The Telerepresentation of Gender in Japan

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Gender was not at the top of my list of topics to investigate when I began my nineteen months of fieldwork (from February 1988 until September 1989) inside the production department of a major Osaka television station. At the beginning of my research on how producers and directors create television in Japan, I envisioned a rather macho sort of political analysis that would identify influential individuals and groups, study factions and schisms, and chart the symbols and strategies that made up everyday life inside the television station (hereafter "ZTV"). However, this approach soon showed gender to be a key feature of company life. Fascinated, I paid close attention to the many ways men and women deployed representations of gender within the television station, and I tried to make sense of Japanese television programming in reference to this ethnographic grounding.

The first part of this chapter examines the cultural and ideological climate of TV production in Japan with particular reference to gender. The second part focuses on how TV planners, researchers, and producers imagine and entertain one type of gendered audience: what they call shufu (housewives). Although the overall tone of much that follows is critical, at the same time I want to leave space for ambiguity and change. If my research inside ZTV taught me anything, it is that gender in Japan, both on and off TV, is far from settled matter.

GENDER AND HIERARCHY INSIDE ZTV

According to a friend in the ZTV research department, the two most important factors that program planners consider when thinking about television audiences are age and sex. A similar perspective can shed light on the situation of women workers within ZTV. At ZTV, men minimize women's power and influence most obviously by outnumbering them. With close to ninety percent of the full-time employees (shain) being men, women inside ZTV are marked, both numerically and symbolically, as less significant. Moreover, shain women rarely occupy positions of power or even minimal authority. In 1989, none of the seventy-five shain women had reached the level of bucho (section manager), the lowest managerial position in the company. Meanwhile, the company employed well over one hundred "temporary" women employees. In this category women outnumbered men, though the low status of their work made them (and, in certain ideological extensions, all women at ZTV) second-class citizens within the organization. Produced in such an environment, it is hardly surprising that Japanese TV programs do little to empower women or work for change in the area of gender relations.

To understand how people negotiate gender relationships within the patriarchal and hierarchical organization of ZTV and how women at different levels in the company often adopt differing strategies to deal with their situations, it makes sense first to focus on the sorts of ideologies women in the Japanese TV industry must face. Among the most pernicious, especially among senior ZTV employees, are those that depict women as inherently inferior workers. The president of ZTV is one prominent proponent of this dominant view, and he shared the following opinions with me during a man-to-man talk one afternoon in his spacious office:

I often say that, you know, according to the Japanese constitution, and probably in the American constitution too, it is against the law to discriminate according to sex—they are both equal. Now, that "equal" is based on the law; that is not a realistic equality. . . . Regarding ability, to speak in general terms, of course men's ability is higher. Isn't it the case that in Greek philosophy they said homo sapiens? That is, women are not people. And it's the same in China too. . . . And in the case of presidents, while there are great (even) women like Thatcher, speaking in general and statistically, men have to be higher (than women); if you look at history . . . there are very few cases where women have come out on top in struggles for power. In fact, Japanese people have [the sport] sumo wrestling—now even if a woman tried she couldn't win, could she? Even in the Olympics they divide things up according to male and female. . . . So people think that I am a male chauvinist.

So even my wife bitches [at me], . . . But basically, compared to men, women are less intelligent, they have less physical strength, even their bodily structures are different—that is the philosophy I hold to—but in order to show that the company president is not a male chauvinist, we are also hiring women. They are people too, after all. While they may have certain limitations, there must also be "territories" where they can make use of their abilities, too. [He acts as if directing the personnel department.] "Use them in places like that." For example, there wasn't a single female announcer in the company, so I asked them] "Isn't that a little strange? There are, after all, many female viewers!" [We laugh]. . . .
So it's not exactly discrimination against women... but speaking realistically, in overall terms, statistically and in terms of number—it is a male-dominated society. I think that is the trend in the world.

These discriminatory statements are indicative of the degree to which women are seen as the inferior sex and thus as inferior employees by the elite managers of many Japanese corporations. Except in certain limited "territories" (the ZTV president used the English word), women are at best anomalies in the company organizational scheme. They are difficult to fit into regular senior/junior relationships, they do not drink as long or as as well as the men, and they are—in this view at least—generally irrational and emotional.5

Recent changes (post-1980) in hiring practices notwithstanding, the company will probably continue with policies that make women workers marginal while localizing them in appropriate "territories." As women workers are sometimes not so subtly reminded upon marriage or the birth of a child, the most appropriate territory of all is in the domestic sphere. (As we shall see, Japanese telerepresentations also assign women to appropriate territories, especially the home.)

Despite the confidence with which some men assert their superiority over women at ZTV, they can only do so by ignoring or rationalizing away the presence of very talented and successful women workers inside the station. One is a veteran television producer affectionately called "OK-san" by her workmates. Recruited early on from a publishing company where she wrote a cooking column for housewives, her experience made her attractive to ZTV where, "in those days" according to OK-san, "male or female, the company needed [talented] people." One of the most friendly and helpful of my informants, she had to say this about the early years at the company:

At that time, you know, the company had just gotten started so... the organization was still soft. It wasn't like today, some thirty years later, where the organization has become so completely systematized. There was still a relatively free sort of atmosphere at work. We all started at the same line, so to speak—our ages were all about the same—and so there was a strong sense of group consciousness [gakketsu ichibikata]. So in the beginning we didn't feel that we were being mistreated or discriminated against so much—at that time. It was still a new medium, you see?... And the people [in the television station] too, they hadn't yet, how to put it, they weren't yet so rigid. There was a feeling that we were all working together... We drank together, talked together, and did things as a group, so the atmosphere was much better then than now. From print, from the cinema, and from the stage and "show business" we took the best things we could use... We were sort of groping around in those days. So in a way, we were able to work freely. If one said, "I want to do this," you were able to, and sponsors weren't such trouble, and people didn't complain so much about ratings... so in that way it was better before the organization was firmly established.

The image OK-san gives of the early years at ZTV is of a flexible and relatively free environment infused with a sense of group consciousness and a shared sense of purpose. Gradually, however, both the organization of the company and many of the people inside it changed from "soft" (maccarabai) to "rigid" (lattei). Freedom decreased as the focus at ZTV shifted from horizontal relationships within the company to vertical, from "group consciousness" to "promotion consciousness," and from participation to competition in many areas of experience. Although OK-san did not say it explicitly, the increasingly rigid structure of ZTV may have worked to establish the power and prestige of men within the company.

For women, the growing rigidity proved disadvantageous in many unexpected ways. The sense of community forged during the early days of the company began to give way to routinization and the pressures of profit making. At the same time, women came to be classified as a separate and subordinate category within the company workforce. It became clear that women were not going to be treated equally within the organization, and they could not count on much support from the overwhelmingly male company union in their struggle. Starting a "women's group," ZTV women worked to ensure their fundamental rights within the television industry. OK-san was an active union leader for over ten years; she participated in sit-ins and general strikes while also campaigning for women's rights in private broadcasting companies. The successes of women in her generation were fundamental and important: the establishment of equal base pay for men and women; the repeal of unequal mandatory retirement ages for women (which were as low as the mid-twenties in some Japanese stations); the guarantee of the basic right to return to work after having a child. Despite these important victories, real problems remained to trouble almost every woman working in the Japanese television industry.

Another person conveniently ignored by those who would portray women as inferior workers was Ms. Kiyomizu. Now a powerful and respected documentary producer and director, she was originally hired by the television station as an announcer. After getting married, she was told that her popularity with the public was slipping, and she was transferred into the ZTV news production department. She was greeted at her new post by a boss (of course, a middle-aged man) who said, "We don't really expect anything from you." Despite (or perhaps because of) this less than flattering welcome, Ms. Kiyomizu kept on working and became one of the most prestigious ZTV documentary directors. Her presence, her intelligence, and her obvious success all call into question much of what the company president and second in charge say about women workers.
Although women like OK-san and Ms. Kiyomizu should put some strain on patriarchal ideologies of work and gender in the company, most men at ZTV view such women as exceptions that prove the rule, “special cases” (takubetsu na keishyō). Because these women do not fit into the prevailing discourses of gender and domination, they are either marginalized or ignored altogether by those who promote ideologies of male superiority in the workplace. These ideologies maintain and reproduce themselves by dissimulating the actual state of affairs within the station. (Analogous processes of dissimulation can also be seen in gendered representations in Japan.)

The women I got to know best were actively involved in TV production. They worked in what were called genba sections, areas where hands-on creation took place. Genba workers, including those relatively low on the totem pole, were given much prestige within the TV station. When I began working inside the ZTV production department, there were two female directors: the veteran OK-san and a new employee, Ms. Kameoka, who was still in her first year. Because most of the training of new entrants is done by one’s immediate superiors (sugu sanpai), much of the onerous work of teaching me how to become a floor director fell on the shoulders of Ms. Kameoka. Less than five months later, when the next group of annual recruits entered the company, I became the sugu sanpai of the next female director to enter the production department. I was thus working daily alongside women just beginning their careers inside the television station.

For these women, the most pressing concern was to secure acceptance into the hierarchical groups that made up the production department. Though they were officially already entitled to full membership, they had to prove themselves as workers in order to be seen as one of the team. Inside of the production department, the most important relationships were with those in one’s immediate work group. Ms. Kameoka and I were members of the team that produced the “Two O’clock Wideshow,” a live talk show broadcast nationwide five days each week. Our group was led by an amiable bachi, Mr. Ohira, who told me that he welcomed the coming of young women directors onto his team. Perhaps because of the friendliness of the section leader, women were generally treated well by other members of the department.

Within the work group there are three kinds of colleagues: sanpai (superiors), diskii (same year entrants), and kohai (inferiors). Seniority is the primary determining factor in the company hierarchy. The problem for women in such a system is that they have to juggle two kinds of subordination, whereas men have to only deal with one: although both men and women are defined and ranked according to seniority, women are also ranked (by some) as inferior. Inside the production department the usual official solution was to recognize only seniority; gender was rarely discussed openly by either men or women.

Women workers intent upon being ranked solely by seniority rather than gender attempted to mute gender differences. New women directors deliberately avoided calling attention to gender because it would highlight how they were different from the men in the group. This was made clear, for example, by the way shain women dressed. In stark contrast to the temporary workers, who almost always wore skirts or dresses, the shain usually wore slacks or blue jeans. When working in the studio, they often wore the navy blue ZTV windbreakers that were used by the (always male) cameramen and program technicians. Despite these attempts, however, women’s seniority-based ranking and gender-based ranking were conflated, and the women were viewed as kohai, especially when they were found wanting in some way.

As a consequence of their attempts to deflect attention from gender within the production department, the women did not protest the ways in which they were treated inside the station or gender was depicted on TV. Intent on achieving harmony with their male workmates, women directors let many things pass that they probably objected to personally. For example, they suffered quietly the behavior of a chief producer in the production department, whom I will call Mr. Takimoto. Known to touch women in the station whenever possible, he quipped, “I’m harmless because I just touch; I don’t do anything more serious!” His exploits were seen as humorous by most men within the department, to the point that being “attacked” by Mr. Takimoto was viewed as a sort of rite of passage for women entering the section.

The fact that women in the production department could not complain about such immediate and personal attacks helps explain their hesitancy to speak up about discrimination against women on TV. I never heard any of the ZTV directors, men or women, object to that discrimination, although once, during new employee training, a young woman in the programming division did give an articulate presentation on the subject of “why TV representations of women and ideas about female audiences are out of date.” I was impressed by her talk, but even more by the reaction of her fast-rising section chief, who smiled bemusedly and confided to me “man-to-man” that “she really has no idea about the business side of television.”

The ambiguous position of shain women at ZTV was compounded by the presence of low-status, non-shain women employees. Women full-timers were outnumbered by pretty, temporary workers who adorned every office, tending the three pseudo-domestic zones of the Japanese workplace: the copy machine, the tea area, and the word processors. Women struggling against the stereotypical image of females as harmo-
nious and decorative “flowers of the workplace” (shokuba no hana) faced very real problems in relating to the temporary women in their sections. Solutions varied, but many feared that socializing with the temporaries would hurt their professional image in the company. The resultant distancing was noticed by many men, who often interpreted it as a sign that women employees were “naturally” unable to get along with each other.

The temporary women workers in the production department were kept busy with such tasks as answering telephones, making copies, and sorting postcards from viewers. More unusual duties included helping guide visitors to the various studios and assisting in logistical work when the production staff went on location to film special programs. The women were expected to prepare and serve tea to all the employees in the office several times each day, especially in the morning when work began after lunch, and during the so-called three o’clock snack time. Having women play the role of waitress several times a day underlined their subservient status while also making men feel important. Expected to dress stylishly and to be pleasant and agreeable at all times, the temporary women played a crucial symbolic function within the station: they provided a nonthreatening other against which men could define and create masculine identities. Although these women probably found many of the ZTV men ridiculous, their intimae (superﬁcial) behavior was respectful, agreeable, and subservient.

Because I was interested in learning more about women working in the company, I tried to stay on good terms with the temporary workers. I felt especially close to Tami-chan, whose eight-year career at ZTV was much longer than that of most temporary workers (who usually stayed for only six months to a year). She had come to ZTV from a personnel agency and was now responsible for scheduling and managing audience visits to the various studios. An efﬁcient and respected worker, Tami-chan was in many ways the leader of the temporary employees—indeed, at times this energetic woman appeared to be the de facto leader of the entire production department. Her ambiguous position within but outside the company hierarchy allowed her to openly subvert, play with, and parody the system.

For example, after many months of ﬁeldwork, I noticed that in conversation among themselves the temporaries often did not use proper names to refer to various men who worked in our section. When I asked Tami-chan about this, she thought a bit before confiding that they had actually compiled a list of nicknames to refer to the men in the ofﬁce. They called one entire section of the production department “the zoo.” “Don’t you get it?” Tami-chan prodded. “Haven’t you noticed that many of the men look like different types of animals?” I had not noticed, but after Tami-chan gave me a couple of examples (one poor man was “the giraffe,” and another was “panda”), I saw the humor in these well-coined nicknames. One of my friends in the department was labeled “monster-man” (taken from a popular Japanese animated program), and I didn’t have the heart to tell him his nickname because it ﬁt only too well. (I never did discover whether or not I had been given a nickname—I was afraid to ask!)

Although the temporary female workers were among the lowest in status at ZTV—or perhaps because of this organizational reality—they managed to make the work enjoyable by creating their own alternative perspective on the company and the people who worked there. These women were free to parody the hierarchies at ZTV in a way no sainai could, and their irreverent behavior was enjoyed by both women and men inside the company. The famous “elevator incident,” graphically related to me by a temporary worker friend, is just one of many Tami-chan myths that are told and retold at ZTV. Understanding the myth requires one ethnographic observation about a company elevator that would make a loud buzzing noise when overfull. Almost invariably, the person who got off the elevator to lighten the load at such times was the lowest-ranking employee. Even if this person had gotten on ﬁrst, he or she was expected to defer and let the higher-ranking workers ride. I was struck by the acrimony with which hierarchies were computed and enacted at such times; ﬁguring out who was lowest on the totem pole was done quickly and automatically.

Introducing Tami-chan into the picture, however, often resulted in a glitch in the system, as one part-time worker told me in an interview.

One day Tami-chan was riding the elevator up toward the production department. When it stopped at the second floor, our department manager, Mr. Ohira, got on. The elevator sounded BZZZZZZZ. Before we could decide who was to get off the elevator, Tami-chan accused in a loud voice, “Wasn’t it you, Mr. Ohira?” [Ohira-san desho?] As if by reﬂex, the startled buchô jumped off the elevator and began the long walk up to the sixth ﬂoor. The doors closed and the elevator began to rise in stunned silence until, all together, we burst out in laughter!!

Tami-chan made the ofﬁce more pleasant by poking fun at the hierarchy that threatened to become too powerful. Her energy and humor were infectious. Constantly telling jokes, she often had the people around her in stitches before she would suddenly sit up straight and accuse them of “not working seriously.” (This usually made us laugh even harder.) She would straight-facedly say to our buchô, “Dono arigato gozai manmoushi” (roughly, “Thank you very mammoth!”), hoping to get some reaction. Knowing he was outnumbered, the boss usually just pretended he didn’t notice her joking.

Tami-chan and the ZTV temporary workers can help us in thinking about Japanese television and how it addresses and entertains audiences.
First, just as the women temporary workers were paid to agree with men, to compliment them, to serve them, and to add harmony and beauty to the workplace, women are routinely used on Japanese TV in exactly the same way, to listen to and agree with men. Women “introduce harmony” into Japanese telepresence with their (presumed) focus on the maintenance of warm human relations (ningen kaetsu). Unlike men who struggle for superiority and dominance, these women in powerless positions are no threat to anyone. Whatever they may actually think, they express only support for the very system that dominates them.

Women on TV, however, are not limited to simply echoing what has already been expressed by men. Like the temporary workers in ZTV, women on TV often make fun of the status quo. As I have argued elsewhere, much of TV in Japan appeals to audiences by representing a world where hierarchies are subverted by spontaneous play and informal interaction. For example, two manzaishi (comedian) women whom I got to know well, stage-named Iruyo and Kuruyo, construct many of their routines by exaggerating and parodying dominant notions of women. Single and in their early forties, they pretend to be preoccupied with getting married “before it gets too late.” The ridiculousness of their act cannot but reflect on the ridiculousness of a patriarchal system in which women are said to have an ideal age for getting married (tekireiki), after which they apparently spoil like unpurchased fruit.

There was room for play within ZTV (especially for those who had the least to lose), and there was room to play on Japanese TV, where women and men are able to represent themselves in a variety of ways. In both cases, however, the overarching hierarchical structures of the television industry work to ensure that the play and flexibility do not go too far. Tami-chan was always careful to show that she was “just joking around” and never really questioning the authority of the men in power. Similarly, Japanese TV performers play with gender and hierarchy, but always within very real (albeit undefined) limits.

**CREATING GENDER ON TV: IMAGINARY HOUSEWIVES**

Having considered in some detail the various ways in which women and men construct gender in their everyday interactions within ZTV, we are ready to look at how gender is constructed in program planning and production. I focus in particular on the cultural category of *shufu* (housewives), who watch more television than anyone else in Japan. People at ZTV talked constantly about the characteristics and predilections of the elusive *shufu*—although homemakers themselves never took part in the discussion. (Married women who worked at ZTV did not qualify as housewives. A *shufu*, it seemed clear, was a woman who stayed at home. Just as female ZTV housewives downplayed their gender, they almost never talked about their private lives, and they never referred to themselves or other working women as *shufu*.)

My experiences working on the housewife-oriented “Two O’clock Wideshow” revealed many times how TV producers look down upon the *shufu*. Particularly memorable was a program planning meeting where a key writer for the show glossed the entire category by saying that “all housewives are interested in” is “voyeurism, gossip, and wife and mother-in-law relations” (nosoki, uuansu, yone-shittome kaetsu). Looking around the table, I saw the producers and directors nodding in solemn agreement. Nevertheless, TV producers were well aware that they needed to know more about housewives to attract and keep their audience’s attention. Whenever the ratings for their show dropped off, they started looking around for ideas. They often turned to the ZTV research division, which provides detailed and “scientific” information about the composition and predilections of various TV audiences. The research division’s 1989 ZTV *Data Book* was devoted entirely to housewives, promising to help advertisers “narrow your sights and pursue appropriate housewives.” Instead of arguing that all housewives are the same, ZTV researchers pronounced that “housewives now fall into six patterns” (*Ijna no Shufu, Mutsu no Pottan ni Wakarenasu*). Each type was described in a brief paragraph accompanied by a sketch of a faceless woman.

**Namae-shita-gata Shufu** (Broad-minded, Almighty Housewife): 15%

Socializing widely, I am not worried when meeting someone even for the first time. Even if I am spoken to in English, it is no problem. I also have the power to take on anything actively. I am sensitive to all sorts of information in many areas, including politics and economics. After managing the home, I prefer to do things for myself. Even the relations with relatives are left to me; I am strongly self-assertive. I am a broad-minded, almighty housewife.

**Giri-jirai-gata Shufu** (Liberated, Diplomatic Housewife): 14%

Socializing widely, I am pushed into being a leader more often than most. I also like to participate in local activities. Although I prefer to be active, I am relatively uninterested in politics, economics, and international events. I do not assert my personality (*kasa*) much in the home, and I often let my husband help me do the housework. I am a liberated, diplomatic housewife.

**Kamikane-shi-gata Shufu** (“Woman of the House” Housewife): 16%

I don’t care about the outside world. I am less interested than most in politics, economics, and local activities. Inside the house my leadership is strong, and I put priority on my own ideas. I decide by myself about the children’s education and major purchases. I am the “woman of the house” housewife.
Although I am more sensitive than most to information and events in the world, I am not so very active. I do handle the management of household economics, but the final decision-making power is left to my husband. I take care of things within my range on my own, and I consult with my husband about other things. I am the “harmonious wife and beauty” housewife.

Kaishinundō-gata Shufu (Devoid and Helpful Housewife): 17%

Socializing widely, I am eager to take on all sorts of things. But I am yet to reach the level of leading other people and participating in social movements. In the home I concentrate on the housework. Placing my own priorities after those of others, I am the type that works hard for my family. Hating to use money on myself, I am the devoted and helpful housewife.

Heionjichi-gata Shufu (Tranquil and Prudent Housewife): 25%

I do not enjoy socializing. I also don’t pay much attention to information and events in the world. Inside the house I do not promote my own ideas. I leave most things to my husband. Passive and pensive, I am the tranquil and prudent housewife.

In this way, the Japanese shufu are made into targets and markets for sponsors and television programmers alike. But are the cultural and ideological suppositions that underlie this high-tech style of TV research? When I asked my research division friend for an explanation of these types, he explained that he had been surprised that the housewives had sorted out into six discrete groups. Looking again at the six types, he added an observation: “In many ways, I guess, this Harmonious Wife and Beauty Type housewife is the most ideal.” The ideal wife, it seems, is one who upholds the domestic front (without, of course, being so presumptuous as to make important decisions before asking her husband) while being interested but relatively inactive when it comes to the wider world.

In figure 2, consider the two axes that are the foundation for the entire project. The vertical axis represents the degree to which housewives are or are not “aggressive about domestic life” (katei seikatsu ni sekkyokuteki), whereas the horizontal axis indicates the degree to which housewives are “aggressive about social life” (shakai seikatsu ni sekkyokuteki). In that these poles are already set before women are asked a single survey question, this research project relies and reinforces views of gender in which women are defined as fundamentally domestic (Katei-teki) creatures who are more or less active in the somewhat more ambiguous realm of the public (Shakai). Completely ignored in this apolitical model are the many ways—symbolic, social, and physical—that men dominate women in everyday life in Japanese society.

Although this dominant view of gender is rapidly changing in Japan, the continuing domination of television programming and production by older males has kept TV firmly on the conservative side in cultural struggle.
Having watched her mother (Yoshiko) and mother-in-law (Fusae) quarrel and fight a war of words for over twenty years, the daughter Natsuko had firmly resolved that she would never live together with her mother-in-law when she got married. Natsuko got engaged to Kohei, only to find soon after that his older sister’s husband had been transferred overseas; thus Natsuko and Kohei would have to live together with SUMI, her [future] mother-in-law. Becoming angry with how things had turned out, Natsuko finally cancels the engagement. Then Fusae [Natsuko’s grandmother] is incapacitated by a stroke.  

This drama is about a complex nexus of human relationships rather than a single character. Indeed it is difficult to identify who the protagonist is, or if there is one at all. Twenty-four-year-old Natsuko is in a difficult position because she loves Kohei, an eldest son. According to tradition, she is obliged to stay with his parents and take care of them in their old age. (Kohei’s father died when he was only three, which makes his feelings of obligation even stronger toward his mother.) Making matters worse for poor Natsuko, her future mother-in-law, SUMI, is slowly recovering from a stroke. Not only must Natsuko get along with her mother-in-law, but she must also take care of her indefinitely.  

This situation provides the central tension for the drama and is supplemented by other subplots that deal with related issues of individual, family, obligation, and tradition. The crisis of Natsuko’s grandmother’s stroke and the way Natsuko’s mother selflessly cares for her make Natsuko think twice about her own behavior. In the end she realizes that she has been “selfish” (jibun katte) in putting her own comfort above her obligations to Kohei’s family. The modern daughter, Natsuko, ends up falling into line with the dominant ideology of family in Japan, a conversion that is portrayed in the drama as a real step toward maturity. The drama speaks in the voice of (patriarchal) common sense, urging women to persevere, to endure, and to sacrifice.  

In addition to depicting their subordination to men, the narrative shows how women in Japan are subject to domination by older women, especially their mothers-in-law. The bickering and petty conflicts that go on between women in the family illustrate their inability to cooperate with each other. It is hardly surprising that they are happiest when under the firm control of their betters—that is, men. (The reader may recall a similar logic at work in the explanations from some ZTV men for the strained relations between shinio and non-shinio women in the company.) In the opening scene, the women characters are introduced thus:

[In the home, Natsuko is getting ready for the yuinô—the formal presentation of betrothal gifts from the groom’s family. Natsuko’s mother, Yoshiko, dressed smartly in a black skirt suit with white accents, is helping her tighten the obi of her kimono. The dialogue begins just before the mother-in-law, dressed in an appropriately demure but elegant kimono, enters the room.]

YOSHiko: Something out of kilter on the back of her daughter’s pale pink kimono?  
Let’s try not to get it dirty, okay?! How’s that?

NATSUKO: [Happily studying herself in a mirror] Umm! [The mother-in-law hurries into the room and dramatically complains.]

FUSAE: Why didn’t you have her wear the furisode [a long-sleeved kimono appropriate for formal occasions]?

YOSHiko: Let’s try not to get it dirty, okay?! How’s that?

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FUSAE: Why didn’t you have her wear the furisode [a long-sleeved kimono appropriate for formal occasions]?
NATSUKO: I had wanted to continue my job, but I decided to quit at the end of the month. You see, I don’t have enough confidence to handle both outside work and housework like my mother has done.

FATHER: Women are things that are waiting at home for their husbands to come back.

NATSUKO: So, Father, did you really hope for Mom to stay at home all the time?

FATHER: [A bit flustered] In my case I didn’t think that way so much because your mother had always been working...

FUSAE: And so all of the responsibility was shifted on my shoulders. That is, Yoshiko only had a short vacation when Natsumo was born, and since then she has always been working on the outside.

SISTER: Because Grandmother has been so healthy, you’ve been able to do that.

FUSAE: Healthy, well it’s been twenty-four years, I tell you... Because I had to take care of both Natsumo and all of the housework, it was very difficult for me.

[THe camera has shifted to the hallway outside the room where Yoshiko has paused, listening to her mother-in-law accept all the credit for raising her daughter.]

FUSAE: It’s almost as if I raised Natsumo all by myself! [The husband tries to tell her to change the subject, but she presses on with the relentlessly only a Japanese mother-in-law, it seems, can muster.] I think my son, too, has put up with an awful lot. [She laughs.] It’s tough for those who guard the home, but it’s probably even tougher on those who must work outside!

BROTHER-IN-LAW: That’s right! You know what they say. “If you take even one step out of the home, then you make one enemy!”

YOSHIKO: [Entering the room and pulling the hot sake containers down on the table] That’s right! More than any other form of support, without the understanding of her husband a woman won’t be able to work outside. The credit for my being able to continue working all goes to my husband.

SISTER: That must be the case.

FUSAE: [Shaking her head] That makes it sound as if I wasn’t of any use at all, doesn’t it?

YOSHIKO: Losing her cool and suddenly speaking informally! That’s not at all what I said, Grandma! [She catches herself and restores a calm, taciturn formalism.] Of course, I can hardly express in words how much mother has helped.

NATSUKO: Perhaps I was the one helped most of all by Grandmother. Grandma always came without fail on the days when parents came to observe classes at school, right Grandma?

FUSAE: And I would do things like bringing your umbrella if it rained, wouldn’t I?

KOHEI: So you were a little “grandma’s girl,” weren’t you?

NATSUKO: [Smiling] That’s right!

FUSAE: Elder sister, if by chance you have any problems with Natsumo, please come to me for advice. She is after all the grandchild that I raised.

[Kohei’s elder sister nods in agreement as the camera zooms in on an unhappy Yoshiko.]
A few from the program's first commercial break, we have already learned much about the characters. Kohei seems like a nice fellow who cares a great deal for his mother. He shows more outward affection for Natsuko than she does for him. Natsuko seems to have a strong sense of self. She says, jokingly, that she "chose" Kohei because he is nice, and she does not back down before her parents or her mother-in-law. Natsuko's father is a down-to-earth man, honest and good-natured. Natsuko's mother, Yoshiko, is an intelligent woman who is elegant and warm at the same time. (Perhaps she is so positively depicted because women of about her age—mid to late forties—make up the target audience for the drama.) Despite her many strong points, however, Yoshiko is given to fighting with her crusty old mother-in-law, Fusae, who is in her late sixties. Both Fusae and Yoshiko behave irrationally when they fight, and the father and daughter routinely treat their constant struggles like the tantrums of spoiled children.

Subsequent scenes show the conflict between Yoshiko and Fusae in more detail and introduce a subplot about an old man who lives alone next door and refuses to let his son and daughter-in-law move into his house. This subplot is an inversion of the main plot of the drama: Natsuko refuses to move in with a sick mother-in-law and thus resists the socially recognized obligations befitting the wife of a firstborn son; the old neighbor refuses to allow his own firstborn son to move in with him and thus resists the model of a typical three-generation, extended family. By the end of the drama, both of these plots will be resolved in favor of common sense and "tradition." In fact, the correctness of the traditional Japanese family system is about the only thing that Yoshiko and Fusae can agree on. The two women are thus avid supporters of the very system that subjugates them.

Although Natsuko has vowed never to live with her mother-in-law, she soon discovers that the sister who planned to live with Kohei's mother must go overseas with her husband. With nobody else available to take care of the mother, Kohei's sister asks Natsuko to move into the main house. Natsuko and Kohei would become the de facto heads of the family home. This is exactly what Natsuko did not want to happen, and she dramatically cancels her engagement with Kohei. A good and loyal son, Kohei is unable to consider putting his mother in an old-person's home, but he is also unwilling to let go of Natsuko. Yet no matter how hard he tries to change her mind, Natsuko will not listen.

Meanwhile, Yoshiko is working on the problem of the cranky old neighbor, Mr. Kotoyama. (As a woman, it seems, she is naturally inclined to fix problems between families—even those that are not her own.) She meets with the son and his wife, who explain that they want to live with the old man because they worry about him in his old age. When old Mr. Kotoyama comes down with a cold one day, Yoshiko tells his daughter to tell him at work and suggests that she drop by to take care of the old man. The relationship between Mr. Kotoyama and his daughter-in-law improves, and finally he consents to let her and his son move in with him.

The main plot involving the canceled engagement between Natsuko and Kohei is less easily resolved. Although Natsuko assumes that the relationship is over, Kohei has yet to tell his mother and sisters that Natsuko has backed out of the wedding. Kohei appears one night at the their door and rushes inside to talk with Natsuko. Telling her he must decide by the next day whether to cancel the wedding hall reservation, he asks her once again to marry him. Natsuko, however, is still unwilling to live with his mother. She shakes her head "no" without looking up to meet his gaze. Kohei runs from the house.

This crisis is followed by another, pivotal one: Fusae collapses in the hallway. She has had a stroke, just like Kohei's mother. Yoshiko, despite years of fighting with Fusae, unhappily becomes her primary caretaker and even takes a one-year leave of absence from work so that she can stay home with the bedridden old woman. In an emotional scene, the husband bows low to his wife to thank her for taking care of his mother. In yet another scene, Yoshiko and old man Kotoyama are sitting at Fusae's bedside when Fusae gestures to Yoshiko, who moves close to the old woman. Fusae tries to speak, but the sound that comes from her lips are not articulated into words. Nonetheless, Yoshiko nods and answers her, "I understand. I will ask the doctor." When old man Kotoyama comments, "Well, at least she can speak," Yoshiko replies, "No, she can’t speak yet. I guess it’s because we lived together everyday for so long, but I understand almost everything that she is trying to tell me.”

In this way the drama informs us that there is no one better qualified to take care of elderly stroke victims than their own (female) family members. Who else, after all, would be able to read their minds and anticipate their wishes in this way? *Ishin denshin*, the "heart to heart communication" so idealized in Japan, is used here to show how close the connection between these two women is, even though they have often been too busy fighting to realize it. The importance of this connection is made explicit in another scene when Yoshiko addresses the half-conscious Fusae in front of her husband and daughter:

**Yoshiko:** *(Holding onto Fusae's hand)* It's okay, don't worry. It's a matter of course that I will take care of you. *(The camera cuts to a shot of Natsuko watching her mother)* You, Grandmother, are a very important person to me. So please depend on me as much as you can, Grandmother.

In urging Fusae to depend on her, Yoshiko uses the word *amae*. "Amae" describes a relationship of passive dependence, whose very archetype is
very much like a child, and Yoshiko quite naturally falls into the role of
caring mother.
In yet another scene, Natsuko and her mother are taking care of Fusae,
who gestures to Yoshiko that she wants to have her back massaged.
Yoshiko complies happily, saying:

Yoshiko: Lying down all the time makes your shoulders sore, doesn’t it,
Grandmother?
Natsuko: Grandmother is depending on you like a child, Mom!
Yoshiko: That’s right. Grandmother has become a total baby! Grandma,
you are my baby, aren’t you?
[The feeble, grandmother nods and Yoshiko and Natsuko laugh.]

At this point, the implicit endurance of the so-called traditional family system
becomes clear: housewives endure the pain of living with their mothers-in-
law and being treated like children by them, but in later years the tables
are turned and it is the mothers-in-law who become the babies. To fail to
take care of an elderly relative is akin to abandoning an infant. Yoshiko
plays the self-sacrificing mother role to the hilt: she does everything from
washing Fusae’s hair to cleaning and ironing her diapers. Selfless sacrifice,
in this worldview, is what being an ideal mother is all about.

Yoshiko’s efforts to care for Fusae have a remarkable effect on Natsuko.
Seeing her mother sacrifice so much for another, Natsuko reflects on her
own behavior. She comes to realize that she has been selfish in her behav-
ior toward both her family and her fiancé. Natsuko promptly goes to the
hospital where Kohei’s mother is recovering and asks Kohei’s elder sister
to teach her how to take care of the woman. Putting on an apron as a sign
of her resolve—the feminine equivalent of a man wearing a hauchimaki or
rolling up his sleeves—Natsuko learns to change her future mother-in-
law’s kimono. Kohei enters the room and is shocked to see Natsuko there.
When his sister explains that she came to help take care of his mother, he
jumps for joy and runs out to call the wedding hall to reschedule their
marriage ceremony. The final happy scenes of the drama take place back
in the house:

Yoshiko lies awake on her futon. She is worrying about Natsuko, who is late. Just then,
she hears the door open. Getting up and going into the kitchen, she finds Natsuko
sitting at the table drinking a glass of water. (On Japanese television drinking a glass of
water often signifies that a character has been drinking alcohol.)

Natsuko: I’m home!
Yoshiko: Weren’t you a little bit late?
Natsuko: Yes. I just got back from a date with Kohei.
Yoshiko: [Surprised because she thought they had broken up] What?!
Natsuko: Oh, and about this Saturday—Dad is going to come back, isn’t he?

Natsuko: This Sunday Kohei says he is going to come over with the yuinō.
Yoshiko: What do you mean “yuinō”?
Natsuko: I decided to get married to Kohei. [A piano begins to play the theme
song]
Yoshiko: What is this all about? Please explain to me.
Natsuko: I…watching you and Grandmother I came to realize that I
was wrong in my thinking. So today I went to the hospital and tended to
Kohei’s mother, and I apologized.

Yoshiko: [Smiling proudly at her daughter] Congratulations to you Natsuko.
That’s wonderful news.
Natsuko: [Somewhat shyly and hesitantly] Mother…[Bowing] I’m sorry. I realized
that I have been selfish. And I thought that I want to be gentle and
kind to old people… Anyway, Kohei says that he’s going to come by
himself on Sunday, bringing the yuinō. Please welcome him. [Natsuko bows
once again to her mother, showing that even the young in Japan still know the rules
of filial piety.] Anyway, good-night.

Natsuko gets up and starts to head for her room, but Yoshiko extends her arm to shake
hands with her daughter. They shake, and then Natsuko slaps her mother’s hand, American
style. They both laugh, and Natsuko goes to bed.

Yoshiko: [To herself] Wonderful. This is how it should be.
Cut to the final scene, which takes place in the same room as the first scene of the drama.
It is Sunday, and the yuinō ceremony is being held once again. This time it is
Kohei who is dressed in a demure kimono. Natsuko is wearing a black dress suit with white trim.
Kohei presents the gifts and intones some formalistic words appropriate to the yuinō
ceremony. Natsuko gets up and walks over to show the colorful gifts to Fusae, who is lying
half-conscious on a futon next to the others.

Natsuko: Look, Grandma, it’s the yuinō gifts!
Yoshiko: Yes. Do you understand, Grandmother? [Looking at her husband]
You know, perhaps it is Grandma who looked forward to seeing Nat-
suko’s wedding day more than anyone, don’t you think?
Father: That may be the case… [Shuffling the air with a quizzical expression on
his face] Don’t you smell something? There! Can you smell it?
Yoshiko: [After looking around for a minute, she squeals.] It’s Grandma! You
know… [Everyone realizes that Fusae has deceased in bed.]
Father: Oh my god!
Yoshiko: Everyone please leave the room for a moment. I’m sorry!
[As the father gets up to leave, he makes a joke to Kohei.]
Father: You know, Kohei, this time the yuinō will definitely not be broken.
Kohei: Why is that?
Father: Because it has been “blessed with luck”!
[The men laugh uproariously at the pun “un ga taisita.” This joke is based on the
close resemblance between the word “luck”—“un”—and the word for feces, which is
collonically “un.” Thus the father’s pun can mean both “blessed with luck” or
“soiled with feces.”]
Yoshiko: Here we go, Grandma!
makes a face reflecting the foul odor. Natsuko and her mother laugh with joy. Cut to the neighbor's home, where old man Kotoyama and his son are playing the traditional game _shogi_ together on the back porch. They are being served tea by the young wife. The credits begin to roll as we see the final sequence of shots: Fusae sleeping on her futon; Kohei and Natsuko deciding together about where to take their honeymoon (Natsuko sits on the ground while Kohei sits up on a chair, just as Yoshiko often sat below her husband; Yoshiko outside hanging Fusae's diapers. Her husband is trying to help, but he is obviously incompetent at the task—Yoshiko reprimands him playfully. This is a happy ending, Japanese style.

One remarkable feature of this drama is its ideological transparency. The conservative message could hardly be clearer, and the ending ties together all the loose ends into a neat package. I want to unpack this parcel by discussing some of the cultural and ideological representations it contains. The first scene of the drama spun around the appropriateness of particular kinds of dress for particular occasions. Confusion and conflict reigned in the beginning, but by the end of the drama, everyone is wearing appropriate clothes. Sartorial confusion here is symbolic of problems created by people failing to fulfill their proper social roles. Yoshiko's wearing of a demure _kimono_ in the last scene signifies that she has matured to assume the role of the senior woman in the house. Natsuko wears a black and white outfit that is very similar to the one her mother wore at the beginning of the show. She too has matured, and this change in costume informs us that she is ready to play the role of the wife under the auspices of a mother-in-law. Natsuko has learned that it is wrong to be selfish and that true happiness does not come from thinking of one's self before others.

This common cultural emphasis on playing the role appropriate to one's age, even if the role conflicts with one's own personal feelings, is articulated in many areas of Japanese society. Natsuko's new attitude fits very well within such an explicitly nonindividualistic worldview. This hardly explains, however, her previous "selfish" attitude. Upon considering the structure of the narrative, it seems clear that Natsuko's selfishness is subtly linked to her mother's working full-time outside the home. This helps us to understand why Natsuko is so impressed when she sees her mother taking care of Fusae, whom she calls her "baby." Natsuko sees, as if for the first time, the suffering and self-sacrifice that go into taking care of both children and old people. Just as women "naturally" take care of infants, they naturally take care of the aged. Indeed, the drama goes so far as to make it seem that no woman could truly be fulfilled without such experiences.

During the almost surrealistic last scene of the second _yaino_, two hours of carefully planned melodrama are punctuated by the grandmother's silent defecation and by the strangely overjoyed response of the people in the room, especially the women. While the men leave laughing about the pun told by the father, Natsuko floats into the room, smiling broadly as she carries a bucket and towel to aid in the cleanup. Yoshiko seems deliriously happy to be able to change the old woman's diaper, and even the foul smell is met with laughter and good spirits. It is no coincidence, however, that this drama never shows us the actual work involved in taking care of an elderly or sickly person. By careful editing, even caring for an invalid can be portrayed as joyful, because the tedious and often dirty realities are simply not shown. (Thus, when Natsuko went to her future mother-in-law's hospital and helped to change her _kimono_, the actual work of doing the job was cut. We are shown instead "before and after" scenes, almost as if the change took place by magic.)

Women on TV are eager and competent to do just the sorts of jobs that men generally will not do. Even when men try to help (as in the very last scene of the drama where the husband is trying to help his wife hang the laundry), they just get in the way of doing what is, naturally it seems, women's work. The drama _Wife, Mother in Law, and a Complicated Engagement_ is full of this sort of reification. The unfolding process of the drama, including its crises and commonsensical resolutions, are all portrayed as a common cultural script for human relations and individual conduct. Enacting ideologies of naturalization, women in TV families defer to their
Just as telerepresentations of men’s lives in Japan often focus on the negotiation of human relations and hierarchies within companies and other public organizations, telerepresentations of women’s lives often focus on human relations within the domestic sphere. With the exception of short scenes in the next-door neighbor’s garden and in a hospital room, the entire drama interpreted here takes place inside the home. The limiting of women’s lives to the katei (home) itself an example of distillation, greatly circumscribes the possibilities for dramatic tension. Thus program creators and producers locate conflicts inside the home. Although husband and wife relations are by no means always harmonious in Japan, marital discord is rarely portrayed on television. Almost by default, this leaves wife and mother-in-law relations as the simplest means to introduce conflict into a drama. The resulting image of women as incompetent in public and hardly able to get along with each other within the katei is anything but empowering. (As we saw in the ethnography of gender inside ZTV, this formula works against women in the workplace as well.)

Many women in Japan are far ahead of such telerepresentations in their thinking about society, family, and self. The increasing trend among women toward “separation from television” (terebi hanare) has led producers to try new sorts of serial dramas in which women are shown as active workers, aggressive lovers, and anything but housewives. A pertinent example of this genre is Selfish Woman (Wagamama no Onnatachi), a ten-part program broadcast in late 1992. The story is about three women: an aggressive single businesswoman who faces discrimination at work, a young mother who is raising her daughter alone while her photographer husband is living with another woman, and an ex-housewife who decided to divorce her husband and set out on her own because she found home life to be empty and unrewarding. In Selfish Women there are several male characters, but all of them (except perhaps one) are depicted as less interesting than the women. The irony contained in the title (women who assert themselves in Japan are often labeled “selfish” by men) is celebrated by the lead women in the drama, who use the term in a positive way to encourage each other: “Motto motto wagamama ni naro to!” (Let’s become even more selfish!). Though dramas like Selfish Women are perhaps not revolutionary, they are indicative of the fact that telerepresentations of gender in Japan are changing, at least in some areas.

I would like to conclude with two points. First, although many telerepresentations of gender on Japanese television can be criticized as ideological forms that legitimize, naturalize, and eternalize the subjugation of women in that society, it is crucial to remember that TV programs are always built out of variously interpretable and multiply relevant cultural representations that are not in themselves ideological. Themes of obligation and reciprocity on Japanese TV are not necessarily ideological; they

husbands, serve them tea, and clean up after them. Women who work will only be shown sympathetically if they also play their “natural” role as housewives within the home. Indeed, the division of labor inside these TV families seems as old as the earth itself. Dominant ideologies of gender like these display the pattern that Thompson has called reification through “etalonization”:

Social-historical phenomena are deprived of their historical character by being portrayed as permanent, unchanging and ever recurring. Customs, traditions, and institutions which seem to stretch indefinitely into the past, so that any trace of their origin is lost and any question of their end is unimaginable, acquire a rigidity which cannot be easily disrupted. They become embedded in social life and their apparently ahistorical character is re-affirmed by symbolic forms which, in their construction as well as their sheer repetition, eternalize the contingent.¹⁴

Women’s subordination to men, the trials and tribulations of women who marry into eldest son’s families only to be dominated by their mothers-in-law, and the entire so-called traditional Japanese family system are all promoted, in politics, in theory, and on television, as eternal features of the national landscape. What is left out is the careful consideration of the actual social-historical factors that shape contemporary social relations in Japan.

Fig. 4. Closing scene from Tome, Shiho, Kikko Sōdō: Natsumi’s clothes echo those worn by her mother in the opening scene, and her mother’s clothes echo Natsumi’s.
As much as individualism or any other rubric for orienting the self in the social world. Similarly, the many images of romance and love that fill the screen are not always ideological. Only when these elements are systematically combined inside specific narrative telerepresentations do they achieve closure in ways that may be ideological.

Second, there is no strong evidence that viewers in Japan accept all the patriarchal ideologies within telerepresentations. Telerepresentations can be analyzed and reinterpreted—a practice common among viewers as well as so-called media critics—in ways unimagined by TV producers. There is thus always a degree of uncertainty in the operations of ideological production and cultural reproduction. Indeed, to the distress of Japanese television producers and advertisers, women may simply turn off the television and do something else. To understand more fully how television fits into the complex processes of the social construction of gender, we need more ethnographic studies of how Japanese TV viewers themselves interpret and elaborate on what they see and hear on TV. Such research will likely show ideas of gender to be rapidly changing in Japan, and television (whether its producers like it or not) to be inevitably caught up in the ongoing cultural debate.

NOTES

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1. I want to state early on my opposition to two common views of the relationship between gender and media in Japan: first, models that depict Japanese gender relations as stable and unchanging, and, second, the notion that Japanese audiences have no power to resist and reinterpret what they see on TV. Just as it would be misleading in the extreme to portray women as always and everywhere dominated by men within the patriarchal structures of the TV station, so too I think that television in Japan does far more than simply reproduce a monolithic "gender system."

2. Women inside the company are very conscious of this kind of discrimination, and they most often deal with it by trying to prove it wrong. A bright young woman in the public relations department explained the situation during an interview:

Well . . . while I wouldn't say twice as much, there is the fear that if I don't work at least fifty percent harder than the others [i.e., male employees], then I will be let go (transferred to another department). So, I'm working extremely hard. My immediate superior [a woman old enough to be a section manager], she's worked hard like that for a long time and no surprise, she is having health problems. . . . So, I think about that . . . but the problem remains that if you don't work half again as hard [as the others], then you won't get recognition for doing the job."

3. On dissimulation, see John B. Thompson, Studies in the Theory of Ideology (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 370. "Relations of domination may be concealed, denied, or obscured in various ways, for example by describing social processes or events in terms which highlight some features at the expense of others, or by representing or interpreting them in a way which effectively veils the social relations of which they are part."

4. In most Japanese companies, of course, the genba is a low-prestige area because it is populated by blue-collar workers. Professor Tom Rohlen pointed out to me that inversions like that at ZTV are also found in the research and development divisions of leading Japanese companies. In both cases workers in the genba feel that they are doing the most interesting work in the company, whereas the higher-ups just push paper.

5. Why were women being assigned to the production department again in the late 1980s after some twenty years during which OK-san had been the lone female director? Both the company president and the head of the personnel division at ZTV were quite frank in informing me that the decision to assign women to the genba was directly related to the 1986 passage of sex discrimination legislation in the Japanese Diet. Their commitment to real change is at best questionable, and it is probably not a good sign for women that after three consecutive years in which women were able to enter the production department as new directors (1987, 1988, and 1989), none have been assigned there since.


8. The two areas of the company that are most influential here are the programming and production departments. In theory, the programme directors decide what genre of program will work best in a particular time slot (or kabe), whereas the producers and directors in the production department do the creative work of making the shows. In practice, senior members in both departments have much more say regarding the form and content of programs than younger ZTV directors would like. The company hierarchy makes it easy for senior men in the company to retain creative control—a situation not unrelated to the highly conservative images of gender on Japanese TV.


10. Although the traditional family system that was structured around primogeniture and nonpartible inheritance was abolished in the postwar constitution, Japanese families still place a special emphasis on the firstborn son and his future family. For this reason, many young women in Japan today say that they do not want to marry a chōsan (firstborn son).

11. At this point, the future in-laws begin to use kin terms in reference to Natsumu's family. This is a gesture of closeness that will be reciprocated by her family for the rest of the conversation.


There were many television dramas about so-called kateinai bōryoku (violence in the home) during the middle to late 1980s in Japan. These dramas almost always dealt with sons who were under pressure from the school system and who exploded violently, almost always at their mothers. These themes attracted large audiences, but their serious subject matter did not fit well with the desire of advertisers to keep television programs upbeat.

Until recently, received wisdom had it that, should they have life to live all over again, virtually all Japanese men and many women would opt to be men. Today this preference seems to be changing. Ono Mikinori, a consultant to the Aging Well Club, a Tokyo-based senior citizens’ organization, wants to turn the traditional hierarchical ordering of karmic rebirth on its head: “The next time I want to be born as a woman. Nowadays everyone wants to be reborn as a woman.” Ono is alluding to a sentiment shared by many: that middle-aged women in Japan live in onna tengoku (women’s heaven), where fun and leisure abound, while their husbands and children are worked so hard that some of them are literally worked to death.

How are we to reconcile this image with the results obtained from a recent survey conducted by the Kokumin Seikatsu Center (The center for the study of national living conditions), from which it is concluded that “an overwhelming ninety-eight percent of housewives in the larger cities of Japan are dissatisfied or anxious about rising prices, old age, and environmental destruction”? Is it merely the younger women who are anxious about life, while the older generations fill their time contentedly with travel abroad, ballroom dancing, and sewing clubs?

After the formation of the Japanese state at the 1868 Meiji Restoration, the government began efforts to standardize and “normalize” the life of its citizens along certain clear trajectories. As in other technologically advanced societies, enumeration and tabulation of social phenomena allowed what Hacking has termed the “making of people.” From the start, in Europe, Japan, and North America, gender difference was apparent, and the “making” of women, in contrast to men, consistently used a rhetoric in which biology figured prominently. Although the relationship between citizens and the state has changed considerably over the past one hundred years, in official discourse the conflation of individual women with female biology remains very evident.

As part of the process of normalization, the course of life from birth to death, and in particular female life cycle transitions, have been the subject