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The Too-Good Wife: Alcohol, Codependency, and the Politics of Nurture in Postwar Japan, by Amy Borovoy. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, 251 pp., \$19.95 (paperback 0-520-24452-4), \$50.00 (hardcover ISBN 0-520-24451-6)

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When I published *Office Ladies and Salaried Men* in 1998 (Ogasawara 1998), somebody mentioned we already have enough English books on Japanese women. Yet, a decade later, literature on women in Japan continues to mushroom. Today there are far more books written about Japanese women than men. This is at first somewhat puzzling, because Western interest in postwar Japan has been driven first and foremost by its miraculous economic performance. Was it not men, and not women, who were the bankers, industrial workers and bureaucratic elites responsible for bringing about the miracle? Largely confined to the domestic sphere, women were regarded as at best supporters behind the scenes.

Much attention has been paid to Japanese women owing to the fact that the majority were excluded from market activities, yet were able to lay claim to autonomy, support and stability to a far greater extent than most housewives in other industrial countries. Many Western observers reported on how Japanese women defined their experience as housewives as both valuable and fulfilling, and

how they found the basis of social participation through their domestic role to be a means for exercising some sort of influence over the public.

Amy Borovoy sheds new light on this old dilemma of being a woman in Japan. Women enjoy freedom, financial support and stability and social validation, but only within the confinement of marriage that renders them financially dependent on their husbands. Borovoy's work, perhaps beyond any other, is successful in explaining the mechanism of how women muster power, and in illuminating its elusive and limited nature.

The lens that the author uses to take her close-up picture of women in modern Japan is rather unique. She sat in support meetings for families of substance abusers at a public mental-health clinic in Tokyo and listened to conversations that transpired among wives and mothers of drunken husbands and children with substance-abuse problems. As explained aptly in the book, social drinking whether among colleagues, clients or customers is generally approved in Japan as an occasion to build and strengthen human and corporate relationships. Wives are expected to take care of their husbands when they come home drunk, tend to their needs so that they can go back to work the next day and manage any problems entailed in the privacy of the home. Borovoy skillfully shows the difficult choices women face when they attempt to deal with their husbands' alcoholism as 'good wives'. However, as I hope it is clear by now, the book is not only or mainly about the problem of substance abuse but also it concerns instead how women come to terms with the culture of nurturance so pervasive in Japanese society, as their husbands' alcoholism forces them to reflect on their lives.

The key concept of the book is codependency. According to Borovoy, before the introduction of this American psychodynamic concept to Japanese society, women were encouraged to manage their husbands' drinking privately (as they did all other problems of family members) and often attempted to 'make' their husbands stop drinking single-handedly. It is commonly believed that a skillful wife is able to manage her husband's behavior so that family conflicts do not surface as public disturbances. Failing to cope with her husband's alcoholism privately was regarded as much a failure on her part as it was his.

The incorporation of the notion of codependency transformed this. A wife was no longer considered capable of managing her husband's recovery or solving his problem. Indeed, his drinking was his problem—not hers. She should instead focus her attention on her problem, namely, her dependency on her husband and start finding ways to live her own life. In Borovoy's words, the concept of codependency allowed women to 'stop feeling that they weren't being "good enough" wives and mothers and to start asking whether they had been "too good"' (p. 53).

Borovoy contrasts the notion of codependency with the sentiment of *amae* which was defined by Doi Takeo (1971) as 'the desire to be passively loved' in *Amae no Kōzō*, one of the most influential texts of *Nihonjinron* or 'theories of Japaneseness'. The notion of *amae* is considered to be the embodiment of the ideal Japanese family as a caring and closely-knit unit, and—above all—of the warm, loving relationship between mother and child. It celebrates the endurance and self-sacrifice of women as caregivers.

While *amae* relationships were also important in explaining male artisans' subordination to middle-aged female part-time workers in Dorinne Kondo's (1990) classic *Crafting Selves*, Borovoy is more careful in pointing out the unhealthy sides of social control exercised through the mechanism of *amae*. She argues that *amae* obfuscates the existence of interests, conflicts and power in relationships, and thereby precludes the possibility of an abuse of power. A mother's care extended to other family members is idealized as being always loving and nurturing such that her intentions cannot be called into question. Likewise, the needs of a husband and child for wifely and motherly care are regarded as sincere and innocent to the extent that it is difficult to denounce them as being selfish and exploitative.

In fact, the societal exhortation of *amae* relationships is so pervasive and compelling that it is almost impossible for women with drinking husbands to question their nurturing role despite the hardships they faced in their marriage.

It was the language of codependency that enabled women to take actions that seemed dangerously close to transgressing the national ideology of *amae*. They became more conscious of the ways in which their caring work was rendered invisible and unremunerated. They understood the exploitative dimensions of the relationships and attempted to set limits on the kinds of care they would offer. This was no easy task, since they had to confront neighbors, relatives and bosses who continued to believe that a wife should take care of her husband under any conditions. In refusing to change the wet underwear for a drunken husband or leaving him lying drunk and unconscious on the corner of a street (even in a safe neighborhood), wives were painfully aware that they ran the risk of being labeled cold and callous.

However, Borovoy does not get carried away. Her analysis is sharp and sound in observing that in the end, wives did not develop an explicit critique of the gender system in Japan and particularly of the extremely limited opportunities given them in the labor market. They refused to challenge the fundamental premises of the nurturing ideology and instead continued to view the work of caregiving as central resources through which they obtained social credentials. Marriage and family accorded women support and respectability. It was through marriage and family that women were able to participate in the community and other social activities. As miserable as the situation may be for women with drinking husbands, they did not relinquish the hope of living in a more ideal world where they would continue to function as the ultimate caregivers while being appropriately appreciated for their services.

While it seems easy to condemn the Japanese gender system from the standpoint of Western feminism as oppressive and exploitative in hindering women's equal participation in the labor market, many researchers have found such easy criticisms unsatisfactory. Borovoy indicates this in the concluding chapter, where she reflects on American feminism based on the insights she gained from studying Japanese women in order to clarify what gains women in the US have made and what losses they have incurred.

True, she argues, American women in general have better access to well-paid jobs and are financially more self-sufficient. However, this necessarily means that they can spend less time with their children. The tremendous efforts made by working mothers and fathers in juggling family and work and the strains such attempts put on the parents as well as their children have been well documented. The crisis of families without an adult member staying at home to look after children quickly has become a matter of serious debate not only among academics but also among journalists, social critics, counselors and lay people.

Moreover, it is plain that American women who choose to become a stay-at-home moms enjoy less marital and financial stability than their Japanese counterparts, not to mention the social stigma placed on them for their lack of an independent identity. Most Japanese women, in contrast, are financially dependent on their husbands, but they receive a remarkable degree of support and social validation as housewives. The extent to which women have access to and control over household finance was brought home to me one day when one of my housewife friends complained that her husband used the money he provided for his family to pay for family weekend entertainment rather than paying out of his pocket money allotted to him by his wife from the money he earned! While the danger of the Japanese system is clear, I find Borovoy's argument persuasive in that it at least helps us see what American feminism has traded off in its attempt to attain absolute gender equality and individual autonomy.

There are a number of important changes taking place in Japan and among Japanese families. In recent years, the mass media has been reporting families fraught with violence, neglect and

absenteeism. While some stories about selfish mothers, indifferent fathers and withdrawn children may be an exaggeration, they nevertheless suggest that the ethos of nurturance may be rapidly disappearing, particularly among the younger generation. In addition, the fact that women are marrying later, giving birth to fewer children and continuing working for longer years are an indication of the growing tendency to give priority to work over children.

Because most of Borovoy's informants are currently in their 60s and 70s, it would be interesting to know what choices younger women will make if they are forced to cope with their husbands' alcoholism. These women generally have higher level of education and more opportunities for paid work than their predecessors. Would they keep up the caring work expected by the culture of nurturance, or would they relinquish any efforts to live up to the standard of good wife and mother? A sequel to this book would be much welcomed.

References

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