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Rosenberger/Gambling with Virtue

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Introduction

How has the notion of self changed in Japan over the last three decades of the twentieth century? This is the question that drives this book. Through the ‘70s, ‘80s, and ‘90s, Japanese people have felt strong pressures both to globalize and to remain strong as a nation. Popular global ideas push toward increased independence and leisure at the individual level, while ideas of national morality pull toward virtues of productive, cooperative citizens. Despite global trends, different groups of people bring varying conceptions of self to the experience of modernity and often create fascinating hybrid versions of personhood—indigenous ideas and practices melded with Western ideas and practices to produce something new (White and Kirkpatrick 1985, 7; Hannerz 1991). What versions of self are Japanese people creating out of the various forces working on their lives?

I focus on women for several reasons. Their lives never cease to interest me because I identify with their struggles, which are both similar to and different from my own. More important, during these past three decades public discourses of media and nation have particularly targeted women as the agents of change in Japan. Women’s lives are seen as more flexible than those of men, whose lives are more controlled and more rewarded by work; but women’s lives are also subject to expectations for nurturance from family and nation. Change has been highly gendered in Japan, offering women ambiguous freedoms and multiple responsibilities. Women have responded with curiosity, enthusiasm, and a touch of wariness as they push the limits of the orderly status quo.

But there are risks. As an older woman in the ‘90s said, “Women get caught up on virtue.” The emotional tie of relationships and the judgment of others’ eyes pull women into prescribed actions as women, mothers,
wives, and daughters-in-law. Opportunities abound, but so do tensions. Reflecting on the many questions in women's lives of whether to marry, to work, and to have children, an independent young woman in the '90s said, "No matter what path they choose, women's hearts are in a quandary." Women feel deeply the contradictions between explorations into more independent selves and concerns for virtuous selves caring for others. Yet they have taken the challenge to forge new kinds of personhood out of the new and the old. Focusing on women allows a varied perspective and yet a limited one. Different and equally fascinating studies could be done from the point of view of men, Koreans resident in Japan, or Ainu.

I approach the question of women's self and personhood—words I use interchangeably—from an ethnographic perspective. That is, I use women's voices and experiences, their dilemmas, and their choices to figure out women's changing notions about personhood over these three decades. This is not a representative sample for Japan, but I hope readers will find the book dynamic and enjoyable to read because it expresses the hopes, joys, confusion, and pain of ordinary people.

Everyday lives happen amidst influences from the nation-state, media, even doctors, and thus I precede the main chapters about women's lives with introductions to important public discourses of the '70s, '80s, and '90s. Women's lives are not completely determined by these, but the ideas and practices espoused in public discourses contribute significantly to the opportunities and risks that women meet in their journeys. Women react to them in a variety of ways—accommodating, resisting, twisting, subverting, using them to their advantage—but they do not escape them for they constitute their lives, reverberating through institutional and personal life.

Both political ideologies and cultural logic have long encouraged Japanese to conceive of life taking place multidimensionally in various arenas, with some arenas allowing more spontaneous expressions and others demanding more restrained expressions. Life proceeds along a continuum of multiple situations and relationships varying between formal respect and informal relaxation (Lebra 1976, Rosenberger 1989). Readers will recognize this in their own lives, even if they do not give it much attention. We act differently in classrooms with teachers than we do at parties with friends. Girls and boys act differently with each other than with their same-sex friends.

In Japan, knowing how to recognize and maneuver those differences is a mark of maturity (Bachnik 1992). People learn to shift body movements, language, and actions as they move among what I call front-stage
and backstage spaces (signified in Japanese by paired words such as omote or front, and ura or back). Thus, everyday life requires a certain amount of skill in performance. In Japan, performances are helped along because spaces are clearly marked by certain gestures, words, and dress (Yano 1996), but the range of roles and scripts is potentially broad because stages multiply in various directions into a refracted complex.

What is significant in this book is that Japanese women have taken the cultural process of multiple arenas and expanded it to find compromises between the old virtues of personhood and new ideals for self. The voices of Japanese women tell how they conform, maneuver, and make choices within these multiple arenas as they juggle various concerns and desires. Public discourses have also given scripts for women’s fulfillment of multiple positions. These scripts are ambiguous, suggesting freedoms that harbor new burdens, but women have responded creatively with complex and subtle expansions of the stage in all directions. By the ’90s women’s personal choices were making a difference, calling into question the very nature of the multiple arenas.

This process of change through multiple arenas makes the Japanese case particularly interesting, showing that women modernizing in different areas of the world have diverse ways of finding solutions (Moore 1994). It is an example of women maintaining an intricate and conscious balance between changes that expand and empower personal lives but that still accommodate the authority of government, communities, corporations, schools, and family members. Key here is the acceptance of the idea that front-stage roles may be different from the informal positions taken backstage. This makes it easier for women to enact dominant social norms in certain times and places because they know that they can act out choices for emotional expression and self actualization behind the scenes. Women have maintained a kind of double consciousness that is often seen among people who live with asymmetry (DuBois 1939).

The book moves not only through time, it moves among various groups of women, for Japan is not homogeneous despite national efforts to make it so. Readers will hear voices of women from urban Tokyo and regional northeast Japan as well as from different socioeconomic classes. Class is used loosely here to indicate a group with similar education, tastes, manners, ideals, work habits, occupations, and consumption patterns (Bourdieu 1984). Since the early ’80s, surveys have shown that over 90 percent of Japanese people think of themselves as middle class and aspire to middle-class ideals (Saso 1990, 89), but important differences continue to influence the choices that women make.
Readers will also meet me, author and anthropologist, in the pages to follow. I will remain as incomplete as the Japanese glimpsed here, but I include myself to remind readers that it is my ears and eyes, my sense of what is significant, and my narrative that has shaped the way these women are understood. As faithful as I try to be to their words and experiences, they are frozen in time and subject to my interpretations, which are undoubtedly influenced by the values of individual empowerment and close human relationship that I hold dear.

My theoretical orientation guides this book. Simply put, I understand people's ideas and practices as shaped throughout their lives by ideas and actions that come from families, schools, workplaces, media, state policies, national ideologies, and the global marketplace. This happens subtly in late industrial societies where individuals, families, and sexuality are simultaneously highlighted and managed (Foucault 1980, Gramsci 1971). The political economy and people's positions within it habituate their daily thinking and acting and draw the parameters of their lives. They live with certain cultural, social, and economic capital (Bourdieu 1977).

Yet I also understand people as creative beings who within the bounds of cultural imagination can re-mold who they are. People shape their lives and their social milieu as they act and as they monitor their flow of conduct (Bourdieu 1977, Giddens 1979). People always negotiate with the forces that shape them. They negotiate for expression of their personal feelings, freedom of movement, a measure of autonomy, loving relationships, and status. Their negotiations may increase empowerment only on the inside, resulting in increased confidence and actions for self, with little change around them. In a few instances, people come together as they negotiate with powerful forces and have collective influence over the conditions of their lives. Personal change then becomes a process of accommodating to larger forces of stability and of change, while using those forces when possible to one's own advantage (Alonso 1992; Abu-Lughod 1990; Collins 1991).

I appeal to my audience, mainly American I presume, to leave behind the stereotypes that Japanese have a collective or sociocentric self whereas Americans have an individualistic or egocentric self. Both perceptions distort the realities of everyday life because every society gives space for both the collective and the personal, the differences being matters of degree and emphasis (Rosenberger 1992a). George Mead (1934), an American theorist on self, posits that all selves have self-awareness and
that this develops via early relationships; we continue to have an inner ‘I’ which monitors a social ‘me.’

Whether in history, politics, or economics, U.S. ideologies emphasize individuality, freedom, and independence, and make us see the world in terms of these ideals. American students observing Japan often say that they prefer the U.S. system because individuals have a chance of succeeding on their own (to say nothing of failing). The assumption called Orientalism marks us as individuals, centered around certain ideals, and people from Asia as group-oriented, switching points of view with the situation (Said 1979). Alternately, Americans hold Japanese up as a model of harmony with others and nature, an equally unrealistic view.

Huge areas of our lives, however, are not individual or independent. Distinct hierarchies exist in schools, workplaces, government, and indeed families, with personal power often clearer than in Japan. We recognize that relationships give our lives stability and contentment, indeed they are vital in developing and sustaining personhood. Americans reach out not only for self actualization but for commitment (Bellah et al. 1985). This varies considerably by gender, class, community, and ethnic group, as people express individualism and reach out for connection in different ways (Waters 1990; Gilligan 1982; Kusserow 1999). Like Japanese, Americans have backstage regions where they let down their guard and prepare varying presentations of self that will be acceptable to particular audiences on front stage (Goffman 1959). Americans’ experiences of embarrassment cannot be understood without positing social aspects of self (Holland and Kipnis 1994).

I urge readers to expand their views on what it means to be individualistic, a term that carries many meanings (Kusserow 1999). Individualism can imply an arena of expressive personal feeling or of utilitarian self interest (Bellah et al. 1985). Individualism finds expression in autonomy that can be separate from the group, pictured in nonconformity, creative initiative, achievement, assertiveness, rights, and opinions. Yet ironically, sometimes individuality is sharper because it is not expressed at all, but hidden from public view (Roland 1988). Individualism is also expressed in relation to others, and conceived as self-reliance, self-discipline, perseverance, endurance, or identity with a unique group in society. In the postmodern world, the body is an important arena of individual expression, but its adornment and shape is measured in relation to others, and its sexuality usually carves its sense of individuality in intimate relations.
Individuals have some sort of inner core of ongoing experience and memory, yet we recognize that they are fluid over time and space.

In Japan, historical, political, and economic ideologies tend to emphasize the person as part of the group. Indeed, in what is called reverse Orientalism, Japanese look at the United States and assume that Americans are individualistic, often to the extent of callousness (Moeran 1990). Or sometimes Japanese see the U.S. as a model of ideal individual freedoms, a picture which we know is untrue and struggles to be realized (Kelsky 1996).

Indeed, like individualism, collectivism or groupism also has a variety of different forms. Americans tend to think of it as sheer conformity to the ideas and practices of superiors or a larger group; it offends our sense of individual principles and autonomy and we envision dysfunctional over-dependence. But a personhood linked with the group can mean a variety of things: consensus hammered out of individual expressions; cooperative teamwork; competitive factions (Befu 1980); synergistic jazz ensembles sensitive to others’ feelings (Kumon 1992); networks for reaching out (Moeran 1996); creativity arising out of techniques well learned from teachers; enhancement of self via identification with the group (Smith 1983); intimate relationships that give meaning to life’s journeys (Plath 1980); mutual give and take between superior and inferior; altruistic nurturance of others; the warmth of knowing people are sensitive to each others’ feelings (Doi 1973).

Despite ideologies, Japanese history shows the presence of various alternatives for personhood that do not follow the stereotypical image of groupism that Americans often hold. A few examples illustrate this point and orient us in regards to the history of personhood and women.

Japanese language demands the use of honorific language that expresses respect of others and self-effacement, as well as solidarity with an in-group and distance from an out-group. Different pronouns for me and you, and different verb endings, indicate one’s distance from another person or group (Bachnik 1994, Kondo 1990). This requires attention to the relationship between self and other person as well as self and group more than reflection on self as separate, and is particularly strict for women. Yet we find that historically, honorific language developed in the higher classes, and only spread into common usage in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Japanese did not always live with the constant need to think about self linguistically as embedded in a group within a ranked system (Kora 1997, 116).

Interactions imagined among deities in Japanese myths are character-
ized by strong-willed individuals (both men and women) who follow their whims in expressive sexuality and rebellion against norms (Pelzel 1986). Early poems reveal people expressing personal emotions and romantic yearnings, often using images of nature to show their hearts. Novels and diaries by Heian court women show them to have been self-reflective, observant, and creative in artistic pursuits. Far from a picture of women as subservient to patrilineage and patriarchy, we find women inheriting property and raising their children in their father’s houses, husbands visiting or living there with them (Fischer 1991).

What have come to be identified as Japanese characteristics—honor or unquestioning loyalty to superiors with no thought of self—emerged in the samurai warrior class, which gained precedence from the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries. Inheritance and residence centered around the male line. Even in the feudal Tokugawa period (1615–1868), this group represented only about 6 percent of men and women. During this period emotions and individual display were politically repressed for lower classes, as social and geographic mobility, dress, and leisure were highly controlled, and households were organized to check on each other for following regulations. Following neo-Confucianism, the samurai were considered “public” (kō), concerned with the public good, while the lower classes were considered “private” (ko)—selfishly concerned only with their own welfare (Nolte 1983, 4). Thus, political ideology laid down a negative view of private choices and individual differences from long ago. Yet in popular puppet plays of the times, masterless samurai and geisha expressed active desire in art and love affairs, showing that Japanese always remained aware of personal passions, respected for their sincerity of heart (M. Miller 1998).

In the modern period from 1868, the samurai code of personhood and family was refashioned to be used in a modern nation. Officially, self was highly gendered and group-oriented. By the late 1800s the government legislated a patrilineal household system with powerful male househeads and elder son inheritance. Women were to enact the “good wife, wise mother” in the home—a “public place where private [selfish] feelings should be forgotten”—and were prohibited from meeting in groups for political purposes (Nolte and Hastings 1991, 156). Ideologically, citizens were to be loyal and productive for their households and for the nation, all connected via male househeads to the national body fathered by the Emperor.

On the local level, however, conformity was uneven: individual people were not tied into households or the nation as tightly as expected nor in
the ways specified by law. Songs of rural nursemaids showed individualistic feelings of resistance (Tamanoi 1998). Even in the 1930s, a rural village study showed that women chose mates, initiated divorces, and kept their children after divorce (Smith and Wiswell 1982). Households were inherited by various sons, daughters, and adopted children. Scholars have since argued that in practice household continuity required a househead and housewife, but even non-kin could fill these positions (Uno 1996, 581).

Ideas about Western individualism have entered Japan intermittently, but especially since the official beginning of modernization in 1868. Officially, Western technology was welcomed, but not individualism—in instead the government urged a Japanese spirit of endurance and loyalty. In fact, the pendulum has swung back and forth between flirtations with individualism and realignment with more group-oriented characteristics that were selected and characterized as Japanese for political purposes in contrast with Western ideologies. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, for example, educated women debated in journals whether they should be independent individuals or protected mothers (Rodd 1991). Urban young women had jobs as secretaries and saleswomen, and expressed desires to continue to work, enjoy their money, and not marry; divorces and illegitimate births increased. Union activity flourished and skilled male workers used their weight to gain higher salaries; ironically, the paternalistic management system of lifetime employment and seniority promotion, identified as culturally Japanese, was developed to limit their job-hopping. This led to a new middle-class ideal of salaried company men with wives on the "heavenly mission" of child-raising (Nagy 1991).

The pendulum swung sharply toward duty to nation before and during World War II; officially, women's main contribution was to be as mothers, reproducing as many loyal workers and soldiers as possible, but by the end of the war, working-class women were joined by middle-class women working in factories for the war effort (Miyake 1991). As we shall see, ideas of individuality and women's equality came flooding back in after the war with the American occupation, but were dampened by American fears of Communist incursion and Japanese fervor to catch up with the West via economic growth and Japanese spirit.

Thus, common-sense notions about individual and group orientations in Japan have been highly influenced by historically shifting political ideologies that have affected Japanese in their daily lives, social scientists writing about Japan, and Western readers. In this book I explore various
aspects of personhood in Japan, keeping in mind the power of public discourses but also the creativity of people behind the scenes. The various Japanese women we meet here offer invaluable guideposts to understanding changing concepts of selves through their particular struggles as they “gamble with virtue” and shape selves out of personal desires, local norms, national expectations, and global influences. I hope that readers will use these reflections on Japan to take a broader look at their own versions of personhood, along with the risks and opportunities that we all meet as our local norms cope with changing national and global influences.