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BOOK REVIEW

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Amy Borovoy, *The Too-Good Wife: Alcohol, Codependency, and the Politics of Nurture in Postwar Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, December 2005. 251 pp.

Borovoy's book looks at an important cross section in the anthropology of Japan, the intersection of the family, business, and the state. Long praised for its productive symbiosis between the state and business, this book looks at the dark side.

If one reads the latest media reports in and about Japan, one is aware that "Japan, Inc." has broken down as the listless economy drags into its second "lost decade." The pillars of Japanese society—those social forms so actively studied by earlier generations of anthropologists—are seen to be crumbling, all the while trapping the average Japanese in the structures that produced the "Japanese Miracle." The Japanese family is in disarray. Once imagined as a society of perfect marriages and stable families, it is now "Japan as Number One" in divorce (Raymo et. al.) and suicide (over 30,000 a year for the past eight years). The schools are also breaking down as some students incite violence in the classroom while others never leave their bedrooms at all (*hikikomori*). Among the numerous public and private responses, for example, the Ministry of Education (*MEXT*) has recently shortened the acclaimed school week from 5½ days to 5 days in an attempt to re-center education around family and community.

Meanwhile on the business side, anyone who has spent a late night in urban Japan has seen the contradictory demands of the company. One of the more striking fieldwork memories that I have of urban Tokyo is taking the very last train of the night. Stepping off onto the platform at Shinagawa station, I saw a virtual war zone with the bodies of drunken and unconscious businessmen strewn throughout the station and many more puddles of vomit as evidence of their colleagues. What is amazing is not just that the drinking is part of required commensality of work, but it is also the fact that the company similarly demands these same businessmen will be at their desk, if only physically, the next morning, either nursing hangovers or artificially animated by the ubiquitous, and sometimes mysterious, “energy drinks.” This system made the world’s second largest economy, but what are its costs?

Amy Borovoy’s book gives the reader a look behind this system of success to examine its toll. Borovoy argues that the Japanese state and corporations have worked together to create not just the middle-class white-collar worker, otherwise known as the salaryman, but also the wife and family to support his productive activities. She analyzes the trajectory of a controversial American import, namely the concept of codependency that Borovoy defines as “the notion that it is possible to care too well for a family member” (14) and the concurrent pathologization of pre-existing forms of relationships, such as concept of *amae* (“passive dependency”), made famous by the Japanese anthropologist Doi Takeo. Borovoy’s feminist analysis looks at Japanese society to provide a larger view on ideas of selfhood, the individual, and the family. While these are well-worn topics within the anthropology of Japan, her focus on the pathologization of codependency as a window into the dynamics of the family and construction of self allows for a fresh perspective. Thus, while in one sense alcoholism is central to Borovoy’s analysis, in another, it is incidental as she does not interview the alcoholics and substance abusers themselves, rather she is interested in how their actions and the discourse around codependency affect Japanese notions of the self and the family. As such, her book is in conversation with the anthropologists of Japan, past and present.

Her book centers around the introduction of Alcoholic Anonymous (*Danshukai*) and its pair Codependents Anonymous (introduced to Japan in 1976 and in 1982, respectively). The prime difference between the two, as Borovoy notes, is that AA focuses on the harm done *by* its members, CoDA focuses on the harm done *to* them (13). Interested in the role of women, wives, and mothers, Borovoy’s fieldwork consisted of spending a year attending a weekly 90-minute meeting of CoDA and the informal gatherings at a

nearby coffee shop afterwards. Her subjects constituted a range of middle-class housewives who were struggling with either alcohol abuse by their husbands or substance abuse by a child. Although she readily acknowledges that these meetings were highly unsuccessful in “curing” their family member’s abuse, the format of the meetings allowed her to gain insight into female subjectivity in Japan.

She focuses on both the importation and rise of the idea of “co-dependency” and of the particular “worldview” of Saitō Satoru, an influential doctor, who, according to Borovoy, has been instrumental in introducing and translating this concept to Japan. Saitō uses the “language of addiction” to place codependency within the larger idea of middle-class achievement (56). Saitō argues that codependency has long existed in Japan, but it was not until the concept was imported from the US that the problems with these relationships could be articulated (57). Saitō specifically uses the ideas of addiction to critique the “latent pattern in Japanese society” and to advocate for social change in Japan. Borovoy argues that Saitō’s practices have been responsible for changing the course of therapy in Japan.

Her analysis is comparative with the United States, which is only logical, as the ideas of alcoholism and codependency were introduced from there. In general, “talking therapy” has not taken hold in Japan, and the Japanese have traditionally turned to various forms of religious healing. The different histories and contexts allow Borovoy to show how Japanese forms of therapy and treatment often have very different structures and practices. For example, there are “family inpatient units” at hospitals which double as shelters for domestic violence victims to get away from their families. Thus the wife or mother “without” the problem may be the first to be hospitalized not only to “heal” her from strain and exhaustion, but also as a way to convince the husband or child to check himself in. This makes sense and is possible in the Japanese context, as hospital stays tend to be much longer than in any other post-industrial society. Also, in her discussion of the content of the therapy sessions, she notes that childhoods are rarely brought up or discussed as sources of later problems (64).

Borovoy importantly argues the general idea of codependency is not nearly as problematized in Japan as it is in the United States. The traditional ways in which the identity and care of a wife/mother are structured in Japan encourages an extremely close relationship with the husband and children. In fact, forms of codependency are central to the housewife’s identity. For the clinic to problematize a seemingly normal relationship as codependent

is relatively unique within Japan (63). In a culture where self-sacrifice is promoted as a virtue, especially for women, codependency is seen as a “cultural good,” rather than a loss of self. Borovoy is effective in giving voice to the women who are struggling with extremely personal and difficult problems whose “solution” goes against their cultural beliefs. The idea that their sacrifices can actually serve to facilitate alcoholism or substance abuse provokes crises that cut to the core of their identity. In one fascinating example, Borovoy describes the agonizing decision of one wife who let her alcoholic husband sleep off his stupor on the curbside where he had collapsed on his way home. Even after concerned neighbors came to her door, she had to risk being seen as a bad wife and tell them to leave him there for his own good. Bewildered, the neighbors brought him home, and the husband never knew how he ended up in his bed.

All in all, due to the comparative nature of the book, and the useful introduction of numerous US debates on alcoholism and codependency, the book could have benefited from more intense engagements with Japanese thinkers, discourses, and feminism. Although she refers to the existence of extensive native debates, Borovoy misses the chance to engage major Japanese feminists, beyond the ubiquitous Ueno Chizuko. Statements such as “[t]he tenets of Japanese academic feminism—for example, the view that gender roles are socially and historically produced, not innately determined—were not a part of the conversations at the Center” (31) do not add much to our understanding neither of the subject matter of the book nor of feminisms in Japan. In addition to various typographical errors, there are numerous times in the book where statistics are provided, such as “[s]ome estimate that 20 percent of child abuse is attributable to alcohol abuse.” (49-50), without any citation, leaving the reader wondering about its source.

To supplement the weekly meetings that constitute her ethnography, she draws on analyses of the mass media, past and present, to examine the larger discourse about motherhood, wifehood and the self in contemporary Japan. Nonetheless, as is common with many anthropological texts that engage history, especially ones that engage new cultural phenomena and rely largely on other scholars’ historical analyses, there is a bit of disconnect between the immediacy of the therapy group discussion and attempts to historicize those conversations. As such, her historical sources (largely secondary) engage national debates rather than the intimate problems of specific families.

Although her book is well situated within the literature of the anthropology of Japan, she does not place her work against important issues of medical

or therapeutic interventions into Japan (or other parts of the world), such as the major push by US drug companies to sell anti-depressants in Japan (Applbaum 2004, Schulz 2004) or the government's introduction of psychological and psychiatric counseling, to earthquake victims, for example (Breslau 2000). It was also unclear the extent of Saitō's influence, whether "talking therapy" is gaining broad popularity or acceptance. Nonetheless, this book signals a new and interesting turn in the anthropology of Japan. Thankfully, we have moved beyond the idea of "Japan bashing" to more fruitful analyses of other societies' problems. This book's length (176 pages) makes it easy to assign in introductory anthropology classes, courses on medical anthropology, gender, or Japan in general. The comparative nature and the focus on codependency means that the book should work well in undergraduate classes, but will also interest scholars in the field.

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