

The Interplay of Empowerment and Oppression in Japanese Women's Magazines

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Abstract

Japanese women's magazines are analyzed in order to consider how they portray values about gender, marriage, and family. A survey is made of women's magazines after considering how they are used by readers. Although there is an interplay of messages of empowerment and oppression, the magazines themselves neither empower nor oppress readers.

Key words

womanhood, empowerment, oppression, 'good wife, wise mother', gender inequities

This article will consider issues pertaining to the image of women as presented in Japanese mass market magazines. In particular, there are relationships between wider society's changing images of womanhood and women's magazines. Change in the social status of women is sometimes reflected in women's magazines but there is also a subtle portrayal of traditional roles. When the latter occurs, women's magazines function as a vehicle for the inculcation of values about gender, family, and marriage. That juxtaposition of continuity and change makes women's magazines an important source for analyzing notions about the role of women in society.

On the one hand, women's magazines appear to offer readers empowering messages on how to improve their lives. But on the other hand, the magazines contain representations of gender difference and tend to reflect the socially structured nature of gender inequalities. When that occurs, they have the potential to become oppressive. Despite improvements in recent years, the role of women in society continues to be constrained by inequities in social, economic, and political institutions.

Change has been encouraged by the Equal Opportunity Employment Law (EEOC) of 1967 and its amendment enacted in June 1997 and enforced in April 1998. The EEOC prohibits employment discrimination against women workers. In that respect, EEOC appears to empower women. The intent of the law was to provide equal opportunity for women, but even the amendment has not completely eliminated discrimination in

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recruitment, hiring, job assignment, and promotions (Roberts, 2002: p75). Consequently, the potential remains for patriarchal employment patterns to be left intact with men as the core employees and women as their assistants.

The historical tenacity of gender inequalities has sometimes resulted in an acceptance by women themselves of a constraining image. Hence, a subordinate standing tends to be internalized as “natural”. Women still lack socially valued authority relative to men of their age and social status. Moreover, gender issues hinder the career development of women. Yet career development has a fundamental connection with self-image. When gender issues constrain occupational development, the result will be an adverse influence on the overall evolution of a person’s way of living throughout one’s entire life.

Functions of Women’s Magazines

Women’s magazines have proliferated and exist in a variety of genres. Their primary function has been the provision of information about fashion, cosmetics, money, fortune telling, marriage, lifestyles, food, interior decoration, and employment for women. In addition, women’s magazines ostensibly provide a world for women away from male dominated society. However, the emphasis on the visual and the physical implies that even in their own world of the women’s magazine, women must strive to meet the expectations of the male gaze.

It is ironic that women’s magazines originated in the Meiji period (1868-1911) to emphasize the “proper” image for *women* according to the Meiji establishment dominated by *men*. In view of the history of evolving change in traditional gender relations concomitant with resistance to gender relations to gender equality, what models for the construction of womanhood have been suggested by Japanese women’s magazines? An answer to this question will be sought through a survey of the historical evolution of women’s magazines in Japan.

Origins of Women’s Magazines in Japan

The history of women’s magazines in Japan began during the second half of the Meiji period. Development of a market for women’s magazines depended on whether literacy levels could be raised to the degree necessary to read a magazine. With the promulgation of a compulsory education system of eight years for both girls and boys, literacy levels increased dramatically. New magazines appeared every year after 1894. *Fujin no tomo* (*The Lady’s Friend*), one of the earliest women’s magazines, first appeared in 1903 and is still published. The early women’s magazines adhered to the ideology of the ‘good wife, wise mother’ (*ryosai kenbo*) created by the state during the Meiji period. Women were made to realize that wider society expected them to conform to that ideology and they lived their lives in accordance with its values.

As in many countries during the late nineteenth century, Meiji Japan called on women to serve the state as wives and mothers. In the wake of the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95), the Ministry of Education redefined womanhood in terms of the 'good wife, wise mother' ideology by making it the pillar of women's education. A law was passed in 1899 which required at least one higher school for girls in each prefecture. "Kabayama Sukenori, the education minister, argued on behalf of extending education to middle-class females as well as males precisely because households, which were the foundation of the nation, required good wives and wise mothers" (Nolte and Hastings, 1991: p158).

In its attempt to compete with the West, the Meiji state constructed gender relations in the context of the nineteenth century European family with its gender-based division of labor, whereupon women worked as homemakers and men worked in occupations outside the home. Even today, it is difficult to consider that construction of gender relations as a mere anachronism. The current government's "Year 2020 30%" plan, which calls upon all sectors of society to employ women in at least 30% of all leadership positions by the year 2020, implies that the goals of complete equality envisioned by the EEOL have not been met. Although the number of employed women in managerial positions is increasing, women are still expected to fulfill the roles of wife, mother, and housekeeper.

The commercially based and widely circulated mainstream women's magazines of the Meiji and Taisho periods reflect the Meiji state's gender ideology and its household division of labor. For the Meiji period, the major magazines include *Fujin Gaho* (*The Lady's Pictorial*) [1905], *Fujin Sekai* (*Women's World*) [1906], and *Fujinkai* (*Women's Sphere*) [1910]. Approximately 150 new titles appeared during the Meiji period (*Kindai Josei Bunka shi Kenkyukai*, 1989: p8).

Images of Womanhood in Post-Meiji Magazines

Despite the wartime upheavals of the first half of the twentieth century, women's magazines persisted. Leading women's magazines from the Taisho period (1912-1925) include *Fujin koron* (*Women's Public Opinion*) [1916], *Shufu no tomo* (*The Housewife's Companion*) [1917], and *Fujin kurabu* (*The Lady's Club*) [1920]. During the interwar years, industrial expansion brought great changes in the practices of everyday life. The subsequent processes of social change resulted in new media images of socially active women. Women's magazines portrayed these changes through new images of the feminine in juxtaposition with the traditional image of women in the family setting.

Over the twenty year period from 1911 to 1931, 214 new magazines were published (Miki, 1996: p4). During that period, an overwhelming number of readers were drawn to magazines dealing with the contrasting images of womanhood. On the one hand, magazines like *Shufu no tomo* (*The Housewife's Companion*) appealed to readers who understood womanhood, as well as girlhood, in terms of the Meiji state ideology of 'good

wife, wise mother'. Such magazines dealt mainly with the subjects of home management, marriage, childcare, household budgets, health, and beauty (Miki, 1996: p9). "Given the national reach of the major girls' magazines and their mission to reinforce the messages of the state via the education system, girls' magazines comprise a unique source for understanding the boundaries of acceptable and ideal girlhood during the wartime era" (Bae, 2012: p108).

In contrast to *Shufu no tomo* (*The Housewife's Companion*), *Fujin koron* (*Women's Public Opinion*) was the most representative of women's magazines concerned with political issues facing women. As a magazine which featured social and cultural criticism, its subject matter was bolstered by events outside of Japan. In particular, political circumstances which favored women in the United States influenced the contents of women's magazines in Japan (Miki, 1996: p20).

The market for women's magazines in the early post-World War II period was dominated by the 'big four': (1) *Shufu no tomo* (*The Housewife's Companion*), (2) *Fujin kurabu* (*The Lady's Club*), (3) *Shufu to seikatsu* (*The Housewife and Daily Life*), and (4) *Fujin seikatsu* (*Women's Life*). Other magazines that were popular during this period were: (1) *Romance*, (2) *Lucky*, (3) *Salon*, (4) *Tokyo*, (5) *Hope*, (6) *Josei Raifu* (*Women's Life*), (7) *Shin fujin* (*The New Woman*), and (8) *Josei no tomo* (*The Friend of Women*).

After 1970, a major change occurred in that the encyclopedic general magazines gave way to the more specialized weekly and monthly magazines which offered instruction in a wide variety of issues. Socio-economic changes resulting from the postwar baby boom increased the demand for diversity and specialized magazines that could offer advice about domestic issues. Another catalyst for diversification was the 'International Decade for Women' (1976-1985). Throughout this period, the principal themes in the women's magazines were (1) lifestyles, (2) domesticity, (3) aging, (4) fashion, (5) cooking, (6) entertainment, (7) consumer goods, (8) cultural enrichment, and (9) career employment.

By continuing to utilize that variety of themes, the contemporary women's magazine attempts to provide images of the successful woman in expanded roles which include varied opportunities in creating a lifestyle. Those images can contain empowering messages about opportunities in a lifestyle that balances employment with family related activities. Although socio-economic circumstances may not allow all readers to choose freely among the possibilities presented in the contemporary women's magazines, it is significant that a multiplicity of socially acceptable images are suggested by the variety of magazine themes.

Summary

This article has attempted to show how images of womanhood have been portrayed in women's magazines since their emergence in the Meiji period. However, before

judging whether readers are socialized by any supposed harms of women's magazines, or that the magazines deliberately constructed images of womanhood, it is important to consider how readers themselves use the magazines. The work of J. Hermes (1995) has addressed that issue. Her comparative analysis of women's magazines in Britain and the Netherlands sought a new approach by departing from media criticism which depicts women's magazines as "an agent of oppression dressed up as popular pleasures" (1995: p1). By conducting interviews of British and Dutch readers of women's magazines, she found that they use the magazines as a pastime without any serious reflection on the contents and that they are the most taken for granted media (1995: p29).

Although Japanese women's magazines probably share many characteristics in common with Hermes' findings about British and Dutch magazines, Japanese readers also rely on magazines for instruction. For example, *Croissant (Kurowassan)* often contains feature articles concerning a variety of domestic issues such as how to manage the household economy, steps to assure food safety, or lifestyle habits for staying healthy. Detailed photographs are often provided in the manner of instruction for Japanese readers. From their origin in the Meiji period, the instructional value of women's magazines has been a source of empowerment for readers. While it is impossible to determine what makes a magazine meaningful for every possible reader, women's magazines have also portrayed the patriarchal norms of traditional society. As the foregoing historical survey has indicated, women's magazines during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries constructed images of womanhood according to *ryosai kenbo*. To the extent that the ideals of male-dominated society have penetrated the world of women in the women's magazines, there is an interplay of oppression with the other messages of empowerment.

Women's magazines have also constructed models of ideal womanhood in terms of consumption. Thus, they have functioned as catalysts for intensifying the commodified lifestyle which undergirds capitalism. Japanese capitalism is based on patriarchal gender relations because the state depends on women to accept a caretaker role at home. Care of dependents within the *privatized* family relieves the state from the burden of *public* welfare programs. Increasing the birthrate to replacement levels and care for the growing number of elderly are among the top priority issues for stabilizing the economy in the early twenty-first century. Although coincidentally, women's magazines inculcate those interests by encouraging readers to live in accordance with a vision of modern women as the caretakers of children and the elderly.

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