
What They Want: The Transformation of Self

and Its Reflection in Japanese Women's Magazines

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The present article is an analysis of the complex transformation of the concept of self as reflected in several major publications for women. Japan's conservative and traditional society has confined women within strict limitations relative to gender, age and social status. However, the profound changes Japanese society has undergone during the past two decades has prompted changes at the level of thinking in both men and women. The presence of women on the Japanese economic and social stages has become more conspicuous than ever. The media have been quick to sense and exploit it.

As Pollack (1992) points out, the Western image of Japan is “a pastiche of ... colorful and exotic dramas, bloody revenges, delicate emotions, inscrutable suicides...”. However exotic this may seem, it has little to do with modern Japan, which, during the past decades readily embraced Western values. This trend was initiated even earlier, at the beginning of the 20th Century, during the Meiji Restoration. After centuries of isolationism, Meiji Japan was caught up in a Western imitation frenzy, when virtually everything Western became a must-have. The change in form and fashion was followed, even if at some distance, by a more profound change in people's views of themselves and of the world. These changes gave birth to a new generation of Japanese people, where women, who have been “hiding in the light” (to use Skov and Moeran's phrase), have become a priceless work force, and more determined to shape aspects of their own life. We will first examine the concept of *self* and its complex transformation in a post-war Japan which experienced both the irresistible attraction towards the culture of the individualistic West, the material prosperity to nurture this attraction and a contrary wish to appear exotic and highly traditionalistic.

Self=Jibun?

In order to perceive the differences between the Western and Japanese sense of self, a better look into the “equivalent” concepts of “individual” and *kojin* may be helpful in deciphering the role of the self within the individual person. The origin of the English word “individual” dates back to 1605 and derives from the Latin *individuus*, which means “indivisible”. The Western individual regards himself deliberately as distinctive from his fellows, needs freedom of choice and a degree of independence from the group, which is perceived as obstructive to the individual's goals of success and fulfillment. Moreover, the Western individual strives to feel good about himself and be equal with the other individuals, or in a superior position when

relations are hierarchical (Nisbett, 2003). In Europe, medieval culture consecrated the individual as a unique entity, rather than a part of the group (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). At the other pole of the distinction stands the Japanese concept *kojin* (個人). Whereas the Western individual is perceived as indivisible, the Japanese individual is necessarily divisible, a part of something. As the name itself suggests, *kojin* results from the combination of *ko* (個), which, besides being an article counter, has also the meaning of “individual” and *jin* (人), which means “man” or “human being”. While in Western cultures the self is part and parcel of the individual, who brings his contribution to society as a clearly differentiated entity, in Japanese traditional culture the individual must become invisible within the group, doing what the Japanese people call *tokekōmu* (溶け込む, meaning “to melt into”). The lack of “melting into the group” of the Western individual has encouraged many authors of Japanese studies to place the Japanese at the collectivistic pole of the *kojinshugi* vs. *shudanshugi* (individualism vs. collectivism) dichotomy. The self-centeredness of Western individuals is opposed to the selflessness of the Japanese. And this brings us to a discussion on the concept of “self” in both languages and cultures.

The words *self* and *jibun* may be considered translation equivalents, at least in a general sense. However, at a closer look they contain essential elements of the cultures and social systems that created them. According to the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, the etymology of the word *self* is

self—O.E. *self*, *seolf*, *sylf* “one’s own person, same,” from P.Gmc. **selba-*, **selban-*. *Selfish* first recorded 1640, said to have been coined by Presbyterians.

According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, the notion of *self* encompasses one or more than the definitions below:

- 1a: the entire person of an individual b : the realization or embodiment of an abstraction
- 2a (1): an individual’s typical character or behavior
 (2): an individual’s temporary behavior or character b : a person in prime condition
- 3: the union of elements (as body, emotions, thoughts, and sensations) that constitute the individuality and identity of a person
- 4: personal interest or advantage
- 5: material that is part of an individual organism

According to Muramoto (2001), the word derives from the Old German *selb*, which means “the same”. The English word focuses on the individual as a whole, and not as a part of a group. On the other hand, the dual structure of the Japanese term of “self” is expressed in bi-component terms such as *jibun* (自分 *ji* + *bun*) or *jiko* (自己 *ji* + *ko*). Lebra analyzed the component *bun* from *jibun*, and found that it expresses the image of a society as an organic whole, where individuals are only particles of the whole (1976: 67). She also found that the *bun* in *jibun* acts as a sort of catalyst between the individual and his group. As Lebra points out, the term *bun* appears frequently in idiomatic expressions like *bun o wakimaeru* (to know one’s *bun*), *bun o mamoru* (to adhere to one’s *bun*), *bun ni hajinai* (not to disgrace one’s *bun*), etc.

The existence of *ji* and *bun* as interlaced entities reflects the groupism of the Japanese culture. Lebra further analyzes the concept and divides the Japanese self into “interactional self”, “inner self” and “boundless self”. The interactional self branches into the presentational self and the empathetic self. Metaphorically localized on one’s face, the presentational self

represents the image that the individual chooses to show to the other community members. The image of the individual acting on a stage pervades the concept of interactional self. The audience is the *seken* (世間 the world, which may include one's kindred, neighbors, schoolmates, colleagues etc.), an entity metaphorically equipped with eyes, ears and mouth, which validates or invalidates the individual's performance. A young, inexperienced individual, who acts in ignorance of the *seken* can be described as *seken shirazu* (naive, unaware of *seken* rules) but is expected to conform to the standards and become *seken-nami* (ordinary), or risk ostracism and become *seken-banare* (eccentric or incongruent with *seken* rules).

On the other hand, the empathetic self is the intimacy seeking self. It manifests itself in the conscience of belonging to a group (*miuchi*, or insiders), of being within a collectivity as opposed to other individuals who do not belong to that particular group (*tanin*, or outsiders, strangers) (Lebra, 1992: 107).

It is true that the Western selves also exhibit both inner and socially interactional dimensions. In any culture there seems to be a boundary which divides the formal self from the informal one; however, Western cultures stress the independent traits of the self, while Eastern cultures focus on the need for interdependence. The private component of the Japanese self is less conspicuous and is allowed to surface only in very intimate moments and places.

The extreme importance attached to interdependence, rather than independence is reflected as well by other polar concepts of the Japanese culture, such as *uchi/soto*, *honne/tatema*, *ura/omote* etc. *Uchi*, *honne*, and *ura* may define the informal self, whereas *soto*, *tatema* and *omote* are meant to “disguise” the real self under a conventional “mask” in order to maintain the functioning of the interdependent self and to prevent ostracism. What is private belongs to the realm of *uchi* (which does not necessarily mean “house”, but also “inside” a specific group, which ranges from family to large companies), and *honne*, where the individual has more or less freedom to express his real desires and dreams. Rosenberger (2001) explains the mechanism of the shift between the private and public selves with a very suggestive analogy to the theatrical world.

Accounting for everyday life in Japan requires a more complicated version of the stage metaphor, however. Rather than just bright front and dim back stages, we need to imagine a surreal stage that can expand and contract in countless directions through almost limitless space. The front stage opens onto side stages with their own backstages; there may be several layers of front stages with multiple drops, and backstage stretches layer upon layer, with endless possibilities for creating rooms off to the side. The light that shines in from the front allows the eyes of others to see very brightly on front stage and then more and more dimly as action recedes into the backstages. [...] Groups and individuals backstage twist and subvert the front-stage norms, often just enough to gain some latitude but not enough to disturb the performance.... (p. 30)

Traditional Selves and Modern Selves

The dual distinctions such as *uchi/soto*, *honne/tatema*, *ura/omote* etc. are not only applicable to the innermost traits of the individual self, but may be extended across the gender lines as well. Traditional Japan assigned specific roles within the group or *bun* according to gender, age, physical attributes or occupation (Lebra, 1976). Whereas the social dimension is

predominant in men, women, even when having an active social life and even a career, are expected to place their family and children on the top of their priorities. Shinto expresses the relationship between men and women in the metaphor of a tree, where the feminine principle is associated with the wintery *inner* roots, while the masculine principle is represented by the summery *outer* branches (Rosenberger, 2001, my italics). Later on, during a debate over post-war constitution, a politician used the same metaphor to express the distinctions between men and women.

Men and women are equal and have equal rights, but I believe that they have different responsibilities within a home. The woman has responsibilities as a housewife within her home, and the man has his responsibilities as a man ... if we compare marriage with a tree, the wife is the roots that hold the tree below the ground, and the husband is the branches above ground. (Inoue, 1991: 241)

Thus women, and especially married, supposedly fulfilled women, are expected to act as virtuous wives, mothers or daughters-in-law, but always from *within* the household. The Japanese woman belongs traditionally more to the realm of *uchi*, rather than *soto*, but, as Rosenberger suggests, “although women may have more of the feminine principle, they also have some of the masculine principle...” (Rosenberger, 2001: 31), being the ones that strive to keep the channels of social communication open and smooth (Ogasawara, 1998: 147–153).

Japan’s newly achieved prosperity and superior position in the world during the 1980s prompted a shift in the position of Japanese women in society. An increased mobility towards the big cities to pursue careers and a better life led to fundamental changes in the structure and dynamics of the Japanese family. One notable phenomenon is the rapid nuclearization of the Japanese family (Nakane, 1970; Kumagai, 1996). Living apart from parents or in-laws helped Japanese woman escape the stress of being constantly watched over and supervised by critical parents or in-laws. According to Nakane, the nuclear family placed the woman (mother) at the core, the father being just a useful but often absent appendage to this. Also, the decrease of the family size to two or three children per family, combined with the introduction of advanced technology to assist with household chores resulted in more spare time for the woman to be devoted to child rearing, and, after children become of school age, to pursuing hobbies or a career. Even in these conditions, the woman has been seldom if ever conceived of as an individual person, detached from her household (家庭 *katei*).

As Japan was rapidly turning into an economic superpower, a series of studies attempted to measure the correspondence between the average living standards and economic success. Their conclusion was that the Japanese led a life which was considerably far from the ideal *yutori aru seikatsu* (a comfortable life) and which was in contradiction with the flourishing situation of the economy (Kumagai, 1996). The government was concerned with the negative image that Japan was projecting to the outside as a country with much work and no fun, and tried to “cosmetize” it by encouraging the media to show Japanese people who vacationed abroad and spent lavishly on luxury goods. This was a time when Japan attempted to discard its deeply conservative and groupist image for one where the individual was encouraged to manifest his personality, but within the limitations set by the state. Such concepts as *koseika to tayouka* (個性化と多様化, individualization and diversification) were constantly occurring in the media during this period. It is during this time that women began to see more into their possibilities and less in their pre-programmed fate as wives and mothers. Even full-

time housewives (the so-called *sengyou shufu*) became interested in having a part-time job, which in some (rare) cases was interesting, fulfilling and provided an extra income which came in handy for hobbies or the children's tuition.

The passing of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law in 1986 gave women equal working opportunities with men (Skov and Moeran, 1995). It was an important step ahead in promoting more freedom for women, who could pursue a career if they were willing to undertake the hard task of being fulltime employees besides being wives and mothers.

Japanese women, who during the end of the eighties through the nineties became their country's greatest spenders (Skov and Moeran, 1995: 3), have also become less inclined to pursue an existence which would confine them to the backstage of marriage and child rearing, and are more willing to seize the moment and make the best of it as career women, part-time workers, or as successful working mothers running flourishing home-based businesses. According to a web survey conducted by the advertising agency Dentsu in February 8, 2001, when asked what they wanted to accomplish in the 21st Century, childbirth and child rearing came in second, while marriage ranked fifth. On a superior position were placed identity searching/self growth (third) and acquisition/improvement of qualifications and skills (first). The survey was conducted on a total of 223 women ranging from teenagers to women in their forties. As can be concluded from this survey, personal fulfillment is given more importance than the traditional ideals of getting married and having a family. As Rosenberger concluded after interviewing women of various ages and occupations, the concept which would best define if not the (still socially/group constrained) real life, at least the aspirations of the Japanese women nowadays is *jibun chuushin no jinsei* (self-centered life). While such statements would have been vehemently criticized as selfish only a few decades ago, with the passing of time women have become more self-assertive and more willing to express their *honne* (or inner feelings). Even when bound by a family, women are encouraged by various media to seek self-improvement, refinement and relaxation. We will examine a few of the media which have contributed to a shift in women's values during the past two decades.

What You Read Is What You Are

In post-war Japan, Western things symbolized individualism, independence and gender equality (Rosenberger, 2001: 151). The westernization of Japan is evident in the multitude of media which target women as main consumers. Some of the lifestyle magazines for young, single women induce images of "freedom, independence, international sophistication, status and sexuality" (Rosenberger, 1991). Magazines among which *25 Ans*, *CanCam*, *Cutie*, *Oggi*, *an-an*, etc. focus on fashion, diet, dining spots, travel, sexuality and professional aspirations, while magazines such as *Katei Gahouu*, *Fujin Gahouu*, *Shufu no Tomo*, *Sutekina Okusan*, etc. cater for the needs and aspirations of married women in their 30s or older, offering useful tips on traditional art enjoyment, interior decoration, cooking, parenting and money saving. While they may vary widely in scope and target, their common denominator is the declared aim of encouraging women in their quest for a self-centered life by offering images of beauty, well-being, fashion and sophistication with which to identify. In one of her studies on Japanese women's magazines, Inoue Teruko points out that "women's magazines are a mirror reflecting women's culture" (1985: 80). This is based on the strategy of buying market

research reports which standardize the views and actions so that the publishers can grasp their needs and interests as consumers (Moeran, 1993). They urge young single women to reach (at least for a while) for a life out of the stitches of a family which constantly nags them to settle down, get married, quit their jobs and have children. They encourage them to seek fulfillment and pleasure in a self-centered, individualistic life mostly because this is what the market reports “read” and because this is what most Japanese young women yearn for. Rosenberger (in Skov and Moeran, 1995) argues that not all the readers can “find” themselves in the pages of these magazines. Her interviews with young and old women show that women are confronted with more acute problems which will not find a place in the glossy pages of these magazines. They worry or not about not being able to marry, about taking care of their old parents or about interacting with coworkers and superiors. At any rate, women’s magazines compete in offering their consumers the image that they wish to project on the outside.

The abundance of goods advertised in the media encourages people to increase the number of their possessions which would virtually give them a more palpable sense of self (Solomon and others, 1999). Glamorous Japanese and foreign models wear clothes, accessories and shoes with an elegance which promises the buyers of the magazines the same level of stylishness. Designer-created interiors encourage women to look for a place to give them comfort and help relieve the stress of the day. Successful career women who travel abroad, live in expensive condominiums and drive flashy cars are depicted in the pages of such magazines, urging the reader to hope that she can do it too. The stereotypes promoted by the young women’s magazines may help them identify themselves with an external self, apparently more self-oriented than their mothers’, but does not help solve other problems.

Even when keeping abreast with the most recent developments in women’s tastes and needs, women’s magazines tend to depict stereotypes of selves. Although these stereotypical selves may match their readers’ selves, the magazines deliberately choose to leave out more serious aspects of their readers’ other selves and only titillate their newly-acquired sense of freedom and choice. Even if during the past years the media are attempting to show their openness by featuring ordinary women as models, the so-called *model-reader*, or *charisma ten’in* (shop assistants turned fashion leaders), they still cling to the stereotype of presenting women in a more individualistic light than they really are. Women take up hobbies either in order to enjoy themselves or to escape from a present reality which encourages them to compromise (Rosenberger, 2001).

Some of the magazines which target married women over 40 touch on different aspects of women’s selves. They try to tone down the trend of depicting modern, independent working women in urban environments and situations. Pretentious and costly magazines like *Katei Gahou*, *Fujin Gahou*, which target the *fujin* (夫人 lady), upper-class segment, offer a sophisticated assortment of tradition and modernity. At the other pole there are publications such as *Sutekina Okusan* or *Shufu no Tomo*, which offer speedy recipes, diet and money saving tips or overseas travel reports and target a larger segment of the so-called middle-class *shufu* or homemakers. Their common denominator is their tendency to bring women “back to earth” after encouraging them to spend their 20s in pursuing their hobbies and vacationing abroad. After all, these publications seem to say, a woman’s place is in the home.

According to Rosenberger, to Japanese men Western imports may symbolize undue empowerment of women. The conflict between tradition and modernity (Japan vs. West) is

mitigated by the sophisticated (and wealthy) married woman, who adopts Western style furniture for her living room, but preserves a sense of tradition by taking lessons in traditional flower arrangement or tea ceremony. According to Moeran (1995: 139), *Katei Gahou* turns life into a work of art and invites women to aestheticize their everyday life. Its grasp of tradition makes the producers of the magazine depict women either in aprons or kimonos, whereas the front cover almost invariably depicts beautiful and elegant women in Western attire. Thus, placing the women in an ideal world of tradition and refinement, but in isolation from the external world, confined to a house so large that it looks deserted, the magazine depicts an ideal, rather passive and decorative woman whose self is almost inexistent. On the other hand, the married woman depicted in *Shufu no Tomo* or *Sutekina Okusan* has a more mundane but a less flattering appearance, as the one who keeps a tight control on the family's purse strings, who does not miss any discount day at the supermarket, who saves every yen for the house loan or children's education, and who eats out with friends in a less-refined and noisy atmosphere of all-you-can-eat restaurants. Unlike their more refined kin, who dine at fancy restaurants, are well-versed in the arts of flower arrangement, tea ceremony and calligraphy and can afford to buy the expensive *Katei Gahou*, they are the next generation of *Obatarian*, a comic character created by Katsuhiko Hotta, a combination of the Japanese word *oba* (from *obasan*, which means middle-aged woman) and "Battalion", the Japanese title of a well-known horror movie (*The Night of the Living Dead*). *Obatarian*, a new entry in the dictionary, means impudent, selfish, shameless and unpleasant behaviors.

Apparently with the state's blessing, the media attempt to exploit stereotypes pertaining to each age, such as the penchant for freedom in the early 20s, the need to find a husband in the late 20s, and the good mother and dutiful wife from the 30s. The main themes of the media which target female readership are not necessarily the things that concern most of them. In support of Moeran's observation that such magazines as *Katei Gahou* appear to "uphold, both visually and ideologically, the 'traditional' role of Japanese women" (Skov and Moeran, 1995: 137), Rosenberger argues that there is an antiphony between the image promoted by women's magazines and Japanese women's real lives. She argues that most women do not recognize themselves in any of these publications, since "the magazines targeting women in their thirties are for mothers, and the younger ones show campus fashion ... to get a man" (in Skov and Moeran, 1995: 159). Moreover, as it did back in the '80s, the government's concern with the dropping birth rate prompted the launching in 1990 of a "Campaign to Create an Environment in which Women can Bear More Children" (Liddle and Nakajima, 2000). The message conveyed by such attempts of the state to interfere with the women's lives is that:

Women should continue to give first priority to marriage and the family; they should bear as many children as the state thinks is desirable; they should regard their paid work as marginal to the economy, and take up jobs only to fill in the empty spaces in their lives when they are not servicing the family. The state does not promote an image of women contributing to the family, developing themselves through work or participating in the economy. Nor does it wish to develop and utilize women's talents, skills and creativity as an industrial or social resource, except as peripheral workers. This means that women's identities should be redefined as primarily housewives, reproducers and carers. (Liddle and Nakajima, 2000: 318)

In conclusion, there seems to be a widening gap between what women have come to expect and achieve and the conservative tendencies, although they may be disguised in the more

attractive package sold by the media, which promises freedom, fulfillment and a *jibun chuushin no jinsei* (self-centered life) in a still highly conservative society which bars the true participation of women on stages other than the household, for which they were “predestined”.

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