Understanding Japanese Society

Fifth edition

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From the Field: Women with professional careers in Japan's male-dominated corporate world

Swee-Lin Ho

Japan's corporate world remains a predominantly male realm, despite a considerable increase in the number of white-collar female workers in recent decades. Women accounted for 43.2 per cent of the total workforce of 63.8 million in 2015, but female regular workers only comprised 16.3 per cent, while 35.5 per cent of the total workforce were male regular employees (JILPT 2017:20–33). This means that the majority of working women held part-time or temporary jobs, which clearly shows women's marginalised position in Japan's corporate world. Even today, female regular employees are outnumbered by men across all age groups and underrepresented in non-clerical and service-related occupations as well as in most industrial sectors. Furthermore, female corporate workers are still paid approximately 70 per cent of their male counterparts' wage, with women managers accounting for fewer than 10 per cent of all managerial positions in Japan.

Yet, despite the varying difficulties women have experienced, and are still encountering, in pursuing a professional career, those who managed to climb the corporate ladder and reach the upper echelons of medium and large corporations — Japanese and foreign — have developed for themselves values, attitudes and lifestyles that are significantly different from those of other women in Japan whose lives are dominated by domesticity, irregular employment and non-managerial, salaried work. This is documented in my study of two groups of female executives (a total of 27), who had once been co-workers in the 1980s, when they joined an unprecedented number of women to be given opportunities to pursue management-tracked careers and organised themselves into their respective informal friendship networks to mitigate the gaps between their expectations and real experiences to find a more meaningful place in Japanese society (Ho 2018). Despite being highly educated and having professional qualifications, skills and experience that earned them impressive job positions such as chief finance officer, financial controller, marketing director, senior legal manager, vice president of business development and executive director, all 27 women work mostly with male peers, report to male superiors, do not get to participate actively in higher management operations and are not involved in the important decision-making processes in the office.

Within their own friendship networks, on the other hand, the women could share knowledge and exchange resources to help one another cope with the demands of work and mutually affirm their desired self-identities as individuals, qualified professionals and capable workers. Having been exposed to educational reforms and corporate policies encouraging them to embrace neoliberal ideals such as *jibunrashī seikatsu* (lifestyle of one's own), *jikosekinin* (self-responsibility), *jikojitsugen* (self-realisation) and *jujitsukan* (self-fulfilment), these women have come to evaluate their sense of self-worth based more on salaried work and less on the prevailing gender roles as mothers and wives. Being temporally and spatially differentiated from the office and the home, the women's after-work drinking gatherings become strategic sites for them to playfully, and consciously, craft practices for self-production and identity-affirmation. They address one another only by their first name and

not their family name, so that each of them is recognised as an individual and not as someone's wife or daughter. By dropping the suffixes *–san* and *–chan*, they can relate to one another as friends who are mature professionals, and not women with affectionate bonds, as female friendship is generally construed. Instead of taking turns to pay for their meals and drinks, as many white-collar male workers often do, the two groups of women practise *warikan* (paying equal share), regardless of the amount of food and beverages each woman has consumed at each gathering. This is explained as enabling them to equalise their relations despite their differentials in job title, status and income. Through various other collective practices, these executives re-conceptualise the meaning of women's friendship by linking it to work and de-linking it from domesticity and women's expected gender roles in Japanese society.

More significantly, the women's professional careers enabled them to legitimise their late-night drinking activities as an important extension of work, appropriating a justification that was historically reserved for men. At times, they would also visit entertainment places such as host clubs and strip bars after dinner and drinks for voyeuristic play that was also once dominated by men. The women's access to professional careers has not only given them greater access to Japan's urban night space to engage in activities that were once symbolic of masculinity; it has also turned them into significant contributors to Japan's night-time service economy, thus affirming the importance of white-collar work for women. Interestingly, these were made possible by shifts in commercial practices — with the state's endorsement — in recent decades, which sought to tap into the enhanced economic resources of Japan's growing white-collar female workforce. As producers and distributors of alcoholic beverages — especially beer, wine, spirits, *nihonshu* (Japanese rice wine) and *shōchū* (wine distilled from root vegetables) — re-packaged their existing products and introduced new ones to target female consumers, drinking establishments — especially bars and *izakaya* (Japanese-style restaurant-bar) chains — altered their interior decors and menus to suit the preferences of their female clientele (Ho 2015). Love hotels across Japan, too, modernised their image, while night-time entertainment venues — such as host clubs and strip bars — grew in number and variety to cater more to women's needs (Ho 2012).

While women are able to redraw symbolic gender boundaries to gain a stronger sense of self-worth with these changes, the commercial transformations have not translated readily into greater social acceptance. Even today, women are still more susceptible to scrutiny and social criticisms in Japan, which explains why the female executives in my study are vigilant in exercising self-control when they drink. Nonetheless, new possibilities and real changes have emerged for women — albeit for those with enhanced economic power, and those willing to undertake the risk — to re-define the meaning of the gendered self in a persistently male-dominated society.