MIT Student

Professor Ian Condry

21G.039J Gender and Japanese Popular Culture

20 October 2015

Gender Inequality in Japan: An Issue of Class

The issue of whether or not women have or do not have the power to shape their own destinies is an interesting one. To many of us living in western countries that hold values such as freedom of choice close to us, it seems natural that even if women cannot shape their own destinies, they should be allowed a degree of autonomy. And to some extent, in modern American society, this is becoming more and more true. The sight of the office lady is becoming more and more common. Women are as free as men to choose their sexual orientation. However, if we look at the issue globally, this is not necessarily the case. Particularly, looking at Japan, we see a different story. While there are factors besides raw salary that play into the gender wage gap making it a shaky indicator at best of the existence of gender inequality in the workplace, for comparing the difference in gender inequality between Japan and America, it suits our purposes. An Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) study found that the gender wage gap for Japan was significantly higher at 26.59 percent than America's, which came out to be 17.91 percent (OECD). This indicates that while America and more generally the west may be progressing towards a more gender equal society, when looking at the issue on a global scale, eastern countries such as Japan are not. Of course, one's initial reaction would be to suppose that there is some sort of cultural factor that is the cause of this; after all, Japan has traditionally been a country where the woman stays at and takes care of the home. However, by

looking at gender in Japanese pop culture through Akiko Higashimura's manga, "Princess Jellyfish", and validating it through a real-world example in Laura Miller's article, "Cute Masquerade and the Pimping of Japan", we see that the root of this inequality may in fact not be any rooted cultural values, but rather a difference in class, in this case defined as a difference in socioeconomic standing. Finally, by looking at Japan's education system, we suggest education as a potential cause of this socioeconomic difference while further validating our claim that it is class rather than cultural values that cause gender inequality in Japan.

We begin by looking at Higashimura's "Princess Jellyfish". As the 2010 Kodansha Manga Award recipient for best shoujo manga, we know that "Princess Jellyfish" has been well received. As the Japanese people in general have enjoyed the manga, we can assume that the ideas presented in the manga are shared by the Japanese people, and in a sense represent Japanese cultural values.

While it may seem that Japanese culture itself encourages gender inequality, this is not the case, as we can see by looking at the two main characters of "Princess Jellyfish". We are introduced the male lead, Kuranosuke, as he is wearing women's clothes. He maintains this appearance for at least two volumes and experiences very little trouble in doing so. While his father scolds him, this works in his favor as he does not want to follow his father's footsteps in becoming a politician, and nothing actually harmful occurs to him as a result of this. On an emotional level, he never experiences any self-identity confusion either, always firmly holding on to the truth that he is a man. Upon revealing that he is a man, he casually brushes off his appearance as a female saying, "I just have a taste in women's clothing. I'm normal" (Princess Jellyfish). All of this combines to show the degree of freedom Kuranosuke has in determining his appearance. We contrast this with his continuous pursuit of the female lead Tsukimi, a shy otaku

who dresses in a homely manner, due to his desire to make her, in his opinion, “beautiful”. As Kuranosuke believes, even girls at an “otaku garden would all want to be pretty too, deep down” (Princess Jellyfish). Tsukimi is shocked the first time she is dressed up, and does not want to return back to her home due to her appearance. She clearly does not like being dressed up. In short, we see that Kuranosuke imposes his ideal of what a woman should look like on Tsukimi, limiting, at least in the moment, her freedom to choose what she wants to look like. At first glance, this difference between Kuranosuke’s freedom and Tsukimi’s lack thereof seems to indicate an inherent gender imbalance in Japanese culture. This is further reinforced by the fact that Kuranosuke, who despite cross-dressing is very much a man, is imposing this ideal on Tsukimi, a woman, suggesting that in Japanese culture, women are to some extent subjugated by men. However, this analysis ignores the fact that Kuranosuke is the wealthy son of a politician and Tsukimi is in comparison rather poor. That is, there are other factors besides an inherent gender imbalance, namely class, which may create the structure that separates both Kuranosuke and Tsukimi from each other and creates the inequality of freedom between the two.

Of course, one may argue that in the real world, such an argument would not hold. That there are few if any real-life situations where a man and women of classes as different as Kuranosuke and Tsukimi’s would have such an interaction with each other. That is, because it is less plausible to have a situation with a large class divide in real life, Higashimura in her manga, through the dynamic of Kuranosuke and Tsukimi, is commenting on an inherent gender inequality problem rather than a class inequality problem. However, we note that we do indeed see this inequality in class in real life by looking at the “Ambassadors of Cute” in Laura Miller’s “Cute Masquerade and the Pimping of Japan”. Miller states that “the selection, media production, and strategic deployment of the Ambassadors of Cute were primarily in the hands of middle-

aged men", claiming that the Ambassadors of Cute project was actually the manipulation of three women by men in forcing them to dress up as female stereotypes (Miller 20). While this case may be less exaggerated, this is essentially what Kuranosuke is doing to Tsukimi, making it an apt real-world comparison to the fictional "Princess Jellyfish". However, in this case as well, we see that the middle-aged men producing these girls are quite wealthy and influential, as they include in Miller's words, "the powerful bureaucrat Monji Kenjiro" (Miller 20). That is, there is a large socioeconomic difference between the supposed subjugated and subjugators in this case as well. Thus, while perhaps less pronounced, even under real world situations, the argument for class as the driving factor behind gender inequality rather than any inherent gender inequality built into Japanese culture holds up. We observe the same things in both popular culture and real-life situations.

However, we must note that these two examples are merely that—two examples. While we can extrapolate from popular culture such as "Princess Jellyfish", as it draws from society in general as an item of culture rather than a particular event, we have not yet made an argument for why we should favor using class as a basis for gender inequality rather than inherent cultural values. We proceed to do so by looking at education. At first glance, we see that according to an Economist study more than forty percent of college graduates in Japan are female. While this is lower than the global average, it is not outrageously low. In fact, it is high enough that one might say that we cannot conclude that there is a significant difference in education between men and women. However, once we compare the quality of education between men and women, we see a rather stark disparity. Particularly, we look at the University of Tokyo, which has consistently been ranked the best university in Japan. We observe that the university is less than twenty percent female. Looking at science and engineering, which has higher paying jobs relative to

other fields, women only account for less than ten percent of students (Iida). This implies that there is indeed a difference between education of women and men in Japan. Coupling this with the general fact that better education often leads to better social status, we reach the natural conclusion that women and men do in fact differ in social class. Moreover, by looking at the difference in education quality between men and women, we can say something even more powerful by using our conclusion before that gender inequality is a product of class difference; that is, a difference in education leads to socioeconomic difference, which then leads to the gender inequality in Japan that we see today.

By looking at both examples in Japanese popular culture and examples in real life, we see that in many cases we see gender inequality in Japan due to a supposed inherent tendency of Japanese culture to subjugate women, we also see an inequality in class between the subjugator and subjugated. This leads us to think that Japanese culture does not inherently subjugate women, and that an inequality in gender is largely a product of a socioeconomic difference. By looking at education, we validate this difference in class between genders as a large factor behind gender inequality and suggest a reason for the existence of this class difference. From this, we can conclude that there is nothing in Japanese culture that inherently prevents women from personal advancement. While society itself has a structure that encourages men to advance in society rather than women, there are no institutions in place that prevent a woman who wants to advance from advancing. Particularly, we see that if women pursue and prioritize better education, then they should rise in socioeconomic standing, and a major driving force behind gender inequality will be eliminated. That is, by looking at our examples in Japanese pop culture and the real world, we see that women, by pursuing better education, have the power to shape their own destinies.

Works Cited

"Gender Wage Gap - OECD." *Gender Wage Gap - OECD*. N.p., n.d. Web. 14 Oct. 2015.

Higashimura, Akiko. "Princess Jellyfish." N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

Iida, Yuki. "The Male to Female Ratio in the University of Tokyo." *Komaba Times*. N.p., 03 Dec. 2012. Web. 14 Oct. 2015.

Miller, Laura. "Cute Masquerade and the Pimping of Japan." *International Journal of Japanese Sociology* 20.1 (2011): 18-29. Web.

21G.039J / 21A.143J / WGS.154J / 21G.591 Gender and Japanese Popular Culture
Fall 2015