An observation

Floating young men: Globalization and the crisis of masculinity in Japan

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Abstract

This paper highlights a recent change in Japanese men and masculinities in relation to nation and nationalism, as well as the idea of home and domesticity. The prevalence of non-regular employment in the labor market has drastically increased in Japan since the 1990s. This especially hits younger men, as they find it difficult to establish themselves as breadwinners, in keeping with existing gender norms for men. The article examines three types of newly emerging masculinities in Japanese youth: herbivorous boy (*soshokukei-danshi*), *otaku* (maniac or fetishist men) and petit (neo) nationalist. Herbivorous boys are tired of hard work and competition and aspire to the comfort of the domestic sphere; they present a mirror image of the corporate warriors of older generations. *Otaku* place themselves in imaginary homes, either in cyberspace or in commercial "maid-cafés," and are escaping from a commitment to real others. Petit (neo) nationalists turn to Japan as their home and defend it by using an exclusionist discourse that targets neighboring nations and immigrants from foreign countries. In general, as young Japanese men experience growing distress regarding their social stance, it becomes apparent that they are homebound, seeking a sense of domesticity.

Introduction

In the process of globalization, men are said to be losing their power and to be in crisis (Chant and Gutmann, 2000). The proliferation of non-regular work arrangements and employment relations have caused many men to experience downward occupational

mobility, loss of status and vanishing social power. This masculinity crisis has induced some young men to join extreme movements, where attitudes such as xenophobia, race-based supremacy and violence are commonly expressed and exercised (Kimmel, 2003). Often such movements deploy masculinity as a form of symbolic capital that restores a kind of safe space for men in crisis, where they can perceive themselves as fine and entitled (Kimmel, 2003:605). In Japan, the socioeconomic consequences of globalization have shoved aside the hegemonic image of the corporate man and given rise to new types of masculinity.[1] This brief note offers a preliminary observation of these recently emerging representations of Japanese masculinity, with a special eye on how their identity relates to place-making of the home (Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Cresswell, 2004).

Until the 1980s, post-World War Japan was characterized by high, steady economic growth. Japanese men, typically employed in large corporations, worked long hours and commuted long distances. Known as corporate warriors—*kigyo- senshi*—many spent most of their time in the workplace and in work-related activities (such as commuting), and were largely detached from their families (Amano, 2006; Taga, 2006). This totality of men's engagement in paid work, which even exhausted some to death—*karoshi*—was complemented by the women's role of sole responsibility for reproduction and homemaking, their unpaid domestic work supporting the wellbeing of children and employed men. The totality of men's work was compensated by a social order that promised stable, life-time employment and was promoted by a welfare policy that advocated the ideological view of the corporation as a family. Consequently, the workplace was a distinctively masculine place, where Japanese men typically constructed their everyday experience, and was virtually the sole source of men's identity and status. In contrast, women's involvement in paid work was limited; they were excluded from labor unions and employed mostly in low-wage, part-time jobs, i.e., with non-regular employment relations.

From the late-1990s, non-regular employment rose dramatically (e.g., from 20.9% in 1995 to 34.0% in 2007; http://www.mhlw.go.jp/wp/hakusyo/roudou/10/). Further, while the gender gap in non-regular employment is significant in the whole Japanese workforce, this gap has shrunk dramatically among the youngest cohort.[2] As a result, another gap has emerged among young men, as those in non-regular employment are less likely to marry (less than 10%) than those who enjoy regular employment (40%) (Fujimori, 2010; Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2006).

At the end of the decade (1999), the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society and the revised Equal Employment Opportunity Law were passed. This was a mixed result of the efforts of Japanese feminists and femocrats backed by international trends, as well as of civil servants who were inspired by the rise of the service economy, growing globalization and the need to increase the labor supply. These laws stretched the

employment scope, increasing promotion chances for women and lowering gender segregation in the labor market. Some frustrated young men who felt deprived of their job and status entitlements responded by blaming the gender-equality movement for their hardships, and "feminist-phobia" sentiments escalated (Kaizuma, 2005). At the same time, gender norms were not modified; men are still expected to abide by the overarching role of breadwinning to establish their masculinity. This increases the pressure on young men especially those in non-regular employment, whose low-wage, unstable jobs impede their identity construction. The precariousness of their employment and economic prospects deprives them of full participation in the Japanese way of life (Amamiya, 2007). These developments have provoked conflict and frustration among many young men, who fail to meet the strict codes of the hegemonic image of Japanese masculinity. Some have explored other tracks and generated alternative masculinities which criticize the hegemonic image. In what follows, I briefly describe the three main newly emerging masculinities—herbivorous boys, *otaku* and petit (neo)nationalists—and then comment on their link to the issue of domesticity.

Herbivorous boys (*Soshokukei-danshi*)

The term "herbivorous boy" is used to classify a new growing population of young Japanese men (Fukasawa, 2009). The most conspicuous characteristics shared by herbivorous boys are the lack of active association with women (including sex), the failure to adhere to old-generation masculinity, and willing engagement in typically feminine acts, such as cooking and eating sweets.

A biannual magazine for herbivorous boys (*Hanako for Men*, published from 2009) typically contains a variety of articles on fashion, cosmetics, restaurants, hobbies and cooking. It is notable that there are no articles and photographs that promote typical masculine issues which sell the glamor of foreign, non-Japanese territories or the allure of male getaways in faraway lands. Almost all of the articles and photographs present images of men in the private space of the home, stressing domestic comfort and bliss. In Japan, such ideas of domesticity, which in the past were related only to women, are now promoted as suitable for young men. The chief editor reveals that the readers' average age is 31.8 years, and the male-to-female ratio is 7:3. Although older generations in Japan tend to criticize herbivorous boys for having little ambition, low spirit and less communication with superiors, he noted that such qualities as acting tenderly and modestly are integral to Japan's cultural tradition. He added that the character of herbivorous boy intertwines masculine and feminine cultures in a way that reflects contemporary Japan. Editorial preference of the home space is a true reflection of the common spirit of young men who are tired of hard work and

competition and aspire to the comfort of the domestic sphere.

What is women's response to this newly emerging type of men? A survey of 104 female undergraduate and graduate students of Ochanomizu University (2010) showed that 88% knew at least one herbivorous boy in their immediate environment. Their approach toward such boys was mixed: whereas some accepted them as good friends and valued their useful domestic advice and help, others expressed disgust, particularly when considering herbivorous boys as partners.[3]

Otaku (Maniac or fetishist men)

The term *otaku* appeared in the early 1980s to identify young single men who absorbed themselves in Japanese popular sub-cultures, such as animation, manga, comics, computer games, films and TV programs, as well as the development of computer software (Okada, 2008; Otsuka, 2004).[4] *Otaku* tend to neglect their appearance, dressing much like nerds while focusing on narrowly defined and imbalanced consumption, which has inspired this thriving new cultural industry. Although *otaku* refrain from involvement in other life domains and are generally reluctant to work with other people, some willingly work for this industry for low wages.

Otaku usually live in isolation and are keen to communicate only with those who share the same interests on cyberspace. Despite being generally apolitical, *otaku* discourse on cyberspace tends to be laden with extreme and exclusionary tones and fiercely attacks vulnerable minority groups, such as immigrants (e.g., the "cyber cascade"; Sunstein, 2001). *Otaku* rarely associate with women and prefer imaginary girls that resemble animated characters over real ones. However, they are also associated with a real-world physical place. Akihabara, a dense Tokyo district, packed with shops selling computers, games and software, is known as the focal place for *otaku* men and boys. Many coffee shops in Akihabara are "maid-cafés," where young girls dressed up as famous characters waitress a clientele of vastly *otaku* young men who are treated as "masters." The common phrase of those maids is "welcome back home masters!" It is worth noting that the *otaku* style of expression, entangled with narcissism, has fostered an animated ideal of the cultural distinctiveness of Japan and a fantasy of Japan as a world leading nation (Azuma, 2001). In fact, the popularity of *otaku* has swelled recently and attracts international fans (Kiyotani, 1998).

Petit (neo)nationalist men

The petit (neo)nationalist represents the third newly emergent Japanese masculinity. He naively cherishes Japanese crafts and spirit, easily turns to exclusivist language

and is readily motivated to join the nationalist movement (Kayama, 2002). This group is relatively diverse, including groups such as the historical revisionists, militarists and the movement for exclusion of immigrants and *zainichi* (descendants of Koreans who lived in pre- and mid-war Japan; Yasuda, 2012). For example, Yoshinori Kobayashi (1998), a famous comics artist, criticizes the Japanese left and the Korean and Chinese governments for their attempts to blame Japan in war crimes, to dishonor fallen Japanese soldiers and to humiliate Japanese nationhood. While older generations often agree with such criticism, Kobayashi gains increasing popularity among the younger generations.

Another angle of this masculinity is offered by The Society for History Textbook Reform, which seeks to revise Japanese history textbooks. Post-war Japan is described as too "self-critical," overwhelmed by a rampant Western-style individualism which spoils the dignity of the nation. The society excites many "ordinary" young men who face the insecurity of the precarious labor market. It offers them a sense of identity embedded in past values and order that aims to revive Japan as a strong, glorious nation. They disdain East Asian (mostly Korean and Chinese) criticism of Japan's colonial and imperial past and believe it threatens Japan's legitimacy. Ironically, these young men are unable to rely on traditional social networks, such as family, school and residential communities, as sources of identity and do not share the memory of older generations (Oguma and Ueno, 2003). For them, cyberspace is a different place where their identity construction is not constrained by everyday "real" places, but ultimately overlaps with the Japanese nation.

While women also share these sentiments, hard-core neo-national ideas are spreading and more rapidly accepted among young men. Generally speaking, women in the East Asian region appear to distance themselves from the nationalist views that typify many men and to adopt transnational sympathy, which is evident in their enthusiastic participation in popular cultures across national boundaries such as serial TV dramas and pop concerts. In contrast, nationalist anti-Japan movements in Korea and China are also swelled by younger men who are frustrated by their displacement from the labor market in these countries (Takahara, 2006).

Koizumi, Japan's former prime minister (2001–2006), makes a good illustration of how politicians entwine the nationalist view with globalization. Koizumi's government gained enthusiastic support from youth because of his overt assertions that he would destroy vested rights, including those of public servants. While he speeded up privatization and labor deregulation, Koizumi also promoted Japanese nationalism. For example, by his visit to the Yasukuni shrine (a religious symbol of World War II) despite Korean and Chinese disapproval, he gained the admiration of many young men who discounted his economic reforms and the resultant hardships.

Home and the crisis of masculinity

During recent years, Japan has experienced a growing fragmentation from what was believed to be an egalitarian society to one where workers in non-regular jobs are distanced from others who enjoy the benefits of regular employment relations (Hashimoto, 2009). The consequences of this fragmentation are mostly felt by the younger generations, whose men face high rates of unemployment. These men are both confused and unsettled by the loss of their status as breadwinners and thus search for other ways to help reconstruct their identity. The three newly emerged types of Japanese masculinity reflect different versions of economic transformation and render different gendered geographies surrounding the home.

  Herbivorous boys seem to present a mirror image of the corporate warriors of older generations, who focused almost exclusively on their jobs, rejecting domestic involvement whatsoever. Herbivorous boys greatly emphasize their appearance and are estranged from the stressful career of paid work. Instead, they are highly engaged in domestic affairs and fascinated by the desire to cultivate their houses, though their motivation for coupling or making families is rather ambiguous. Their choices indicate a flight from, and a "feminization" of, traditional masculinity. *Otaku* is implied by their focus on consumption. Yet, soaking up the entertainment of game-playing and neglecting their appearance, they appear to be introverted and selfish, escaping from a commitment to real others. Instead, they place themselves in imaginary homes, either in cyberspace or in commercial maid-cafés, where fictional relations are practiced. Finally, disappointed by their unsupportive natural communities, petit (neo)nationalists, mostly young men, turn to Japan as their home, which is defined at the international level. They delineate and defend their home country by using an exclusionist discourse that targets neighboring nations and immigrants from foreign countries. This direction greatly differs from the international collaboration typical of popular culture, whose vast fans are young women.

  Taken as a whole, young Japanese men, experiencing growing distress regarding their social stance, appear to become homebound, seeking a sense of domesticity. Primarily, the focus on home seems to represent the opposite side of the work–home dichotomy which echoes the traditional gender binary, expressing disappointment from and resistance to the world of work. Additionally, the focus on the idea and materiality of the home reflects the need for "a place in the world" as a crucial component for the process of identity reconstruction and suggests that the fulfillment of this need can be reached at different scales. Their domesticity is not confined to the private space of the home, but is rather a site of resistance and dominance which is intimately tied to the world beyond the materiality of their place of residence. It is, however, noteworthy that a painful irony lies in this process: as these men shape their focal

place of identity, i.e., their home, they reverse their own experience of exclusion (from regular employment) by excluding others (women, immigrants). Their supremacy is acquired by turning to what is familiar and cozy, employing domestic practices of power relations to shift ideas about the kinds of people and behaviors that fit in and those that do not. Gender power relations are important for this reconceptualization of the home, as is the issue of reproduction, which was not touched upon here. This preliminary glance at the geographies of alternative masculinities just opens the door for contemplations on the changing meanings of home, belonging and resistance at the intersection of various scales and different types of power relations.

Notes

1   On masculinities, see Connell (1995).

2   In 2010, in the entire Japanese workforce, 53.8% of women and 18.9% of men were in non-regular employment, while figures for workers aged 15–24 were 35.4% and 25.1% for women and men, respectively (Labor Force Survey, 2011).

3   Relative to the 44% percentage of respondents who thought herbivorous men would make good friends or colleagues (as opposed to 45% neutral and 10% who disagreed), fewer women (17%) thought of them as suitable as boyfriends (44% neutral; 39% disagreeing). However, 36% of respondents agreed that they might choose herbivorous boys as partners (25% neutral; 34% disagreeing).

4   The word *otaku* is a formal term meaning "you," which is used regularly within their community.

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