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Gardening and Exotification:
A Look at Gender Roles in Japanese American Society

It’s no secret that Japan does not generally put much focus into the movement behind gender equality. Though the country is a leader in many ways, from technology to life expectancy, they severely lack in other fields. According to the 2017 Global Gender Gap Report, Japan is currently ranked #114 out of 144 countries for gender equality and has a parity score of 0.657 (with 1.00 being perfect parity). From Iceland taking the #1 spot to Yemen at #144, this report accounts for equality of access to education, age at childbirth, women in roles of government, equality of pay, and much more. (Meanwhile, the United States is currently ranked at 49 with a parity score of 0.718.) Why is Japan rated so low? As the World Economic Forum reports, Japan is incredibly unbalanced in government. Only about 14% of legislators, senior officials, and managers are women, women make up 10% of parliament, and Japan has had no female heads-of-state in the last 50 years. Some of these beliefs that women should not have the same opportunities as men made their way to the Japanese American community through the first-generation Issei in America. These ideas were reinforced in American society up through the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Since then, the Japanese American community has been at the forefront of change. As the concept of social equality has become more important, gender roles and human sexuality in the Japanese American community, which have been shaped by Japanese culture as well as American culture, have lost importance in modern times.

 Many of the gender roles in the Japanese American community originated from traditional Japanese customs. In general, Japanese tradition was fixated on the importance of unity of the family. From a young age, children are taught to obey their parents, no matter what, or else it may bring shame to the family. This was a paramount concept for Japanese Americans, especially the Issei generation. Children were expected value family honor primarily, a centuries-old tradition brought directly from the homeland. Additionally, they are taught to be submissive in the face of authority, not to question what is asked of you (Adler 25). For more help on the subject of Japanese culture, I interviewed my roommate, Ryo Uchiyama, an exchange student from Japan. When I asked him if there was anything that he felt pressured to do or be as a Japanese man, this was his response:

Recently, I have to look for a job for the future. As a man, I feel like I have to find at least one job for my life. Japanese people have a sense that women can focus on the housework after getting married, and right now I feel as a man, I have to find a job that’s going to be in high demand in the future. (Uchiyama)

I then asked him if he would feel less pressured to get a job straight out of college if it were socially acceptable: “I’d say I would feel less pressure. I would probably spend a year or so doing an internship. And then after I ensure if the job fits me, I’ll get a job” (Uchiyama). This was one of the main issues faced by early Japanese Americans; the pressure to apply themselves in a field respective to their gender was intense. Nisei men and women were expected to assimilate into their proper expectations of gender. Though men and women (and children) alike would commonly work on the farms, families who did not work in agriculture sought other trades. In the mid-20th century, it was almost entirely men who would enter into political life, seeking seats on city council, and even the United States congress, like Senator Daniel Inouye. On the other hand, women were pressured into domestic work, whether in their own homes or working as maids for white families.

 But the Japanese Americans also had to prove themselves to be worthy of being accepted into American society. They were pressured into assimilating into American culture, forming the concept of the *model minority*, an idea that immigrants should not only meet qualifications of acceptance into their host society but should exceed those expectations. This concept is considered to be a myth because it “is a stereotype used to control minority groups” (Endo and Della-Piana 47). Asian Americans are faced with the idea that they need to be better than Americans in education if they are to be equal in society. Mothers must be strict in enforcing that their children study, a term derogatively known as *kyōiku mama*, or “education mother.” These mothers were stricter on their sons’ educations than those of their daughters. After all, it was expected by American society that the boy would grow up to be smart and studious, maybe becoming a business owner or manager. Meanwhile, his sister would mature, only to find herself pressured by American culture to be a good wife who may have a chance to earn money at a low-wage job. However, American culture also expected Japanese American women to be the keepers of Japanese culture. They were expected to organize tea ceremonies, perform traditional dances, and create flower arrangements. Additionally, women were often exotified and fetishized by American men and put up with it, all for the sake of being accepted and assimilating into the society. While women from many different backgrounds face this same exotification, like Hispanic and black women, these women were seen as promiscuous and easy, whereas the Japanese American women were thought of as a loyal, quasi-celibate ethnicity, a trophy wife for any man who could score her.

 Though the Japanese Americans were expected to bring many traditions and points of view from their ancestral homeland, American culture heavily influenced how gender and responsibilities were treated in various communities and generations. During the era of the Nisei and Sansei youth, from the 1930s to 1960s, America held many of the same traditions that Japan held. This pressure from American culture helped form the concept of how each gender should act in Japanese American communities. For example, during World War II, white women entered the workforce to fill the jobs held by the men before they left for battle. In an admission by the War Production Board, women were never meant to stay in the workforce, but only to work for the duration of the war. “There [was] little doubt that women would be required to leave their jobs at the end of the war to permit the return of men to their jobs as they are released from the armed forces” (qtd. in Kossoudji and Dresser 432). However, they soon found that they enjoyed earning money, and not having to work in the home. When men returned from war, they came back to find all their positions had been filled by their wives. They established the idea that women should not be in the workforce, rather, they should stay in the home and look after the children, clean the house, and prepare food. This idea was prevalent up until the 1960s and perpetuated the notion that women were expected to be subservient to their husbands, who were the breadwinners of the household. This concept was also seen in Japanese culture, which only helped to enforce the expectations of Japanese American women.

 Japanese American men suffered from the pressures of American culture as well. American men were proud of their country and laid down their lives for it. Meanwhile, when they would see a Japanese man, they could only see a man whose ancestors abandoned their home country to live in another, hardly an act of *true manliness*. Even if the Japanese American man had served in the military, as we saw in *American Pastime*, he would still be seen as inferior and an enemy who was undeserving of even a haircut. American men also preserved the idea that men shouldn’t show any kind of emotion other than anger, nor should he show any form of friendly affection towards a male friend. As Mark Greene, editor for The Good Men Project, says about American culture regarding the starvation of platonic touch between men:

In American culture, we believe that men can never be entirely trusted in the realm of the physical. We collectively suspect that, given the opportunity, men will revert to the sexual at a moment’s notice. That men don’t know how to physically connect otherwise …. There is no corresponding narrative about women. (Greene)

Greene continues, describing the psychological conflicts that American men have put themselves through, giving a “laundry list of reasons” why we see platonic touch as a negative concept. One such reason is that “[w]e don’t want to risk our status as macho or authoritative by being physically gentle” (Greene). This concept has pushed its way through to the Japanese American lifestyle, dominating over the previously-held idea of interpersonal platonic contact in Japan. During my interview with my roommate, I asked how he felt about physical connections with other men and how it differs from American culture. He described how “in general, in Japan, people do not hug. Sometimes we can see some girls hugging each other and holding hands … but it does not have any specific meaning.” (Uchiyama). While it is uncommon for either boys or girls to show each other platonic touch, it is not seen as any more or less strange for men to show it than it is for women.

 One of the biggest differences between Japanese and American cultures, however, is the sense of individualism that is evident in the American Dream. In her book *Mothering, Education, and Ethnicity*, Susan Adler explores the extent to which the two cultures contrast in regard to this notion. She mentions the characteristics of the American behavior, which focus on “individualism, equality, rights and privileges, self-reliance, and self-assertion” (Adler 25). Meanwhile, the characteristics of the Japanese behavior could not be more different, which emphasize “collectivity, duty and obligation, hierarchy, deference, and dependence” (25). Adler suggests that the reason for the Japanese sense of unity and dependence is rooted in their mono-ethnic past: they were raised around people with the same history and the same values that they were taught. On the other hand, because of the country’s multiracial past, American culture tends to be focused on individualism. Though the society has always been controlled by white Americans, it is a country of immigrants, which could not have been said for Japan 150 years ago. Growing up in this country, every citizen has to compete with others to have a place in society. (That is, with the exception of white Americans, who tend to work less for a higher benefit.) This is apparent in the Japanese American community because they simultaneously must hold both cultures in high regard if they are to be true to their ethnic identity. They must be obedient to their mother and father, but independent enough to fit in with their fellow Americans. They have to show a hard work ethic yet have enough time to spend relaxing with their family. And most importantly, as Japanese Americans, they must show national pride in their country, but not to their heritage. This specifically was put to the test during the Loyalty Questionnaires of World War II, where they were forced to choose between commitment to America and the army versus retention of ancestral values.

 Much of the change that occurred in the Japanese American point of view happened in short bursts. For example, the years from the late 1960s through the mid-1970s proved to be a revolutionary time for people around the western world to challenge the traditional way of life. The Counterculture movement of the 1960s heavily influenced Americans to change their point of view regarding gender and sexuality, and this concept bled into the Japanese American community as well. Counterculture and the Summer of Love of 1967 brought new expectations to families, to husbands, to wives, to lovers. Previously, in Japanese culture, any form of sexuality that differed from the norm was ostracized, though not illegal. When talking with my roommate, though he personally has no problems with it, he explained that society recognizes gay and lesbian couples to be abnormal and “strange,” that they are seen as “out of society” (Uchiyama). Additionally, same-sex couples are still not allowed to legally be married in Japan and are not allowed to be present in the Imperial Palace, as we saw in the documentary of George Takei’s life. However, this could not be more different than the Japanese American community. The Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) has long been a supporter of LGBT rights, since even before the Stonewall Riots in 1969. They have protested, celebrated, and paraded for the LGBT community for many years. Why do the Japanese Americans fight so hard for the people that Japan does not give full legal equality to? The executive director for the JACL, Priscilla Ouchida, believes that the War Relocation experience gave reason for their support: “‘No one spoke up on our behalf. … We realized we needed to help others’” (qtd. in Lilly). Internment played a big role in shaping the Japanese American community’s views of ethics and human rights. As Ouchida says, they were seen as the enemy by most Americans, who wanted them gone from their country or even dead. After the Internment, the Japanese Americans saw this same attitude with other cultures, from the LGBT community to the Chicano Movement in California during the 1970s. In every situation, the JACL and its members were there to back up the defending group, fighting for their rights right at their side.

 The Internment during World War II was one of the most effective forces for changing how the Japanese American community viewed traditional gender roles. After President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, Japanese Americans were ordered into relocation camps for the duration of the war. This brought the men, Issei and Nisei alike, out of the workforce and into the “home.” Historian Paul Spickard explains how upon arrival in the camps, “[t]he father’s strong position as the authority figure was the first to go, largely because he lost his economic function as primary provider” (Spickard 110). The men were no longer paid to farm, cultivate, or work in canneries. Instead, during the first year, the able-bodied Issei and Nisei men worked in the camps doing physical labor, like digging trenches and repairing pipes. However, in 1943 when the Loyalty Questionnaires began to arrive, Nisei men began to leave to fight for their country. The jobs in camp were left to the men who remained, but also to Nisei women, who, as previously mentioned, were getting their first experience in the workforce as professions other than teachers. As women began working more hours during the day, Issei men stayed at home longer with their wives, tending to the chores that were normally performed by their daughters. Men began to clean around the house, learned to sew and make clothing, and more. They took more of an interest in gardening when the American government asked the internees to start growing their own Victory Gardens to assist in the war efforts, while also cutting down on food being sent to the camps. These acts of straying into the other gender’s stereotypical work helped form the basis of a new way of thought: there is no reason that men cannot do the things that women can do, and there is no reason that women cannot do things that men can do.

Japanese American gender roles have been heavily influenced by cultural norms from both their ancestral homeland as well as their place in American society. In both Japanese and American roles alike, for centuries women were seen as inferior and unable to do the same tasks a man could do. Women were expected to be docile homemakers, staying home with children while the men were active in war, politics, and labor. This made its way through to Japanese American views until World War II, where the Issei and Nisei women were expected to be wives, mothers, or eye-candy for tourists in Japan Town. The Japanese American culture is built on the idea that they ought to assimilate fully into American culture, a concept difficult to achieve when heritage is considered a paramount basis of identity, especially for the Japanese. But perhaps more important to the formation of modern Japanese American culture and gender roles were the forms of work during the Internment of World War II. During this time, men began to do more work around the house, like gardening and sewing. All the while, interned women were getting their taste of being in the workforce, initially as teachers and educators in the Camps. Following Internment, the Japanese Americans have long been in support of the problems faced by minorities, especially active in the Chicano Movement in the 1960s and 70s as well as fighting for LGBT rights. In 1994 and again in 2006, the JACL penned a letter in full support of marriage equality. Former JACL spokesperson William Yoshino said in an interview with NBC that “[w]e have to draw lessons from our own experiences. If you look at the history of Asian Americans, I think you can point to a history of being marginalized in many ways” (Guillermo). By 2018, these traditional views on how a person should act based on their gender are fading relatively quickly. It is more common now than it was 50 years ago for Japanese Americans to explore sexualities outside the norm. More women are in the workplace than ever, and it is increasingly more common for men to play the role of stay-at-home fathers while their wives work. How will this change in the future? I believe that in the coming decades, as with the rest of American culture, we will see a slow abandonment of previously-upheld ideologies of the gender binary, and I fully expect the Japanese American community to act as they have in the past and be in full-fledged support every step of the way.

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