

BEYOND THE GEISHA STEREOTYPE IMAGES OF “NEW WOMEN” IN JAPANESE POPULAR CULTURE

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One of the most eminent changes in Japanese society over the last ten years is the position of women both in reality and in representations. In correspondence to the increasing number of working women, female characters in Japanese popular culture such as manga or TV dramas have shifted from obedient weak girls to strong working women. This change is more clearly observed in works by female authorship, for women themselves are keenly aware of the change of their positions in their society. There are self-images of Japanese women in manga by female authors that male authors have never been able to express. Male points of view often misinterprets what is really happening in women's lives as well as those of foreigners. Therefore, I would like to excavate various female voices in Japanese popular culture, by focusing on works of manga and TV drama of women. Recently, Manga is one of the most powerful cultural products that Japan exports to foreign countries, but those of male authorship sometimes restrict images of Japanese women as the object of male desire and thus reproducing the geisha-stereotype abroad. (1) Instead of tracing the male fantasy, I would like to examine how manga reflects female fantasies of ordinary Japanese women, and discuss its social and cultural background, for the purpose of introducing Japanese women's own perception of themselves. It would help foreign people to understand what is really happening to the lives of contemporary Japanese women, and thus help to correct misinterpretations of Japanese women, which still survive as the geisha-stereotype.

In the birth of the genre of *shojo-manga* (manga for young girls) during the early 60's, its main topic is the heroine's love affair and marriage. Most plots of *shojo-manga* focus on the heroine's relationship with her boyfriend, and ends with a happy union with her lover. Extremely big eyes and lovely disguises of the heroines exaggerate their femininity, and thus show the ideal femininity for girls which can attract the male gaze. (fig. 1) Women should be cute (*kawaii*) and weak, never claiming equality to men, in order to attain the ideal marriage. Love and marriage are almost the only concern for girls according to the plots of *shojo-manga* at that time. This ideal of the woman's life is in some way influenced by Western culture, such as classical Hollywood Cinema or animations of Disney. Not a few *shojo-manga* depict western towns and countries, such as Paris or New York, or sometimes a western countryside, as the paradise of romantic love affairs (fig.2). Although authors of *shojo-manga* are almost always female, they seldom depict heroines with strong independence, and idealize weak and passive girls for gaining happiness in the end. Takemiya Keiko, one of the most representative Japanese female manga writers once said that;

In the beginning, I tried to depict strong heroines in my works, but they could not gain popularity among female readers. Then, I began to write stories about boys, and those kind of works turned out to be a great success. (2)

According to these words, young girls themselves hardly sympathized with strong heroines, and weak and obedient women are more acceptable for them. Old Confucian ethics which preaches women to be obedient to men, was still surviving among ordinary Japanese women around the 70's.

It is Riyoko Ikeda(~), another big name Japanese female manga author, who dramatically reformed this kind of traditional ideal of manga heroines. Her masterpiece, *The Roses of Versailles* (*Berusaifu no Bara*, 1972~1973), which depicts the French Revolution is also revolutionary in the history of Japanese *shojo-manga* . In contrast to the conservative heroines in traditional *shojo-manga*, Oscar, the female protagonist in *The Roses of Versailles*, demonstrates strong independence and subjectivity, working as an Imperial Guard in Versailles Palace (fig.3). Raised as a male to be a

member of the Imperial Guards which is her family's occupation, she expresses herself to the public equal to male comrades. Young female readers of the early 70's, including myself, greatly sympathized with Oscar because of her strong will and independence. Later, the work was adapted into a TV-series and the theatre performance, and gained greater audiences.

In the early 70's, the number of working women in Japanese society was gradually increasing(3), and Oscar had become a charismatic model of contemporary ambitious young girls. But in the story, she lost her love with a Swedish noble man, and ended her life at a young age in the battlefield of the French Revolution. In fact, just before her death, she finds another love with her attendant Andre, but her tragic death and uncompleted love suggests that women can not have a life long career, and if women want to work in the public, she should sacrifice her private happiness. During the 70's, many Japanese women in reality quit their job at the time of their marriage. The tragedy of Oscar implies that women can not have her career and love at the same time, and if she wants to pursue her career, she is forced to sacrifice her private life. The fact that Oscar dresses as a male, indicates that working in the public is not for female but male gender at that time. It was also difficult to depict an independent Japanese heroine even for the female author, for Oscar is not Japanese but French.

A Japanese heroine with strong independence and activity appeared in the late 80's, in Saimon Fumi's representative work, Tokyo Love Story (1989). Adapted into a TV drama in 1991, it gained gigantic popularity among Japanese young audiences, and still retains its influence to the young generation by re-broadcasting and releasing a DVD in 2001. Unlike traditional manga heroines with unrealistic appearances, Rica is more similar to ordinary Japanese women, without any stars in her eyes(fig.3). She expresses herself freely both in the public and privately, and confesses her love to her comrade Kanji without any hesitation. One of her words, " Let's make, Kanchi" had become the epoch-making line of the heroine in manga history, confessing love from the female side. She usually takes the initiative in her relationship with Kanji. Heroines in manga are no more passive or obedient, but had become active and strong as well as heroes in manga for boys.

Raised abroad in her childhood, Rika is good at English speaking, and uses her ability for her work. With Rika, a new ideal of the Japanese woman who enjoys love and job at the same time has emerged by a female manga author. The author, who herself is a female creator says that female readers greatly sympathize with Rika, whereas Satomi, who is a high school classmate of Kanji, is rejected. In contrast to Rika, Satomi embodies the old stereotype of a good-wife and wise mother ideal in Japanese society, working as a teacher of a nursery.(4) She is usually obedient to others, and does not express herself too strong as Rika does. She is often depicted with small children, suggesting that she would be a "good-mother" (fig.3-b).

But ironically, it is not Rika but Satomi who wins the love of Kanji. His choice suggests that the "good wife and wise mother" stereotype is still the male ideal of women in the late 80's to early 90's. Even for the female manga author at that time, it was hard to imagine that women like Rika can lead a peaceful family life. According to the ideal of that period, housewives should not be too active or too independent. In fact, Rika in the original becomes pregnant due to the affair with the president of her company, and determines to be a single mother in the end. Although she could not marry with Kanji, she says that she is satisfied with her life with her baby. Her words imply that women could be happy outside the marital relationship. But the TV-series, which has greatly contributed to popularizing the story, adapted the end of the story, in which Rika remains single without children. TV-drama, which tends to follow conservative moralistic standards, does not want to challenge the traditional family values. Thus, the choice between job or love in a woman's life course remains in TV dramas of the 90's. Rika's loss of her love could also be interpreted as the punishment for her going beyond the old ideal of passive, obedient women.

However, in the beginning of the 21st century, more liberated heroines have appeared both in manga and in TV-drama, and among them is Sumire in *You are My Pet* (*Kimi wa pet*, Ogawa Yayoi,2000). Graduated from Tokyo university, Sumire works as a journalist in a big newspaper company (fig.4-a). She has enough income to afford an apartment house by herself, and begins to live with a young man as her "pet". She names him Momo,

which was her dead dog's name. At the same time, she begins to date Hasumi who is her superior in her company. Her former boy friend blamed her for keeping a young man as a pet, but she continues living with Momo, enjoying the love affair with Hasumi simultaneously. Unlike manga writers of the 80's and 90's, female manga authors of 21st century allow their heroines to enjoy both her job and love. Further, the author gives a human "pet" to the heroine, just as men used to keep mistresses. Although Sumire's life does not reflect Japanese women's lives in reality (keeping a young man as a "pet" is not a popular phenomenon for contemporary Japanese women !), it effectively expresses a fantasy for working women.

Obtaining economical independence, Japanese women have begun to seek not financial support, but mental comfort from their partners. It is said that the characteristics of an ideal husband for women has changed from "three highs" (high education, high income, and tall) to "three Cs" (comfortable, cooperative, and compatible) in the mid 90's Japan (Inubushi 2000). During the 80's, when Japan's economical success was at its peak, Japanese women tended to depend on their husband's income, but after the disappearance of Japan's successful bubble economy in the early 90's, it had become necessary for women to seek economical independence by themselves. Increasing job opportunities for women after the law of equal employment of men and women was issued in 1986, also encouraged women's participation in the job market, thus, working women themselves have increased both in reality and in representations. Sumire, one representative of them, finally chooses Momo as her partner. The fact that she chooses Momo, not Hasumi, symbolizes the change of the ideal man that I mentioned above. Although Momo does not get any regular income, she finds herself very comfortable with him, and she finally finds that she loves him. Hasumi, who is an embodiment of the old ideal of "three high husband" demonstrating the stereotypical masculine fascination in traditional manga for girls (fig.4-b), is no more attractive for Sumire. Unlike Rika, who was punished in the end due to her violation of ideal femininity, the new heroine in manga is no more punished because of her strong will or independence. She can enjoy love and job at the same time, and finally attains happy union with her new boyfriend. Adapted to TV-drama in 2003, the work is accepted by many female audiences as the new type of female fantasy. Its popularity

symbolizes the changes in Japanese women in these 10 years, and suggests the change of Japanese society itself.

On the other hand, not a few Japanese women don't want to continue their job after their marriage or childbirth, as the M-curve of the statistics of female employment indicates. The difference in wages of men and women is still not so small, therefore, some young women think that it is not a good choice to live on their own income, but rather, it is comfortable for them to live on their husbands' income. The problem of incompatibility of job and marriage for women is not completely solved in Japanese society, therefore, it seems that female lives in contemporary Japan are divided into two different types; working women (often without children), and housewives with children.

A recent TV-drama *At Home Dad* (Ozaki Masaya and Oki Shizuka, 2004) seems to try to solve this problem. As the title indicates, the male protagonist of the drama, Kazuyuki, who is fired by his company, decided to do housework, while his wife, Miki, goes back to her work as a part time editorial staff. In the beginning, Kazuyuki is reluctant to stay in his home, and unwilling to take care of his daughter and doing housework, but he gradually finds his new duties enjoyable and worth doing. Miki also faced the difficulties in her new life as a working mother, but her husband's support helps her to continue her job. In reality, life as an at-home-dad is not so popular among Japanese men, but the drama had attracted many audiences by showing the possibility of exchange of stereotypical gender roles between women and men. Miki, as a working mother, is the new heroine of Japanese TV-drama, challenging the old stereotype of the female gender role. Passive and weak heroines are no more valid in manga or drama of the 21st century Japan. The stereotypical masculine ideal of heroes has also changed into generous and men with understanding in correspondence with the changes of the heroines.(5)

Breaking traditional ideals of the feminine, female creators in Japanese popular culture are continuously trying to seek new possibilities in the lives of Japanese women. They show how Japanese women perceive their own lives and experiences, and have brought great changes in their representations

especially in these ten years. Their works create not only the images of “new women” in Japan, but also create new visions of Japanese society itself.

Notes

- (1) Recent Hollywood movie *Geisha* (2006) still reproducing this stereotype of geisha-girl in worldwide level.
- (2) The similar cross-dressed heroine is depicted in Tezuka Osamu’s *A Knight with Ribbons* (*Ribon no Kishi*), but the heroine, Safire, is finally engaged with Franz, the prince of her neighbor country, and thus returns to be a “ordinary female” as the spouse of Franz.
- (3) Inubushi 2000.
- (4) Detailed discussion about “good wife and wise mother” stereotype in Japanese TV dramas, see Saeki 2005.
- (5) Detailed discussion about the change of the heroes in Japanese popular culture, see Ito 1993.

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