Ramos, Óscar; Garcés, Pilar
Japanese women's role. Past and present
Universidade Nova de Lisboa
Lisboa, Portugal

Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=36101106
Introduction

It is an undeniable fact that society in Japan is suffering the convulsions of a tsunami in the way it has to face a new cultural era. Suddenly the models that have been the driving force of society are being contested by an oversized wave that is gradually but inexorably dismantling a highly structured and homogeneous community whose main principles and values rested upon the concepts of duty and honour. At the crest of this massive wave are the women and young people of this country who are heading a revolt against the establishment without being absolutely conscious of their leading role in this socio-cultural upheaval. Both women and the Japanese youth feel that the world of the older generation is collapsing, that their energy urges them to react against this crumbling world, and, consequently, they react instinctively, moved by an opposing force that makes them search for an answer in a chaotic universe. Thus, it is this sense of confusion and bewilderment that makes them look for a response outside the uncontested world inherited from their elders.

In this paper our aim is to analyze the social and economic changes the Japanese society is experiencing after the economic bubble (baburu ho:kai) by studying certain anthropological and sociological aspects concerning Japanese women and their role in the new emergent society of the 21st century. Our study is largely based on research carried out in the Spanish University of Valladolid, in several institutions in Brazil and in Nihon University in Japan, together with the interviews held with several managers and employers of Japanese companies between October 2002 and March 2003.

1 There were some written questionnaires distributed among executive managers who answered the questions posed on the surveys given out in the following companies: Yazaki Electric Wire Co., Sanyo Denki Co. Ltd., Toshiba Machine Co. Ltd., Matsushita Inter-Techno Co., Ltd., National/Panasonic Co. Bandai Co., Makino Milling Machine Co. Ltd., Concierge-Suruga Bank Fujita Kanko and Aichi Packaging. There were also interviews with senior and junior managers of 20 more companies. The questionnaires and a selection of answers is included in the appendix in a publication still in print (Garcés and Ramos, forthcoming).
The idea of studying Japanese women and their decisive role in the future reorganization of the Japanese society stems from a wider view of women in general and their weight in the development of a globalized world, for women all around probably endure – in different degrees – violence, sexual exploitation, double-day: at work and at home, discriminatory working conditions and second-class political status. But besides acknowledging all these evils against women, our objective is to find out the peculiarities of Japanese women, as they stand in a privileged geographical position that allows them to share the freedom of the women of developed industrialized countries and the social pressure of Asian women that forces them to accept their fate with resignation.

1. The deceitful burden of the past in determining women’s role in society

One of the arguments commonly used to explain the reasons for certain types of social behaviour is to turn to history and argue that things are the way they are because they have always been like that through history. The credence gained by the argument of the past seems to be irrefutable and an unquestionable act of faith. Therefore, when looking into the role of Japanese women in society there is a tendency to explain their subordinate status by declaring that in the past women were relegated to a lower status, and today they are simply considered the heirs of that lesser rank imposed on them in the days of yore. But when the argument of the past is brandished against those women who refuse to accept a subservient role in society because it is customary, it is done either by consciously and deviously ignoring the different stages women have gone through in history or because of lack of knowledge of history itself.

From a mythological perspective it is known that god Izanagi and goddess Izanami descended on earth to give birth to what is referred to as an Eight Island Country. Then Amateratsu was created from a bronze mirror held in Izanagi’s left hand and light beamed down on earth. The goddess was created to give birth to the Japanese nation, as an omniscient mother who would take care of the country of the rising sun and from whom descended the imperial line started by her grandson, the first Emperor Jimmu, who eventually settled his castle in the Yamato Plain in 660 BC. After him the Japanese imperial line was established without excluding women from it, as there are historical proofs of female rulers – like the case of Empress

2 AMPO (1996).
3 Hendry (2004).
Suiko (592-628). Besides, it has been widely acknowledged that the position of women in politics in the Nara period (710-794) was highly influential, as it was believed that women had certain supernatural powers that could communicate with the spiritual world. In this sense, even nowadays, people still perceive women as creatures who exert an invisible but effective power on men, as for example in the use of the expression dansei joi, josei yu: i (men superior, women dominant). Also in the later Heian period (794-1185) the Japanese arts and letters flourished with the different nikki (diaries) and monogatari (tales) written by educated women whose narratives are not only wonderful pieces of literature but faithful portraits of women’s inner life in those periods. Until the Muromachi (1338-1568) period the Japanese was a matriarchal society rigidly stratified, with a ruling class, the uji, who called on the work of a large obliging working class, the be, who comprised an assortment of hereditary occupational specialized groups. Within the latter groups women worked outside the household in the fields and in the sea. During the Edo period (1600-1868), according to the anthropologist Hara Hiroko, Japanese fathers used to help out with children looking after them. A proof of their disposition to care for the infants is the finding of a childcare manual addressed to men describing how the husband should give baby milk if the mother was short of supply. Also the children of the bushi (samurai) were the mother’s responsibility until it was the father that took up the moral upbringing of the children introducing them to the literature and martial arts. To this we can add the comments of the Christian missionaries, who went to Japan from Portugal and Spain at the end of the 16th century, and who were direct witnesses of the way women were considered in society. As an example of these observations we can mention those left by Luís Fróis – he was in Japan from 1563 to 1597 – who observed that in Europe husbands and wives shared their property while in Japan each had their own assets, and sometimes, when the woman was in a better position, she gave a loan to the husband with an interest rate of 11% on the amount lent.

This brief look at history gives us a more real outlook of the way in which some people have abused the term history, past or tradition to justify or explain the reasons for women’s subordinate role in society. This is not to say that women held a better position in society than nowadays, for the influence of religion like Buddhism that excluded women from salvation, or Confucianism that demanded obedience on the part of women and men were outwardly considered superior to women, together with the feudal system

of the shogunates, based on the vertical hierarchical relationship of loyalty, downgraded women.

But at the same time this perspective urges us to wonder at which point in history society decided to bring all these issues together and eventually relegate women to the background of the social scene. And at this point we reach the Meiji period (1868-1912) when Japan opens its doors to the world beyond its borders and discovers that the country lags behind other most developed countries like France, England or Germany. It was in the Meiji period, when the take-off of the Japanese industry, that the doctrine of the ryo:saikenbo: (good wife wise mother) was followed to the letter establishing a clear and insurmountable division between the roles of husbands and wives in society. This philosophy was also coherent with the Confucian ethics of women’s obedience first to their parents, then to their husbands and finally to their children. It was justified in the name of harmony and patriotism, as this behaviour of submission was explained as an essential part of Japanese prosperity; a woman in this country manifested her loyalty for the nation by behaving as a Japanese woman should do. As a rule the place of women in society was at home, and they had the responsibility of the upbringing of the children, the care of the elder and the entire devotion to their husbands. But this misconstrued image of women, as non-productive members of society is a fallacy for in the 19th century women made up over two thirds of the labour force of the textile industry – mainly those working as silk reelers, cotton spinners and weavers – even though they worked under terrible conditions.

Many of the women who worked in these private companies did not even sign the contracts themselves, but their fathers did for them, usually poor peasants who desperately needed the money, even if the conditions of the contract were outrageous. But still those women played a crucial part in the development of the country although the problem was and still is that they have not been credited for their sacrifice.

With the modernization of the country in the Meiji period a type of society vertically structured and controlled by men, who relegate women to the realm of the home, was definitely established. Sociologist Nakane, in her study of Japanese society, explains that society can be articulated in two categories: the vertical in which a hierarchical organization is established and the horizontal based on equal relationships among the different members of society. The state in the Meiji period found in the vertical organization of society a way of counteracting the liberal theories of equality and

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8 Nakane (1970).
freedom imported by the influence of the European countries. In the Imperial Draft on Education in 1890 it was clearly stated that the foundations of society were the bond of *chu* (filial piety) created between the emperor and his subjects, because the state was considered the *kazoku kokka*, the all-encompassing family-nation where each member is assigned a specific role in a vertical structure in which the members of inferior rank should pay obedience to the members of the superior one. In fact, this vertical organization of the community is so deeply ingrained in the Japanese mentality that all the spheres of Japanese life have been thus structured. The most obvious example we can experience nowadays is the way in which people introduce each other by handing their *meishi* (business card), so that the people introduced can know at first glance which rank they have in relation to the other person and, thus, use the appropriate register of language.

In the Taisho period (1912-1926) urban Japan showed a different face from the stereotyped rice fields and spinning wheels of the previous age and the service sector sprung up offering new kinds of employment to women like mannequin girls, elevator girls, train girls...All these jobs involved some kind of service to the public which actually protracted women’s image as nurturers: first of the family and then of society. The adaptation of the English word *ga:ru* (girl) implied that these jobs were only suitable for young unmarried women who usually wore uniforms in a western style to emphasize Japan’s main concern in keeping up with the modern times.

During the 30s and 40s the government emphasized the reproductive role of women, and presented it as an encouraging image for the escalating militarism of Japan. The country needed soldiers to fight in the wars and administrators to govern the territories colonized by the Japanese military machinery. This image during the Showa period (1926-1989) marks a conservative trend that went well into the 70s, a decade in which motherhood is revealed as a positive trait that stresses the importance of women’s role in the development of the nation. The argument was so powerful that even the feminists thought it a step forward in the recognition of women as becoming the cornerstone of the family system. But the problem women faced was that they were not considered as individuals, but as members of a society who did not reach the status of ‘real women’ until they married and had children, for this woman-centred type of family highlighted the relationship of the mother to the child, leaving the husbands outside, and limiting women’s duties to waiting on their husbands, as this was the best way to serve the nation.

10 Stov and Moeran (1995: p. 16) incorporate in their article some of the pictures included in an album of 1933 that the Asahi newspaper published in a collection entitled *Changing Japan Seen Through the Camera*. 
The postwar period, which can be said to end with the Tokyo Olympics in 1964, marked the Japanese position in the international market as well as an advance in media technology and distribution, and this meant for the female population a new epoch in which the image of women seemed to change to reveal a new reflection in the god’s mirror.

2. The shaping of Japanese identity

In order to understand the cultural transformation that is happening in the Japanese working environment, it is necessary to comprehend the new emerging attitudes of employers and employees, the changing working ethics, the aspirations of men and women as individuals, and their newly-awaken appreciation of freedom, privacy and leisure. What the government did from the 60s was to foment an incredible economic growth that could also serve to the welfare of the Japanese people, nevertheless, all the measures taken by the State were directed to the development of the country as a whole, not of its members as individuals in the pursuit of happiness. Until now there has been a general consensus due to the values instilled in the way Japanese children are reared from the early stages of life. One month after the birth of the baby the child is taken to a Shinto shrine and is offered to the gods and symbolically to the whole society, miyamairi. This means the new born child is considered as part of the community and will be controlled by the family, the school, the neighbourhood, the company and eventually by the State.

The Japanese family system fostered in the Meiji period still pervades the homes of the people, and the ie is the unit, the home, the family that preserves “continuity” from ancestors to descendants – born and unborn. Each house watched that ancestors should not be forgotten by preserving their memory in the altar reserved for them in the house, the butsudan, and in society celebrating the souls of departed ancestors during festivals like the celebration of the bon matsuri. Also descendents should be ensured by marriage and children, not as a personal option, but out of duty for the good or their country. Hence, each house was considered as an extension of the Emperor’s and the country was a great family group. This expanded onto the concept of the company, which was a kind of family of its own, where members had their duties and obligations clearly defined.

At the same time children in school are taught that what is most valued in society is their compliance with the group they belong to, uchi. According to Joliet,11 in a comparative study about education systems, the

research concluded that American children were expected to be independent and act like leaders – this means forming individuals – while Japanese children were expected to be docile, emotionally mature and well brought up; they are expected to be able to read by the age of 3 or 4. In primary school, when they reach the age of 6, children of the same school tend to meet at the same place and walk together to school. Education policies promote equality and children are encouraged to take part in all chores concerning school like cleaning the premises and taking care of the catering. Competition between individuals is not encouraged and all abilities are channelled for the improvement of the group. Mothers are encouraged to help their children do their homework during holidays; if assignments are not completed, mothers will be scolded by the school. During their school life children are subject to rigorous academic testing that dictates their educational and professional paths. Schools are an important source of shared knowledge and national identity, for a standard form of Japanese is expected with a uniform understanding of the world.

The control exerted over all members belonging to a certain uchi is executed by the different social units and institutions, including the neighbourhood, as interaction within the community is encouraged. It is true that these types of communal activities are much more common in rural areas because, even though the consumption of rice is declining, it is still considered staple food, and growing rice requires considerable cooperation. Houses are close enough for interaction and everybody has to help the other members in order not to bring shame to the community. Young people perform voluntary tasks such as fire-fighting and villagers, in general, have allegiance to their age-mates. The communal bathhouse or the corner shop are also places where people gather and exchange news. Urban neighbourhoods draw on similar principles but, obviously, life is constrained in terms of participation due to geographical distance and mobility within the community. However, the citizens are encouraged to participate in communal responsibilities, chonai kai, like the organization of traffic safety campaigns, drills in preparation for disasters, the maintenance of sewage, or the suitable illumination of back alleys, etc. Still we can find parks and spaces for children and older people to meet and the speakers noisily announce an informal curfew for children to go back home before dusk, while the elders watch the infants conduct, acting as guardians of good manners and correct behaviour. The conclusion is that no matter whether a person comes from a rural or an urban background the community engulfs any weird behaviour and those who break the rules are excluded from the community, mura hachibu, in a greater or a lesser degree. As a consequence, everybody tries not to stand out and do as others in order to be part of the group.
From all the above we might derive the conclusion that there is a dark contrast between the sense of equality imbued by the community and the strict vertical hierarchical structure of Japanese society based on a relationship of oyabun/kobun (parent-part/child-part) extended to all ways of life, included the work environment as, for example, people of the same company feel part of the same uchi that makes them different from others, soto. But we can easily infer that equality is instilled to create a homogeneous community in which members occupy a different rank that depends on their education and professional status. It is a common practice between different Japanese groups to marginalize those who do not conform to the rules. Japanese society moves in the vigilance of others and individuals should avoid being medatsu, conspicuous.

The lives of the Japanese are planned since childhood and most rituals and festivities refer to the different life cycles they have to go through. Birth and childhood have several rituals like the celebration of girls’ day on March the 3rd, or boys’ day on May the 5th when there is a display of icons like dolls from the imperial court at the Heian period to celebrate girls’ day and warrior armours and helmets symbolizing splendour and ferocity, along with the koi, hung at the balcony to celebrate boys’ day representing the endurance expected from any human being through life. On the 15th of November for girls of 3 and 7 years of age and for boys of 3 and 5 years, shichigosan, communities also hold a special celebration. In sum, the life cycle of a person finds its expression within the community and it is worth noticing that during childhood (6-13 years) the most important events are entry and graduation day; in their youth (13-25), as 95% of the young Japanese finish high school and half enter university or college, entry and graduation festivities are also considered vital for their development as adults. In addition their coming of age at 20, is an important stage and most town halls celebrate this event, seijin no hi, by promoting celebrations where women wear kimonos and men attentively listen to speeches about the upright citizens they are expected to become. Nowadays, many young people rebel against this type of celebration and prefer to go to karaoke or visit Disneyland instead. Adulthood (26-60) is marked by marriage (marriage age for men is, nowadays 27 to 29 for women 25-27) and children and men’s lives are organized around work dutifully serving their company even in their free time, while women’s lives are organized around the house. Nevertheless, as we will observe later on, women are trying to free themselves from this rigid life cycle and their non-conformist

12 The cut-off age for women used to be 25 kekkon-tekiishi (Christmas cake). This term refers to a metaphorical expression that compares women to a Christmas cake because after the 25th they are no good. Nowadays it is said that this concept extends to the age to 30, and they refer to these women as New Year cookies.
attitude has brought important structural changes to the economy of Japan. Finally, Japanese are considered senior citizens when they reach the age of 60 and the term *kanreki* hints at the completion of a life cycle, a stage in the lives of women that is also convulsing Japanese society.

According to MacVeigh\(^\text{13}\) Japanese life is, in this sense, highly ritualized, since rituals are planned productions that require assigned roles, observers, paraphernalia and a consensus about the purpose of activities.\(^\text{14}\) The omnipresence of ritual life is closely bound up with a triad dimension of its social existence: a dual perspective of the self as private, *honne*, and the conventions of public life prearranged and ritualized, *tatemae*; the hierarchy, and in-group/out-group boundaries.

Thus, the rituals followed by a society serve several purposes like the maintenance of a group social unity, marking significant events in an individual’s life cycle and communicating cultural meanings. All this helps imposing a certain type of order in the community and is an attempt to inculcate belief.

3. From production to consumption

The growth of Japan, until it became one of the leading countries in the world due to its economical development and its technological advance, seemed to be the perfect platform for women’s aspirations. After the second world war the rights of women experienced certain improvements provided for by the laws approved like the universal suffrage passed in 1946, secondary education becoming co-ed, 26 universities opening their doors to women, several laws passed in 1947 advocating equal salaries for men and women, and maternity leave and holidays. But all these laws, very frequently, were just a pose to prove modernity, but the mentality of the Japanese society was still clinging to the roles imposed by the Meiji government: women should look after the house and their husbands should devote themselves to the welfare of the country.

But in the 80’s women began to feel that the only way to improve their lives was to demand a place in society.\(^\text{15}\) In education it is esteemed that the

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13 MacVeigh (2002).
14 It is interesting to note that in the performance of *kabuki*, the audience finds satisfaction rather in the technical skills of the performance than in the artificial production that creates the illusion of identification between the actor and the character. Japanese taste usually values the technique over the delusive creation of an artificial world in art.
15 There is an interesting article by Harvey (1995) that analyzes one of the *asadora*, television series broadcasted by the NHK in the morning hours, addressed mainly to married women at
number of women attending four-year university increased from 11.1 in 1984 to 21.5 in 2001,\(^{16}\) but their intellectual preparation has not assured women a better position in their work environment. One interesting study carried out by Kazumitsu and Ii,\(^{17}\) in which they applied an econometric model of female labour participation and wage equation on Japanese married women using data from “Japanese Panel Survey of Consumers” conducted by the Institute of Household Economy, concluded that the probability of work for women decreased as the level of education increased. To this the survey Ono\(^{18}\) adds that according to the Ministry of Labour statistics in 2000, female university graduates on average earned 32 percent less than their male counterparts. The conclusion of these studies is that university for women may mean being overeducated and this may constrain their opportunities for job placement and also for marriage. Nakata and Mosk\(^{19}\) explain that the cost of education is mainly financed by parents, and taking into account that educational costs in Japan are very high, some families still prefer to allocate resources within the household in favour of sons, as, even though, the rate of return – according to Government statistics in the year 2000 – to university education in Japan is actually higher for women than for men, this does not imply that women earn higher but that their rate return from university education is higher. In fact, the Ministry of Labour in its 1998 *White Paper on Working Women* found out that the number of women going to university was higher than those finding jobs. Even though some laws like the EEOL\(^{20}\) passed in 1986 had tried to present a change in mentality for the inclusion of women’s rights in the work environment, this alone has not been enough to change the Japanese concept of work and commitment. Also many women considered their education as a personal achievement rather than a springboard to a better job. The analyses carried out by Kazumitsu and Ii\(^{21}\) shows that the decision to work among Japanese married women is home. *Oshin* was very successful in the 80s. The protagonist of the story is a woman called Oshin, and the narration tells this woman’s success in life through endurance, *shinbo*. Written and produced by women the story begins at the end of the Meiji period and finishes in 1983. Even though the story is told by a woman, it played strongly on the grandmother side of women as protectors of the family and on a certain nostalgia for the past.

19 Nakata and Mosk (1986).
20 This Law prohibits gender discrimination with respect to vocational training, fringe benefits, retirement, and dismissal and urges firms to equalize opportunity with regard to recruitment, hiring, job assignments, and promotion.
strongly affected by social systems such as exemptions for spouses, pension, and other forms of social insurance.\textsuperscript{22}

Japan is a country that has largely based its success in the industrial work on massive production at low costs. To achieve this aim large corporations based their excellent results in the employees’ entire dedication to the company. Men had to work for hours on end for their companies, and even their scarce free time was devoted to the company. Men spent most of their lives surrounded by their colleagues at work and women were left alone in their homes looking after the children. Men were granted promotions and life employment depending on their seniority in the company, while women were left out of the system because the majority of them followed the M curve (peak in employment at 20 to 24 years of age, lowest at 30 to 34, reach the peak again at 45 to 49) regarding employment: they worked when they were young and single, then left work\textsuperscript{23} – either voluntarily or kindly requested to leave by the company, \textit{kata-tatki} (given the tap on the shoulder) or pressured by the family, and came back again after they had brought up their children. Men are usually recruited directly from colleges and universities by large Japanese companies that seek to foster loyalty and train their employees for their own purposes, they create the \textit{sarariiman}. In return these companies offer security of employment, seniority and pay rise pensions, health care and bonuses and a whole life company-focused. Work group is important and it creates a kind of \textit{uchii} with a \textit{sempai/kohai} relationship (the loyalty paid to the elder or mentor by the pupil). But most women, both young and single or returnees, are considered temporary workers and the companies do not bother to invest in their training. As an example of what generally happens in Japanese companies let us consider the findings of the following publication, Creighton (1996).\textsuperscript{24} This enlightening article deals with marriage, motherhood, and career management in a Japanese “counter culture” and argues that women working behind a counter in a supermarket have a special status

\textsuperscript{22} As shown in the survey, in Japan, the amount of the special tax exemption for spouse was reduced if income exceeded 700,000 yen and a woman had to pay the tax herself if income exceeded 1,030,000 yen in 1993. If annual income exceeded 1,300,000 yen she had to start paying premiums for social systems such as pension, health and other social insurances. In a survey carried out in 1996 the data showed that most women tried to adapt their posts not to exceed 1,030,000 yen.

\textsuperscript{23} In the study carried out by Ono (2004), it is stated that the 2001 \textit{White Paper on Women’s Labour} issued by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare reports that the labour force participation of women in the age group of 25 to 34 has increased, but one out of four women would like to work and take care of the family, which takes us to the change in mentality needed in the Japanese society and the need to adopt policy measures to enable women to balance work and family.

\textsuperscript{24} Creighton (1996: pp. 192-221).
in their work field. She says that Japanese women work and career aspirations are independent from family education. Women are valued socially by their role as *ryo:sai kenbo* (good wife, wise mother motto) and suggests that the change introduced by the EEOL has been rather a desire to participate in industry than an internal shift in Japanese social values regarding women. It is true that women workers were normally found between the ages of 24-27, then they were given a *kata-tataki* and were suggested to retire because they accumulated seniority and higher annual salary, therefore they became costly labour. The mature women returnees were not considered as regular full-time and were just designated temporary labour. In her study on women working in department stores the author finds that certain stores take the matter seriously and the department store industry is taking the initiative in appointing women to management posts and opening the way to participation in administration. SEIBU was one of the first to hire women and offered them a merit system that based pay raises on ability without regard to gender. Also childcare leave systems were well developed at many department stores. For example MITSUKOSHI’s programme allowed nine weeks of paid maternity leave and up to one year of unpaid leave. ISETAN adopted its leave programme in 1971 and allows pregnant employees to take eight weeks off with pay before and after childbirth. A woman can also take up a maximum of three years of unpaid leave and return to the same job. What was discouraging was that a leave programme for fathers was recognized in 1991 in the Young Childcare Leave Law, but no men took the advantage due to social pressure and because both men and women thought men incapable of raising a child properly. Department stores have also been pioneers in adopting policies or rehiring women who have left after the birth of a child as ODAKYU department store that initiated the programme in 1970. SEIBU and TOBU also inaugurated license programmes of reinstatement under which a woman could return to her job up to a maximum of ten years after departure. SEIBU also maintains its own in-store-day-care facilities. The SEIYU stores allowed women with children under two to take two hours off and this was extended to fathers or mothers.

Women perception of themselves is very difficult to define as they have been raised to consider the domestic realm their responsibility and marriage and motherhood their primary goals. Women are evaluated on how well they perform their domestic duties not on their work positions or performance. *Wagamama* (selfishness) is unacceptable in the Japanese society and women should not appear so. Another interesting aspect of this article is that the women interviewed thought that the relationship *senpai-kohai* was strongly felt among men but women tended to build friendship rather than a vertical relation in their working environment.
So during the 80s women began to be part of the production machinery made in Japan, and because there was a shortage of labour and higher cost of living, women became attractive to the labour market, but their life course was carefully maintained by the state: work full-time after graduation and enjoy freedom, marry and have children and be economically dependent to raise children and then take a part-time job and look after the elderly. As a result of this, during the 90s marriage age has been delayed, the country began to experience a decrease in the rate birth and society showed signs of aging. The government decided to send women back home and the role demanded by the state was that of a full time housewife, sengyo shufu and the education mama, kyoiku mama, who was entirely responsible for the children’s success academically and, consequently, professionally. The problem was that during the 80s laws to prevent discrimination against women were just to serve the needs of the state and of a corporate society who turned men into corporate warriors and women into professional housewives and re-employable labour force. This type of patriarchal organization monitored society from three angles: a) a system that controls the family through lifetime employment, seniority based salaries and enterprise unions, tax and pension systems based on the household unit (family registration koseki), b) a Japanese welfare system based on the premise of division of labour and roles between sexes and c) the new trend of the administration that reinforces women’s participation in society by creating volunteering networks to care for the elderly fostering non-wage female labour. Women, thus, have been protected by the government as members of a certain family system not as individuals.

Women were made to believe that they could be an essential part of the productive economy of the country, but this was just a façade. The role assigned to them is the traditional role instigated in the Meiji period but adapted to the 21st century industrial society. Now women receive influences from several sources like social institutions, foreign influences, popular culture and the media, and this contributes, to a certain extent, to shape certain patterns of behaviour that should contribute to create an image of Japan as a uniform country without regional or class and gender differences that highlights the conscious ongoing process of socio cultural integration, and this is probably as important as the way the Japanese have evolved in an island secluded from external influences and promoting a standard language, universal education, full employment, nationwide media, and

26 Harootunian (1989).
social cohesion. Still the value attached to harmony is the keystone of Japanese society and the most important feature is the relationship established by its members, known as *giri-ninjo*, duty and disregard of selfishness.

The ambivalence women find is that if they work, they have to be young and single or housewives after child rearing. Their work is seen, in fact, as part of consumption, while men's contribution to society is considered as production. This is specially significant in the way women's image is projected by the media as described by Rosenberger. The author argues that the number of magazines for women have burgeoned in the last decade. These magazines address women at the different stages of their life cycle, thus, we find magazines directed to high school girls in which an individual style and the use of free time and holidays is encouraged. The next age group is students from 18 to 22 years old and they are prompted to work and use their earnings for consumption, in particular, the purchase of products to make them attractive to men. The following group is young single women from 22-25 and they are offered foreign travel and luxury brands. This kind of magazine, also begins to include wedding dresses and advices for wedding ceremonies. The following group are women from 25 to 35 and here magazines find it very difficult to address potential customers: some show self-oriented leisure, sexual appeal and international sophistication for single women some others concentrate on decoration, fashion and items for the household. The media try to attract potential female readers so they have to present a woman's paradise, but at the same time they find themselves drawing attention to the traditional role. An interesting study is the one carried out by Morean on the magazine *Katei Gaho* (Household graphics). This magazine is aimed at the 40 year-old educated woman. Although the women on the cover appear dressed in a Western style, they show complicity in their look with other women, not sexual appeal as a Western model would. They appear to be actresses that show that perfection is in women's own hands. The magazines present an interest in the tastes of women and they offer a dream world that foregrounds nostalgia for nature, *shizen* and the season, *shun*. What the magazines tries to emphasize is that these women are above all Japanese and their interest is the family well-being as shown by the topics covered like food, fashion and interior design. Magazines have certain power over the way women categorize themselves and the discourse

30  An example of the way in which the media offers a traditional image of women is the advert of City Gas. Here the woman appears in an apron, happily smiling while the advert reads: "isn't Gas City feminist? " Suggesting that to be feminist is to make household chores easier for women.
of ideas they present are those approved by society. The message women receive is that there is an age for freedom and independence but marriage lies at the end of the cycle because it represents the redefinition and confirmation of status for families and individuals, for when people marry they are expected to leave behind all kinds of rebellious attitudes and settle down. It is important to understand that marriage and love do not always go together in Japan, as marriage is considered a national duty. Still *mitai* is used to arrange marriages taking advantage of the technological devices like the mobile phone or the chat. Women appear to be the central axis for consumption, creating a feminine gender identity that embodies the contradictions of the East and the West, tradition and modernity, continuity and change.

Political institutions also cultivate the traditional role of women but with ambivalent intentions. On one hand the state encourages full-time through welfare policies like the pension reforms of 1986 and the policies that allow women maternity leave and child care facilities, but on the other hand little is provided by the government on elderly care in a growing aging society, as well as the existence of real discrimination in promotion and wage. In large companies, highly educated women now have the chance to become managers but they must be ready to accept being displaced or work longer hours. Many women give up because this kind of life is incompatible with motherhood, and those who decide to follow the career track are normally single. They are usually not portrayed as a model to follow in society and the majority of women still feel that marriage is their duty. There is a double-edged policy that favours women in maternity leave, breast-feeding time and leave for menstrual discomforts, but this discourages male employees because they feel women can not be relied on to work in groups. Also women who work long hours can not look after children and government day-care gives preference to lower income workers, therefore part-time is encouraged for flexibility sake. Smaller companies would rather employ graduates of two year junior colleges than university graduates, for these women are normally employed for minor tasks, are not offered the possibility of a career track, and will probably leave after marriage. The message subtly recommend them to use their earnings for personal leisure while they are young, to consume goods and then return home for good. Returnees are also persuaded to work part-time and to make good use of their free time by taking up traditional arts such as flower arrangement (*ikebana*), tea ceremony (*chado*), and

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31 An enlightening article on women’s education is the one carried out by McVeigh (2002) about a Japanese Women College. In this college the concept of International Liberal Arts in emphasized but, paradoxically, in order to educate young girls to become Japanese women. Therefore, the topics covered range from *aisatsu* (greetings) to *mitashinami* (appearance) to *kotobazukai* (speech) and *taido* (attitude). All considered intrinsic Japanese female characteristics.
all such activities that affirm Japanese traditional culture that, according to the state, allow women to pursue personal goals of self-expression. Women are presented as the ones responsible for Japan’s image abroad, are usually used as decoys to sell Japanese products in international markets, clad in wonderful kimonos and projecting the official image of Japanese femininity, nature and purity.

Women have been appointed as ambassadors of Japanese culture, but they have not been empowered. They lack political power, as political leadership in Japan depends less on oratorical skills and charismatic personalities than on personal allegiance and reputation for loyalty in groups that support the politician. In order to become a successful politician the person must belong to a certain urchi supported by the party. Women have more to say in local areas and their views regarding environment and consumption is becoming an essential issue for the welfare of society. Some cooperatives run by women began to buy directly from producers and this successful idea was awarded in 1989 the international prize for creating an alternative economy. Still these matters are considered a minor issue while technical advance, forwarded by men, is the country’s main concern.

In the interviews we held with managers of several small and middle-sized companies we went over all these issues and concluded the following on the position of women in the socio-economic change of Japan:

1. Regarding education there is a general feeling of failure, as many young people, both men and women, have no interest in education. They regard it as a duty they try to avoid: young men feel that their fathers are entirely devoted to the company and have no life to enjoy, and young women feel discouraged at the dim perspectives of a long term job and promotion with a two-year degree, and those who aspire to a four-year degree feel that they will have to choose between marriage and children or follow a career and remain single.

2. With regard to social class, there is a wider gap between those women who decide to stay at home, or work part-time because their husbands’ salaries are high enough to live a comfortable life, and those who are forced to work because they have to make ends meet.

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32 According to Iwao (1993) politicians have been using the image of beautiful women like actresses, singers, Olympic medallists to gain voters, but they do not regard women as politicians in general. There have been honourable exceptions like Doi Takako, the strong leader of the Socialist Party in the 80s, or Tanaka Makiko, PM Koizumi’s former Foreign Minister. But these are still considered a rarity.

33 According to Corporate Women Directors International in 2004 there were only two women in the administration out of the 27 companies listed in Global 200 Fortune.
The first group are regarded as the model to follow, and the expression onna tengoku, woman’s heaven, points at this longed for way of life; they work part-time, contribute to the community in the local sphere and have a personal budget to spend in trips abroad, golf and tennis lessons and leisure.

3. Concerning work organization, young men and women feel extremely disoriented. Many have sporadic jobs as freelance like those called freeters and NEETS. The sense of duty has not been ingrained in the young generation and traditional Japanese concepts are foreign to them, while material affluence and a culture of mass consumption is all they aspire to.

4. Finally, as regards women role in this social upheaval, there is an undeniable fact appreciated in the way the working environment is changing due to the transformation that women are experiencing. They delay marrying, they have fewer children, they enjoy free time and they have discovered the self. In Japanese this concept is translated by the word jibun, which means “a part of the whole”, but Japanese women do not regard themselves as a part of the whole but as individuals with desires, needs and rights. Now, when they decide to marry, they look for companionship and love and they are not ready to accept their husbands’ continuous absence. They demand that their husbands look after the house and the children and they want to enjoy free time together. And even though women still feel the pressure of society to perform the traditional role of devoted mother and wife, they look for a different kind of life and they are gradually achieving that the political institutions, the companies, and society accept the change. The majority of the managers interviewed agreed that women should have the same opportunity as men and firmly believed that in a near future there will be more women managers, but also, these same managers thought that men should not be in charge of the house chores and that children were a woman’s duty. Therefore, women live in a perpetual paradox, probably explained in Japanese mythology for when the goddess Amateratsu hid in the cave and left the earth in complete darkness, the other deities realized that

34 The difference between both groups is difficult to define. According to Kojima (2005) the NEETS are young people of middle or low class who do not want to work or study. The freeters, according to Kruger and Fuyuno (2001) are university graduates who do not want to be slaves of a company. In 2004 there were more than four million freeters. To this we can add the new phenomenon of adolescents who live isolated in their rooms, the hikikomori. What is more worrying is the fact that most young people feel at a loss in a very traditional society with wobbly structures and many decide to live with their parents in a perpetual spree, the single parasites.
she should be persuaded to leave her hiding-place to preserve light. They used a mirror to make her come out. Captivated by her image in the mirror the goddess left her refuge persuaded that the reflection offered her a new power and status among the deities. Maybe Japanese women have also seen their reflection in the mirror offered by society, and have left their houses to become free members of society who can contribute to their own welfare and that of society, with the right to happiness and freedom. Now it is the turn of the institutions to facilitate this emerging concept of society by considering men and women on equal terms and by giving young people an opportunity to become responsible but happy adults.

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Abstract

In this paper our aim is to analyze the social and economic changes the Japanese society is experiencing after the ‘economic bubble’ by studying certain anthropological and sociological aspects concerning Japanese women and their role in the new emergent society of the 21st century. It is widely accepted that culture is going to determine the viewpoints and the actions undertaken by people and organizations. Habits, behaviours and attitudes are entwined in the culture of a certain community and belong to the social inheritance rather than to the genetic one. Culture as part of the individual will determine the characteristics of the individuals, as part of the group will determine the methods and the systems of the organizations and their aims. Human behaviour is, thus, influenced by both, but especially by what could be labelled as the socio-cultural inheritance, namely culture.

Resumo

Neste artigo temos por objectivo analisar as alterações sócio - económicas que a sociedade japonesa experimentou depois da economic bubble, através do estudo de determinados aspectos antropológicos e sociológicos relativos às mulheres japonesas e ao seu papel na nova sociedade emergente do século XXI. É genericamente aceite que a cultura será determinante na formação dos pontos de vista e nas acções empreendidas por pessoas e organizações. Hábitos, comportamentos e atitudes estão entrelaçados na cultura de uma certa comunidade e pertencem mais à herança social do que à herança genética. A cultura, como parte do indivíduo irá determinar as características dos indivíduos, enquanto que como parte do grupo irá determinar os métodos e os sistemas das organizações, bem como os seus objectivos. O comportamento humano é, assim, influenciado por ambos, mas especialmente por aquilo que pode ser designado como a herança sócio – cultural, nomeadamente a cultura.

要約

この論文における我々の目的は日本女性と新しく現れている21世紀の社会における彼女たちの役割に関する人類学的・社会学的側面の研究を通じ日本社会が経済バブルの後に経験し続けている社会的経済的変化を分析することである。文化が人と組織の意見と行動を決定することが広く認められている。習慣、行動および姿勢は特定の共同体の文化に絡み合っており遺伝的というよりも社会的継承に属する。個人の一部としての文化が個人の特性を決定し、文化が集団の一部として組織の方法と体制、目的を決定する。このように人の行動は両方から、特に社会的・文化的継承とよばれるもの、すなわち文化から影響を受ける。