-egalitarian” countries do not necessarily take motherhood lightly. Women in most countries report that they would prefer to work reduced hours to spend more time with their children. The fact that lots of mothers work part-time in gender-egalitarian countries (i.e., Scandinavian countries) is further evidence that mothers generally value time with their children.⁵

Second, what Japanese cultural norms are is ambiguous. The degree to which the Japanese respondents are more “traditional” than respondents in other countries varies from issue to issue. For instance, the survey cited earlier shows that more Japanese respondents possess a positive view of working mothers than respondents in any other country in the survey (24 countries including both West and East Europe and most English-speaking countries). 57.2 percent of Japanese respondents thus strongly agree to the following statement: “a working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work. This is significantly higher than the percentage figures for the United States (40.4 percent), Australia (24.9), Austria (44.4), West Germany (44.2), Sweden (24.2) and the United Kingdom (21.8). Similarly, more respondents in Japan strongly believe that “having a job is the best way for a women to be an independent person,” “both men and women should contribute to the household income,” and “men ought to do a larger share of childcare than they do now.” In other words, once we look at a whole range of survey responses, it becomes clear that the Japanese are not necessarily always more traditional—or content with traditional gender roles—than are people in other industrial countries.

Third, cultural explanations fail to account for within-the-society variations. The graph shows that historical change in the percentage of women in high-status positions such as physicians, lawyers and corporate managers in Japan. Note that the female ratio of physicians and lawyers grew in line with the increases of women in four-year universities, while the number of female corporate managers stagnated. Traditional cultural norms per se cannot explain why Japanese women succeeded in breaking into some high-status male occupations but failed in others.

In sum, it is too simplistic to attribute Japan’s under-utilization of women to Japan’s cultural norms.

Labor market institutions as hurdles for women

I argue that institutional rather than cultural factors explain the under-utilization of women in Japan. What separates Japan from other countries, I argue, are institutional factors. In particular, three sets of institutional factors are critical in understanding opportunities for women: (a) paid leaves (i.e., maternity and childcare leaves); (b) availability of childcare; and (c) labor market flexibility.

The presence or absence of paid maternity and parental leave, for instance, affects women’s labor market attachment. Knowing that pregnancy does not lead to dismissal or significant reduction in income is important to encourage women to invest in their careers. Generous paid benefits make it worthwhile for prospective mothers to enter and remain in the labor market. Availability of affordable childcare makes it possible for women to come back to work

once the paid childcare leave runs out. In countries where no such paid leave exist, availability of childcare becomes the single most important factor in allowing mothers to work.

Throughout the 1990s, the Japanese government has significantly improved the situation of working mothers. After finally making one-year unpaid childcare leave a statutory requirement, the government reformed it twice to introduce paid benefits and then to raise the benefits. Japan today offers 40 percent of wages to working mothers who take the childcare leave. Despite the significance of the legislative progress, Japan still lags well behind many European countries that offer much better benefits. Furthermore, despite improvements, Japanese public childcare facilities only take care of about 22 percent of children under the age of three.⁶ Although this figure may not look so bad when compared to Catholic countries like Italy, Spain and part of Germany, it should be noted that all those countries suffer from similar problems that Japan does—limited advancement of women and big plunges in fertility rates. In other words, many Japanese women who initially aspired to balance their motherhood and career end up giving up one of them, because of the deficient institutional structure to support working mothers.

Women-specific social policies are not the only thing that matters. Labor market flexibility perhaps exercises even greater influence on women than special policies for working mothers. Because of space limitations, let me focus on two dimensions of labor market flexibility that matter most for women: (a) flexibility over working hours; and (b) flexibility over job recruitments. The first dimension basically concerns whether individual workers can choose between part-time and full-time work without penalty. In a “flexible” labor market, a worker can request a reduction in work hours without risking future promotions or pension rights. Workers perform the same jobs and receive pro-rated compensation (i.e., benefits and wages). The second dimension concerns whether individuals can go out and into labor markets without serious long-term penalty. A “flexible” labor market thus is a market characterized with an extensive external labor market. In an external labor market, employers hire workers with specific expertise and experience from outside according to their manpower needs at the time. An external labor market allows those who have quit their current jobs or have been outside the labor force to come back and seek new jobs. An internal labor market, in contrast, is inflexible. In such a market, recruitment almost exclusively takes place at the entry level and higher job categories are filled by internal promotions. Thus, workers who quit thus will be kept out of good jobs with future possibilities of promotion.

These two kinds of labor market flexibilities possess extremely serious consequences for women. Thanks to labor market flexibility, Scandinavian

Japanese women remain the world's most under-utilized resource.

The under-utilization of women in Japan means that many Japanese companies are hiring lots of male workers with inferior abilities.

women, for instance, can switch from full-time to part-time when their children are small and go back full-time when they are a bit older. The first kind of flexibility (i.e., work hours) allows Scandinavian mothers to adjust their work lives to their life cycles without necessarily having to quit their original jobs. The Japanese labor market lacks this kind of flexibility. In Japan, full-time and part-time differences are not matters of working hours; they are altogether different jobs. Only full-time workers are legally considered regular workers and thus enjoy benefits and protection. Workers hired for full-time jobs cannot work “part-time.” The only way to work part-time is to leave a good full-time job to take up a second-tier job elsewhere. Furthermore, working part-time is a one-way ticket. Part-time jobs do not lead to full-time jobs.

Inflexibility of working hour arrangements in Japan means much fewer options for women. Women with good full-time jobs face three choices. One choice is to give up motherhood. The second is to seek full-time childcare. The third choice, when affordable childcare is not available, is to quit work altogether. Since childcare is less available in Japan than in Scandinavian countries, the lack of flexibility over work hours forces most mothers to quit their jobs.

The second kind of labor market flexibility (i.e., a well-developed external labor market) also affects options available to women. A well-developed external labor market enables mothers to take time off to care for their offspring and come back into the labor market later. They can find new jobs depending on their previous work experience and education. In other words, qualified mothers can reenter into “good jobs.” In countries where internal labor markets predominate, mothers’ prospects are bleak. Regardless of their abilities, education and job experience, mothers who quit their jobs once will be permanently kept out of the “good jobs.” It is evident that internal labor markets are less capable of taking advantage of mothers’ human capital.

Moreover, internal labor markets exacerbate what economists call “statistical discrimination.” Labor economists have theorized that employers are generally more averse to hiring women, because women are more likely than men to quit. This means that employers risk losing their sunk cost (search and training costs) when they hire women. Although some women may be determined to work even after they get married and have children, it is too costly for employers to gather reliable information on each female job applicant. This is why they resort to “statistical discrimination” based on the statistical odds of women’s higher quit rates. In internal labor markets, employers have more incentive to avoid hiring women, because their personnel management practice is based on the premise of long enterprise tenure.⁷

The two kinds of labor market flexibility discussed here explain why Japan under-utilizes women better than do cultural factors. Inflexible work hours

and recruitment practices keep a large number of qualified women out of good jobs.⁸ In particular, they are responsible for Japan's dismal performance in terms of percentage of female managers. In large Japanese firms with internal labor markets, recruitment into "good jobs" mostly takes place at entry-level jobs for young workers. The lack of institutional support for working mothers has resulted in mothers' withdrawal from the labor market. Because all the good corporate jobs are kept within the internal labor markets, women who try to reenter the labor market only have an option of marginal employment in the second tier of the labor market.

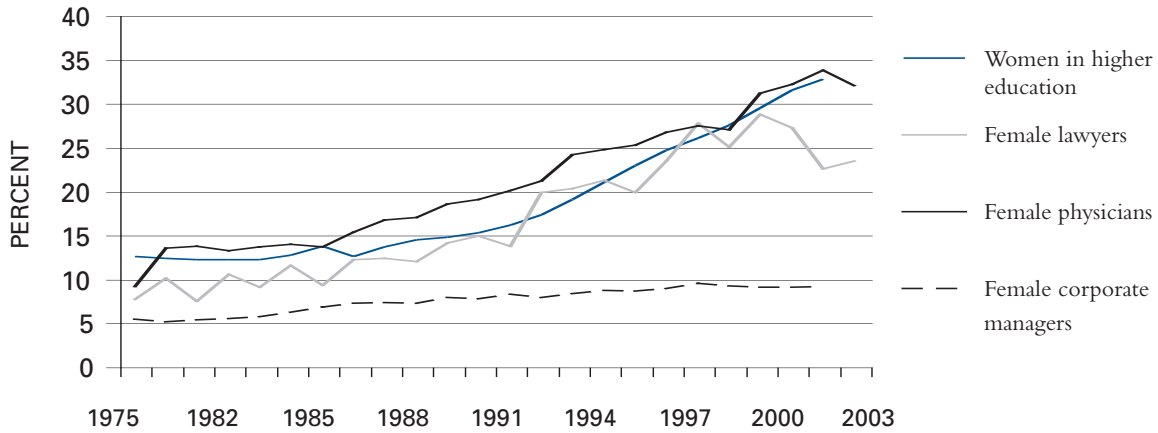
The patterns of female occupational advancement observed in the graph (see next page) are consistent with the implications of labor market factors discussed so far. Jobs such as lawyers and physicians operate very differently from jobs inside companies. Job entry is based on state-administered exams. A woman who aspires to be a corporate manager first needs to be hired by a company, receive adequate on-the-job training, and then be promoted from within after many years of service. In contrast, a woman who wants to be a lawyer or a physician just needs to study hard to pass the state exam. Unlike becoming a corporate manager, women who want to become lawyers and physicians have much more control over their own career plans, because there is less room for employers' discrimination. Female lawyers and physicians have a much better chance of taking time off for childcare and going back to the same occupation than a highly talented female corporate employee. They also have more possibilities to work part-time without being "downgraded" into lower rank jobs.

Feminism as industrial policy

I have so far argued that Japan's labor market institutions and the deficiency in the institutional infrastructure for childcare are to be blamed for Japan's grotesque under-utilization of women. In particular, the durability of internal labor markets in Japan has prevented women from moving into positions of responsibility in spite of all the positive changes that have occurred. Since there is no reason to believe that Japan possesses a different ability distribution between the sexes when compared to other countries, the under-utilization of women in Japan means that many Japanese companies are hiring lots of male workers with inferior abilities. Economists such as Gary Becker have argued that market competition would eventually wipe out companies that discriminate against women, because their competitors can hire able women more cheaply to generate greater profits.

It is worth noting that Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) has commissioned a study to evaluate the relationship between the utilization of women and corporate performance. The preliminary report does

Female lawyers, physicians and corporate managers in Japan



Note: “Women in higher education” refers to the percentage of female high school graduates who continue on to universities. “Female lawyers” and “female physicians” are women as a percentage of those who pass the qualifying exams (bar exam or state medical certification exam). “Female corporate managers” refers to women as a percentage of all corporate managers.

Sources: Ministry of Education Statistics Summary; Ministry of Justice; Ministry of Health Labor and Welfare; Japanese Labor Force Survey.

observe some correlation, although it is not conclusive. The report states that companies that adopt more “performance-based” wages and promotions rather than “seniority” generally perform better; and also tend to possess more female managers. If these relationships hold true, competitive pressures facing Japanese firms could be a blessing for ambitious Japanese women. A greater emphasis on performance rather than seniority will remove one of the major obstacles against women at the workplace. Furthermore, the shrinking population makes it imperative to devise ways to take advantage of female population. Companies that offer women-friendly (and family-friendly) environments will be better placed in the labor market to attract younger workers—increasingly scarce resources.

Although Japanese industrial policy has aided ailing companies to retain their excess male workers—in order to maintain Japan’s rigid internal labor market—in the past, the new industrial policy is likely to be more feminist. Under Prime Minister Koizumi, Japan has shifted its old policy of helping declining sectors of the economy to hold onto their workers by terminating wage subsidies to structurally depressed industries. The government is also pushing corporations to review their personnel management practices to utilize women’s talents more fairly and effectively. In other words, “feminism”

should be an important part of Japan's industrial policy. Once that happens, we might finally begin to observe more women among leading positions in the corporate sector in Japan.

Notes

1. I do not imply that there is a necessary trade off between women's advancement into the economic and political spheres and their domestic happiness. Although scholars used to think that greater labor force participation by women might lead to a drop in fertility rates, recent studies show that advanced industrial societies with high rates of female labor force participation (i.e., Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon countries) also happen to be countries with high fertility rates relative to other countries.

2. For details, see United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2004*, <http://www.undp.org.in/hdr2004/>.

3. Margarita Estévez-Abe, *Welfare and Capitalism in Postwar Japan* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

4. Family and Changing Gender Roles III (International Social Survey Programme, 2002), <http://www.issp.org/data.htm>. Accessed September 2, 2005.

5. *OECD Employment Outlook 2002 Edition* (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2003).

6. The author's calculations are based on the Japanese census and the data published by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare

7. Margarita Estévez-Abe, "Gender Bias in Skills and Social Policies: The Varieties of Capitalism Perspective on Sex Segregation," *Social Politics* 12 (2005), no. 2, 180-215.

8. Mary Brinton discusses how Japan's internal labor markets for men were premised upon the use of female labor as expendable marginal labor. See Mary Brinton, *Women and the Economic Miracle: Gender and Work in Postwar Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Also see Gottfried, Heidi and Jacqueline O'Reilly, "Re-regulating Breadwinner Models in Social Conservative Welfare Regime: Comparing Germany and Japan," *Social Politics* 9 (2002), no.1, 29-59.

Baby Strike? Reflections on Ideology and Realities in Women's Lives

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To listen to mainstream news media in Japan today, one might imagine that women are engaged in a hostile action, a Lysistrata-like walk-out on men, on children, on families and their elderly, and on Japan itself. What is their action? According to some opinion-leaders and (reading between the lines of policy) government agencies too, women are not having babies and in selfishly resisting procreation, are putting the future of Japan at risk. Even the Crown Princess, Masako, in tactless, not-so-subliminal references, has been seen as putting the Imperial House—and thus Japan's continuity—at risk by marrying late, by wanting a career or at least a role, and by having only a single daughter. Women overall are thus in a backhanded way made very important, crucial in fact, to the state and to its citizens, at least through their biological attributes—what some would call biological imperatives.

Is recognition of women's socio-political importance likely to produce more accommodation, more support for women both to raise those wanted children successfully and to make their necessary contribution to the economy? Will there be more child care provided, more flexible workplace conditions offered, or will the state continue to hope that women will be shamed into performing their reproductive job? This hasn't worked, because it is not women alone, and their "selfish" need for independence and careers, which has led to the crisis of the shrinking birthrate. Women are not on strike.

To see where women really are today in Japan it is necessary to take a retrospective view of where they have been. And it will be immediately evident that where they have been is far from where they were "supposed" to have been, according to the ideologies of family and state, constructed only relatively recently but taken often for ancient legacy.

In the Meiji era, a new modern nation state was to include the 19th century's version of the modern family, as epitomized in patriarchal Victorian England and in elite Prussian families, social models then for Japan's development. What was "modern" then, especially as amplified by the Confucian

social ethic that organized moral learning for Japanese elites, tended to be retrogressive for women: the Meiji Civil Code of 1898 put women in their place in many ways. Before officials drafted the code, they had sent emissaries to collect data on family and community practices in the hinterlands, far from the urban elite experiences of those who would frame the model for the future. These researchers were horrified at what they found: matriarchal households, women with several husbands and freely divorcing, co-habitation without benefit of registration—these things made the officials ashamed for Japan. To hold official heads high in the face of cultural and political encroachments from the West, society must be remodeled, in the image of the patriarchal elite households of Japan and the West. Women could not own property, could not divorce, could not “own” their own children, and men spoke for the family—no individual could speak for herself. This new family allowed the state penetration into the affairs of the household, as the male head of household represented the state to the family and the family to the state. The realization that women had not always been under the thumb of a national family doctrine and certainly had not needed to yield to all men—and that their subservience dates only to just over one hundred years ago when the new state demanded a domestic order of control and dependency—gives the contemporary woman’s situation a special cast.

And retrospect is everything, as the roles and experiences of women in Japan have been seen by generations of outside observers, as “three steps behind” or “battling on the home front” or “domestic managers and professional housewives.” My first forays into women’s studies in Japan took place in the 1970s, when, as elsewhere, women’s studies emerged as a separate field, a corrective to male-dominated academic departments. Women’s studies meant feminism, and feminism, especially to the mainstream Japanese press, meant trouble. Bringing my two-month-old son to the first international women’s conference in Japan, in 1978, I found myself the butt of much journalistic criticism: how can she travel across the world putting her infant in danger—just to attend a women’s conference? Or: See, this is what feminism will lead to: a woman taking her baby away from her husband and his family. Worse yet, I was caught by a paparazzi-like press photographer with a long lens breast feeding my son in the far back of the auditorium, primly covered by a shawl yet patently breast-feeding. My son was featured on the front page of several Japanese newspapers, a clear victim of women’s liberation. The conference itself was riven with schisms, as women activists squared off against scholars, as housewife consumer activists were marginalized as “just housewives” “using mother’s logic” and as personalities clashed. Revelations of internecine struggles in the press only served to support the idea that women are not good organizers, cannot hold peaceful meetings,

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and the like. But the result, however represented in the press, was greater support for women's studies in universities, better visibility for feminist interests, and a sense that women were already making progress at the workplace and in the home.

In 1978, Suzanne Vogel published an article in the *Japan Interpreter*, a journal now out of print, in which she described what she had found in years of interviewing women in Japan. This article, "The Professional Housewife," drew interest and created controversy. She noted that among her sample of housewives, more satisfaction than dissatisfaction was expressed over their domestic roles. Not popular among American feminists, oversimplified in the discussions, but raising cries of recognition among Japanese readers, Vogel's work became involved in the discussion of life satisfaction and the domestic sphere, so strongly set apart from the world of work. The role of housewife had, she said, built-in satisfactions that come with autonomy and control over the domestic sphere. Women doing well at their jobs at home were valued and given social credit that American housewives could not receive in a society not valuing women's work. Vogel was not propounding a moral, not saying that women should stay home nor that they couldn't manage work and home together; she was noting what some could not imagine—that satisfaction could be gained through adherence to supportive social values. Cries of "false consciousness" were heard. It must be said the informants were mostly of middle age, and that their own daughters, whose patience for a long apprenticeship under the gaze of a mother-in-law was short, would not find their mothers' lives fulfilling. Their storylines, as has become obvious, are very different.

In the late 1990s, I found a large discrepancy between what women were "supposed" to be like and what they really were like, or felt or wanted. What most women—and their families—wanted was a family of two or more children and the resources with which to rear them successfully. The average family desired was 2.3 children, despite official claims that women were shunning children. Moreover, there was a significant statistical problem in the collection and interpretation of data. Given the striking lack of very young mothers in Japan and the cultural preferences for marriage timing within relatively predictable age guidelines, it is likely that most women's childbearing years will fall between the ages of 24 and 38. However, official studies have women's "reproductive age" as ages 15–42, and therefore indicate a much smaller rate of births. Whether used deliberately, or for international comparisons, the findings are misleading and might well feed the objections of officialdom to women who are "rejecting child-bearing."

The real concerns of families—and I must emphasize that it is families, not only women, making the decisions to limit births—are time, space and money, as they might be anywhere. Most women in middle class households,

or in almost any household but for the most wealthy or most elite, have multiple roles, including a job (if not a career) and the care of elderly relatives, in addition to the care of the home and children. Being a mother and caregiver is seen as a one-hundred-percent job and other commitments have not the social credit or virtue that these “primary roles” are said to have. A two-hundred-percent woman sounds exceptional but is not, though culturally dominant definitions would make her so.

Women and men both are in what has been called the Confucian generational “sandwich.” Better health care and diet have increased longevity (now 85 for women, 80 for men, on average) but at the same time there is often a longer period of complete dependency among the oldest elderly, increasing the chances that families will need to provide physical, emotional and financial support for parents. Most urban middle class families are not co-residential with either husband’s or wife’s parents, either because they are not “eldest son” households where the son is expected to remain with his parents, or because they are in neolocal households away from natal homes because of work or other factors. There is greater flexibility now, and the older kinship principles are no longer very strong in many families—to the point where the daughter’s (not the son’s) family may care for the elderly. Where there is debilitating disease or senility, however, the care of elderly can feel like a burden, expected or not.

A famous novel by Ariyoshi Sawako, translated into English as *The Twilight Years*, tells the story of Akiko, a middle-aged wife caught between the needs of generations as her teenage son is studying for his college entrance examinations and her husband’s senile father is more and more demanding of her time and attention. Though it is her husband’s father, it is the daughter-in-law and not the son who is the primary caregiver. She is the sandwich filling holding together the family, supporting the aged parent and her son, and her husband falls quickly out of the picture, not through a “natural” cultural practice, but in denial and guilt. The book was a bestseller in part because Akiko, in a moment of utter bombshell clarity, commits herself wholeheartedly and totally to her father-in-law’s care, and it is this transcendently unusual wholeheartedness that makes caring for such a wretched man possible. The book, like Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, also created a groundswell of attention to a social problem and promoted access to non-familial care agencies.

The rising rate of elderly in the population has an impact not only at the domestic family level. Obviously, when care of elderly parents becomes too much for families, or families are not present to do any care, outside services are needed. Official pronouncements call for families to care for their own in what has been called “Japan’s Beautiful Family System” and this call to filiality, it would seem, might help to alleviate any pressure now or in the future, on

public services. Pulling out all the Confucian stops might increase social pressure to support one's own family, but the pressure adds to the load of work and guilt on working women's backs. Care of the elderly is the crux of the matter as the population ages, and lies behind the exhortations for more children. More children would mean a larger cohort of workers in the next generation, increasing the tax base which would fund social welfare projects. Soon families will face what is called the 4-2-1 demographic profile: four elderly, two working parents, and one child. With this socially cataclysmic profile in hand, there is no wonder that officials declare an imminent doomsday, and someone, a whole gender of someones, is to blame.

Ordinary women taken one at a time seem less demonizable. Some profiles of women in contemporary families will demonstrate the diversity and the cobbled rather than dictated strategies of life.

Shoko has two children, a girl age 14 and a boy aged eight. They live in a two bedroom flat in the north of Tokyo, not quite in Saitama Prefecture which would make them suburban but still in a bedroom community, as the phrase goes—a place from which working adults debouch in the morning and to which they return at the end of the work day. Shoko works locally, in a ward office where she assists elderly in the services available to them, including home visits, grocery-shopping, and even home-bathing for shut-ins. It is her job to know her clients and their needs and to run interference for them through the bureaucratic tangles. Her husband is much less involved with the community since he works in the heart of the city, and often cannot even attend evening Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meetings—which are usually attended only by mothers in any case. Shoko is at a turning point, thinking of quitting work for a few years, as her daughter approaches the all-important college entrance exams. Her husband is leaving it up to her but he reminded her that if she stays at work they can better afford the extras—tutoring and cram classes—that are on the list of requisites for successful exam-takers. She thinks the social support she can give her daughter by being home is more important, but her thought is that when their son is ready for the tutoring, she'll go back to work for it. Both sets of grandparents live on their own and only see this busy family on their very occasional weekend trips—perhaps only three times a year each. Shoko says that she will gladly take her mother in if she needs help but not her father, who is, she says, cantankerous. As for her husband's family? Not if she can help it. She's already collecting brochures from retirement communities for them.

Atsuko is flying high, and just turned 50. She is in *onna tengoku*, “women's heaven”—the space of life after her primary roles have been fulfilled, after she has waited her turn, and now does just what she wants. Her children are in their 20s, the daughter married, and the son in college, and she's done. She's

been twice to Europe with her women friends, and goes hiking in the Japan Alps with a club of hikers, both male and female. Her husband is about to retire, and she feels she has to pack in the pleasures before he is at home, a *sodaigomi* or big bag of useless trash, unable even to make his own tea. She finds him totally anachronistic, as her friends' husbands even cook the evening meals and will definitely not be dependent retired men. She had saved her own money from her part-time job just for this time in her life, and will, she says, spend it all on her hobbies and travel, before he retires. She is taking cooking lessons as well, and has developed a full-scale crush on the chef, a locally-noted Japanese cook specializing in Italian foods. He seems to reciprocate and at this writing nothing yet has developed. If it does, she is sure it will be fun but undemanding and won't interfere either with being home when her husband is there or with her other pleasures.

Chieko is a single woman with a daughter, divorced and living near, but not with, her parents. She struggles to be everything for the daughter who, as is customary in Japan, almost never sees her father. She is working as a copy writer at an advertising agency where she is treated very well—there are a lot of women like her working there—and is permitted sometimes to work at home or bring work home early to meet her daughter after school. She says that she will never remarry, but hopes to be working straight through her daughter's school life so as to be able to move up the agency hierarchy—even a temporary interlude would knock her off the ladder. Her daughter notices how hard her mother works and tries to do what she can at home including cooking supper, which only makes her mother feel guiltier.

The three women whose brief profiles I have just given are ordinary, each of them. But in their diversity, Shoko, Atsuko and Chieko demonstrate that facts of class, of personal distinctions, of choices, and diverse family and other situations are not accounted for in policy, which for the sake of bureaucratic efficiencies and neat ideological stances about family and society, must ignore so many realities. If most women work, and most families are just “getting by” there are clearly unrecognized interventions needed to support reproduction. Official culture amounts to a codified set of conventions concerning the family which simply do not describe most people who either live in guilty recognition that they are not the “good family” the state would want, or live in creative defiance of its demands.

Japan in the social science literature is now said to be a “normal country” with the ordinary problems shared with other developed societies and with some less developed ones. “Normalcy” is revealed, in part, as the result of Japan's economic slump, which began in the early 1990s—few people can live the illusion of the ideal domestic life, and there is a greater diversity of options for an ordinary existence. Each woman, each family, lives by coping on its

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own, in its own way. Tolstoy's happy families are all alike, and so are ideal families, since happiness means conforming to the stated ideology that (it is said) guarantees happiness in exchange. Ordinary, but not unhappy families, live in different ways constructed by necessity and their own strategies. When a critical mass of those ways can no longer be denied, contrary as they are to the official ideologies, something must change. Policies now in place, whether increased day care provision or supplements to families caring for the elderly at home, are ineffectual and aimed at preserving a fictional ideal. A larger effort to "permit" families to operate in their own ways must be supported by policymakers, in service to the creation of an altogether new—plural and tolerant—public culture of the family.

Note: The material for this set of reflections was drawn from my own work, *Perfectly Japanese: Making Families in an Era of Upheaval*, published in 2002 by the University of California Press. The short narratives of three women's lives did not appear in the book but were part of the research materials collected over the four years previous to publication.

