

Mistranslations: Updating Images of Japanese Career Women in English-Language Media

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Introduction

The *kyaria uman*, on the other hand, projects an entirely different picture from the temporary, expendable OL. She is part of the mainstream Japanese business world, but because this has traditionally been a male preserve she is still very much an oddity and must present herself as one hundred percent business and nothing else. She wears no jewelry except for a watch and a simple ring—and little or no makeup. No fancy clothing here, only conservative suits and low heels.¹

Just as photos of early Nineties' businesswomen in shoulder-padded suits, spiked heels, and poufy bangs elicit snickers today, some passages from Brannen and Wilen's slim 1993 volume of advice for American women doing business in Japan, *Doing Business with Japanese Men*, can provoke gasps of astonishment. Many of the authors' suggestions certainly ring true even fifteen years after publication, such as "Don't ever embarrass your boss publicly... Give your input, if you disagree, in private" and "Spend time socializing with key Japanese personnel to find out what's really happening"². Yet, just as a recent fashion spread of conservative yet funky suits in the widely-read *Nikkei Woman*³ contrasts with sartorial limitations of the dowdy *kyaria uman* above, images presented of Japanese women in a business environment are often broadly

stereotypical and, at best, outdated misrepresentations of modern reality.

Western cultures have long been fascinated with the “enigma” of Japanese women. The subject of Japanese women itself is extremely popular in the West, with over 10,000 book-length, English-language publications registered in the United States Library of Congress’s catalog since 1990 alone.⁴ Against this backdrop, the perceived paradox of Japanese career women, whose place in the modern business world conflicts with traditional domestic roles, is a particularly enticing topic for foreign journalists, academics, and researchers. Although the number of academic publications dedicated solely to the subject of Japanese businesswomen is not large, media interest from newspapers, magazines, and online sources remains strong. Yet, passages like those found in *Doing Business With Japanese Men* illustrate how the messages about Japanese businesswomen in English-language media remain riddled with stereotypes and outdated information.

This paper will attempt, through a review of English-language media contrasted with Japanese sources, to counter these mistranslations of Japanese businesswomen. Specifically, these will include definitions of Japanese women’s roles in the workplace and misrepresentations of women in career track positions. Focus will also be given to portrayals of Japanese men and division of gender roles in the domestic sphere. After deconstructing these images, the paper will conclude with a discussion of the causes behind “mistranslations” in English language media, which continue to promote outdated images of Japanese career women. In all, the author hopes to shed light on the changing social, domestic, and professional realities Japanese career women face, and how these contrast to the often inaccurate picture presented in the Western media.

Defining the Problem: OLs, Career Women, and Japanese Women Managers

The most basic problem writers in English-language media typically have when addressing the issue of Japanese women in the workplace is how to define them. *Doing Business* identifies only two types of Japanese businesswoman: the OL and *kyaria uman* (explained in English as “managerial-track career woman”⁵). OLs are characterized as “women who enter the workplace in their early twenties and leave shortly after marriage to start a family.” In contrast to Ogasawara’s broader explanation of *Office Ladies and Salary Men*⁶, this definition fails to both illustrate the variety of roles OLs can play in the workplace and linguistic shades of meaning. In fact, many saleswomen in well-known department stores and other employees in a non-office environment may also call themselves “OLs.”⁷

Western authors are also unsure of how to treat OLs once identifying them. Typically, OLs are portrayed as temporary sojourners the Japanese workplace, unworthy of serious mention. *Doing Business* limits its commentary on OLs to their clothing choices and marital habits:

Japanese women almost invariably marry by the age of twenty-five... The pressure to get married is enormous, and if the young working woman doesn’t succeed on her own her office manager will probably take time during the working day to show her pictures of eligible bachelors who work for the company.⁸

This portrayal is overstated and outdated in two respects. First, the average age at marriage for Japanese women was already 27.3 (26.3 for first marriages) in 1995 and 29.6 (28.2) in 2004⁹ (with figures even higher in the Tokyo Metropolitan area for first marriages—27.3 and 29.3, respectively). Second,

fewer Japanese men and women actually meet their future spouses in the workplace than in the past. A 2006 survey by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare's National Institute of Population and Policy Research indicated that, for the first time since 1987, most Japanese met their spouse "through friends and/or siblings" (30.9%) as opposed to "at the workplace or through work" (29.9%).¹⁰ Indeed, any corporate survivor of Japan's 13-year economic slump would be quite surprised to find a male manager concerning himself with his female subordinates' marital status, particularly following the passage of Japan's 1998 guidelines for eliminating sexual harassment in the workplace.¹¹

While OLs or other "non-career track" employees certainly present a problem, this is nothing compared to the minefield of locating and labeling the Japanese woman manager. Jean R. Renshaw, author of the seminal *Kimono in the Boardroom: The Invisible Evolution of Japanese Women Managers*, faced this challenge head on in her quest to identify and interview Japanese women managers for the book's research sample. Renshaw opens her discussion with:

As a beginning, it was necessary to define the parameters by asking, "Who is a manager?" and "Who are successful Japanese women managers?" The word "manager" is itself built on "man," and the usual definitions of manager exclude women, with traditional management texts based on a male model. This book views manager in less gender-specific terms as the person who brings together necessary resources to achieve desired objectives¹²

Renshaw notes that that the Japanese women interviewed in the book met the definitions of manager as they "successfully direct organizations, carry on business within the national and international economy, and handle affairs of state, of corporations, of small home businesses, and of families"¹³. Rather than focusing on a narrow title-based definition or even a wider classification as

someone performing a management function within the corporate world, Renshaw found it necessary to create an artificially broad definition as noted in the quotation above. Why was this?

A look into her methodology might give us a little background. Renshaw began her research with the *Keizai Doyukai* (Japanese Association of Corporate Executives), an organization of 1,400 top executives from some 900 large corporations, which “all share the common belief that corporate managers should be key players in a broad range of political, economic, and social issues.”¹⁴ She chose to approach the female members of the *Doyukai* (which numbered 20 out of 2000 in 1993) as they represented a “pre-selected sample successful women managers.”¹⁵ However, Renshaw found the first months of seeking interviews “discouraging” until the interviewees themselves began to introduce her to other managers and business owners. In the end, her sample included a wide range of “managers” — from actual company presidents to gallery owners, network marketers, small business owners, and even an ambassador. It is not inconceivable that the breadth of her intended sample—and, most likely, definition of manager—expanded to fit the scope of her interview population.

Why is this significant? Renate comments several times on the necessity of seeking Japanese criteria for success in selecting her interview sample, in order to “choose women deemed successful by Japanese standards.” However, one could question as to whether Renshaw’s interpretation of Japanese standards of success and the standards actually used within Japan are one in the same. In this case, it is useful to contrast how Japanese language surveys of women in management define the term “manager” (translated in this context as *kannishoku*). A June 2006 Nikkei Woman survey listing the top 10 “women friendly” firms in Japan (measured in part by the proportion of women

registered in management positions) serves as a good example. In this case, women in “management positions” were defined as those working in the various ranks of corporate management including directors (*yakuin*), division heads (*bucho*), and section heads (*kacho*), or those serving as CEOs.¹⁶ A 2003 Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare Report used a similar definition, labeling “management” as the *kacho* and *kakari-cho* (group, sub-section head) levels.¹⁷ In general, the word *kanrishoku* in Japanese is commonly understood to encompass the upper levels of the conventional Japanese organizational structure, which is replicated outside the corporate world in both academia (in administrative positions) and the civil service.

Unfortunately, Renshaw’s failure to accurately reflect the conventional Japanese definition of “manager” in her research may have contributed in another mistranslation of Japanese women in the workplace. Her initial strategy of seeking out the “elite” in interviews (i.e. interviewing elite *Doyukai* members) suggest a bias of sorts to a Western view of success. By bypassing interviews with more rank-and-file management, Renshaw may have unnecessarily limited her sample to a narrow segment of the population of Japanese working women. Methodologically, these limitations were further compounded by her choice to conduct the interviews in English, which she admits may have “introduced the danger of a biased sample”¹⁸. In fact, these choices (to focus on “elite” career path women who could speak English) can be construed as having introduced an age bias in the sample, and Renshaw notes that the majority of managers in the survey were over 45¹⁹. As one of the few book-length treatments of the topic of Japanese women in management, Renshaw certainly deserves praise for her groundbreaking, balanced discussion of the struggles and successes of Japan’s “rising female managerial class.” However, her methodology and core definitions unfortunately set the stage for more biased representations of

Japanese women in the workplace.

Women on the Career Track: Demographics, Economic Trends Force Change

While the passage of almost fifteen years since the publication of Brannen and Wilen's *Doing Business* can excuse much of its outdated premise, stereotypes of Japanese women's roles in the workplace are still alive and well. A July 23, 2003 *New York Times* article by Howard M. French on the economic stimulus of increasing the percentage of Japanese women in the labor force provides a perfect example:

By tradition Japanese companies hire men almost exclusively to fill career positions, reserving shorter-term work, mostly clerical tasks and tea serving, for women, who are widely known in such jobs here as office ladies, or simply O.L.'s.²⁰

It is surprising that such outdated generalizations are still found in English-language media, particularly in one of the most widely-read national newspapers in the United States. In fact, career track positions at large corporations (referred to in Japanese as *sougo shoku*) are increasingly filled by women. Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare data indicates that the percentage of women hired to fill career-track positions at large firms rose from 26.3% to 37.7% from 2004 to 2006 (based on data for new April hires).²¹ Women made up a larger proportion of career hires even at mid-tier firms (up from 15.4% to 17.5%) and small-and medium-sized enterprises (9.6% to 20.3%). Japanese women are even expected to post sharper salary gains (2.9%) than men (1.8%) in the six years from 2004 to 2010, most likely due to a higher ratio of four-year university graduates among new hires.²² These figures represent dramatic improvement in Japan.

In fact, the last several years have seen a fundamental shift in hiring prospects for younger Japanese, particularly women—a fact that has yet to be fully incorporated into reporting the Western media. For new employees starting work in April 2008, hiring from four-year universities rose 5.3% over the prior year to 101,596 persons at 832 firms.²³ The 2009 hiring season is likely to be much the same, with employers competing over students for a fourth consecutive year of a “seller’s market.”²⁴ Some companies have been unable to fill their hiring quotas for new graduates, and are turning to mid-career hires to fill the gaps—a practice unthinkable a decade ago.

Several factors have led to the recent hiring crunch, with demographics probably the most significant. Japan’s declining birthrate (1.32 children per woman in 2006, down 40% from 1971)²⁵ has dramatically reduced the number of university graduates available for hire each year. Mass retirements of “baby boomers” (*dankai sedai* in Japanese) are also creating a sudden, urgent need to fill desks. The post-war baby boom in Japan was more concentrated than that in the United States (broadly defined as those born between 1946 and 1964). The Japanese government officially defines the *dankai sedai* as the 6.4 million persons born between the years of 1947 and 1949.²⁶ Their numbers are significantly higher than those born between 1944–1946 (4.64 million) and 1950–1952 (5.91 million). Japanese baby boomers will start reaching mandatory retirement age (60) in 2007, creating massive changes in the Japanese labor market. The total number of employed baby boomers was estimated at 5.01 million in 2004, comprising around 8% of Japan’s working population (which was already in decline owing to an aging society). Combined with the pressures from a falling birth rate, these demographic forces have sent Japanese companies scrambling fill the career-track positions soon to be vacated by retiring baby boomers.

A more “micro” focus on the issue is also illuminating. Career Partners Job Information Research Institute Director Kokichi Natsume attributes the recent increase in women hires for career track positions to three factors: “(1) companies placing a priority on hiring talented staff, regardless of gender, (2) improved attitudes among women towards work and clearer career-oriented viewpoints making it easier for companies to hire women, and (3) development of specific position types in corporations that require women for further business expansion.”²⁷ While the first two can be attributed to a natural generational and cultural shift in attitudes, the third is a structural change in Japan’s job market that deserves attention. In this case, the “specific position types” that Natsume refers to are called *jyun sougo shoku*. Translated literally, this means “quasi career-track positions,” which might elicit an image of a modernized OL (whose clerical track positions are officially labeled as *ippan shoku*). However, this is not the case. An encyclopedia of job-search related information aimed at job-hunting university students, *Shukkatsu Daijiten*, defines *jyun sougo shoku* as “positions with essentially the same job responsibilities as career-track positions, but where there are no forced relocations or only relocation within a limited geographical area.”²⁸ The latter type of position is also known as *chiiki gentei seishain* (or “region-specific permanent hires”), although different companies tend to have different labels for this type of position. Natsume attributes the recent hiring frenzy among talented women university graduates primarily to an explosion in *jyun sougo shoku* positions in the finance, information services, education, and other fields. Stock brokerages, insurance firms, and banks in particular have fueled the boom with a renewed focus on improving service to retail customers (vs. enterprise clients) as well an uptrend in community-based consulting businesses. While *jyun sougo shoku* positions are certainly open to men (indeed, Japan’s equal opportunity

employment law of 1986 has long forbid outright gender discrimination in job advertising), they remain popular among female university graduates as a still challenging alternative to high-pressure career track (*sougo shoku*) positions, which typically require lots of overtime and mandatory relocations.

Mr. French's "mistranslation" outlined in the quotation above represents two very common errors in English language portrayals of Japanese women in the workplace: generalization (women's roles in the workplace are reserved for "shorter-term work, mostly clerical tasks and tea serving") and reliance on outdated assumptions ("Japanese companies hire men almost exclusively to fill career positions"). This is despite reams of data, some of which was highlighted in the preceding paragraphs, proving reality to be quite different. Even Renshaw's generally spot-on rendering of Japanese women managers in the workplace includes a few inaccuracies, such as the following about the participation of career-track women in corporate orientations:

Orientation to the company for new male hires was traditionally an intense, lengthy immersion in corporate culture...and had not been offered to women. A few corporations are now including career track women in this orientation or immersion, but it is controversial...²⁹.

While this might have been the case when Renshaw's data was collected more than a decade ago, pressures to cut costs in Japan's long corporate recession have all but eliminated the intense, months-long "immersion retreats" seen in earlier generations. A 2007 *Nihon Jinjibu* survey of corporations holding orientations for new hires (*shinyu shain kenshu*) showed that only 40% actually sent employees off-site at all for orientation training, and that the majority of firms had short orientation periods of less than one week (37.0%) or between one and two weeks (23.9%).³⁰ Orientations themselves focused on practical content such as business manners, basic work procedures, and preparation for

the transition to life as a working adult. While firms certainly provide specialized training for different classes of employees, the author's own experience at a conservative Japanese financial institution indicated that female career track hires were included in orientation sessions alongside their male counterparts.³¹ In this case, a lack of updated information available in English or difficulties in obtaining this information may cause earlier mistranslations (such as in Renshaw's work) to create further misrepresentation in later English-language reporting.

Mistranslating the Domestic Sphere: Blaming Japanese Men

Much discussion has been devoted to the reasons behind Japan's declining birth rate, with the blame placed on later marriage, increased women's participation in the workforce, high educational costs, difficulties in finding daycare, and a lack of support in the domestic sphere. A recent BBC news piece entitled "Gender issues key to birth rate" pointed to a 2001 survey indicating that married men spent only about 30 minutes on daily household tasks or with their children.

This is partly down to traditional attitudes—Japanese men tend not to cook, clean or change nappies. But another problem is a culture of long working hours, followed by compulsory after-work socializing.³²

To be sure, long hours and compulsory socializing are part and parcel of Japan's working culture for career-track employees of both sexes. But, do all Japanese men deserved to be painted with the same broad brush? English-language media typically find Japanese males a convenient whipping boy for a variety of social ills. Both Renshaw's book³³ and other English-language articles take delight in translating nicknames for common phrases used to describe retired husbands (*sodai gomi* or "oversized garbage" and *nure-ochiba zoku* "the

wet leaf tribe—clingy, musty and emotionally spent”³⁴) To be true, the statistics do not work to their advantage. A 2002 University of Michigan study found that Japanese men do only an average of four hours of household tasks per week (vs. 29 for women), less than a fourth of what American men perform and one-sixth of that of Swedish men.³⁵ The BBC article introducing the survey proclaimed Japanese men as “among the laziest in the world.” Whether this is statistically true or not, the English-language media certainly, at times, has the odds stacked against Japanese men in terms of their roles in the domestic sphere.

However, in this case as well, a lack of balanced and updated information has contributed to an overgeneralization about the complex roles of Japanese men (particularly younger men) in the home. Renshaw, in this case, makes the most accurate description of the phenomenon:

Men in their thirties and younger are the generation caught in the swirling vortex of transition. Their mothers took care of them, expecting only high achievement from them in return... Most did not learn to do household chores or take care of themselves, but now the women in their lives expect a great deal from them, both in the workplace and the family.³⁶

Indeed, Japanese women are dissatisfied, both with Japanese men and the Japanese government. A 21 September 2007 Nikkei Working Mother Meeting survey found that 94% of Japanese mothers were either “dissatisfied” or “rather dissatisfied” with government policies aimed at addressing the declining birth rate.³⁷ In terms of needs, mothers rated measures devoted to “harmonizing work and home life through shorter work hours” as most important, with one woman noting that she wanted “establishment of an enforceable system to promote realization of a work-life balance for men.” More acidly, one woman quipped

that “if men don’t change the way the work, nothing will change”.

Faced with this impetus, some men are indeed changing. Renshaw notes anecdotal evidence from her interviews and focus groups of men in their twenties and thirties showing “more variation in attitudes and behavior”³⁸. Renshaw found that men in this age group aimed to be successful, but also valued free time for themselves. She also surmised that “men in their thirties who married working women find themselves spending more time on housework and, when there are children, taking more responsibilities than their fathers did for them”³⁹. Statistically, younger Japanese men are spending more time being involved in childrearing. The 2005 *White Paper on National Life* shows that the average amount of time spent per day by husbands in their late twenties and thirties on childrearing rose from 1996 to 2001 (from 0.3 hours to 0.5 hours, and 0.2 to 0.3, respectively).⁴⁰ While still much lower than the equivalent figure for wives in the study (an increase from 1.9 to 2.0 hours for women in their late twenties, from 1.8 to 1.9 in their thirties), the figures do indicate a clear uptrend. What’s more, younger Japanese men appear to *want* to be more involved in childrearing. In a 2001 attitude survey by the Central Research Service Inc., some 52.6% of Japanese men in their twenties answered that “Fathers should split child-rearing duties with mothers, and actively participate in these tasks.”⁴¹ Some 47.7% of men in their thirties agreed with this statement—a proportion which declined as men aged to 20.9% for men in their sixties. For men in their twenties, this answer was also more popular than the other two choices: “men should participate in childrearing as much as their schedules allow” (39.0%) and “men should work outside the home, and women focus exclusively on childrearing” (4.5%) answers. Men in their thirties still favored childcare participation as much as schedules would allow by a slim margin (48.2%). The numbers speak for themselves—younger Japanese men

indeed have different ideas and priorities regarding division of gender roles in the domestic sphere.

Popular culture also reflects this sea change. Magazines targeting fathers in Japan are enjoying a bit of a mini-boom, with many new titles appearing on bookstore racks. Some, like FQ Japan ("The Essential Dad Mag"), are more visual magazines aimed at younger men. The recent Autumn 2007 issue featured a special section on "superdad" David Beckham, how to pick the right child gear (from strollers to baby monitors), and fashion spreads for the entire family. More serious topics introduce "next generation dads" that take an active role in childcare and companies which allow men to take family leave. Other magazines, such as President Family (published by President Inc.), target older men and focus primarily on topics such as education (i.e. cram school selection), parenting ("How to Speak to Your Children With Love" [*Aisareru ko no hanashikata*]), and even ways on how to support a wife in her quest to re-enter the workforce in her forties.⁴² President Family is successful enough to have spawned imitators such as Aera Kids and Nikkei Kids Plus, and is now a monthly publication with a certified print run of 254,350 copies (according to the Japan Magazine Publishers Association).⁴³ If we regard popular culture as a mirror to the changes taking place in society, then the advent of these "dad mags" —unthinkable even five or six years ago—is a telling phenomenon indeed.

Even the English language media has noticed the change. A recent September 14 Reuters' article reported on a new "daddy exam quiz" (*Papa Kentei*) offered to fathers, a take-off on the current boom in unique knowledge-based exams to help increase interest in childrearing among men. Reuters noted that:

The image of fathers is gradually changing in Japan as younger men

eschew their own dads' hands-off approach in favor of closer involvement, and a wave of new parenting magazines for male readers has been hitting newsstands.⁴⁴

While encouraging, the article still inserts the obligatory jab describing Japan as “a country where men tend to work long hours and leave their wives in charge of childcare and household chores.” Despite some recognition of change, writers in English-language media still feel the need to present these stereotypes as part of their “mistranslations” of another aspect of Japanese women’s lives.

Conclusion: Motivations for Mistranslation

Why, then, does the English language media which continue to promote outdated images of Japanese career women? What are the causes behind the mistranslations explored in the preceding pages? A few reasons have already been identified: a tendency towards generalization, reliance on outdated assumptions or data, and a lack of accurate information already available in English. We will discuss each in turn. Western authors may use generalizations to quickly bridge cultural gaps that might require extra explanation to a non-Japanese audience. In the case of a short newspaper article about a Japanese cultural oddity or societal development, it is simply more convenient to avoid commenting on exceptions to generally shared stereotypes. For example, shorter English-language articles addressing Japanese men’s participation in childrearing and housework typically make no or little mention of the growing trend among younger men to place a higher value on family, most likely due to space constraints.

Reliance on outdated assumptions or data and a lack of accurate information already available in English also contribute to “mistranslations” in

English-language media. While the number of Japanese-capable journalists, academics, and authors is certainly growing, language barriers can still account for a large degree of the misrepresentations. Renshaw, for example, presents a largely accurate portrait of Japanese women managers. However, a look in her Notes and References sections reveals sources which are almost exclusively written in and/or translated into English⁴⁵. While there is certainly much reliable information available in English about Japan, the time lag between academic fieldwork and publication (with the additional step of translation into English for works originally published in Japanese) introduces at least a several year gap between the underlying research and its introduction into the English-speaking body of knowledge. Thus, book-length academic works typically provide a somewhat outdated picture of Japanese society. Further, as these tend to form the basis for other scholarly research, they can cause misrepresentations much further down the line. Even more current media, such as newspaper or magazine articles, can suffer from inaccuracies if the writer is not capable of accessing Japanese source material. Indeed, while there is a vast amount of translated Japanese source material available in English both online and in print, the quality of translation can be uneven. Further, the library of translated information available in English is often incomplete (a translation of a vital survey of population trends, for example, was only available for a few corresponding years). This further limits access to accurate information in English. All of these factors contribute to the misinformation which has, in these cases, resulted in a “mistranslation” of Japanese career women in the English-language media.

In the end, the author hopes, through references to more recent data and accurate, Japanese-language sources, to have shed some light on the changing realities faced by Japanese career women, and how they contrast to the often

inaccurate picture presented in the Western media. There is no question that Japan, having recently placed an embarrassing 91st in the World Economic Forum's 2007 Global Gender Gap Report, has a long way to go before women even begin to achieve parity with men in the business sphere.⁴⁶ That said, small but important changes are afoot in definitions of women's roles in the workplace, demographics, and attitudes concerning the domestic division of labor among young Japanese men. It is hoped that this paper has helped to begin to bridge the information gap concerning these issues, and to help prevent future mistranslations of Japanese career women.

ENDNOTES

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要約

誤訳：英語メディアにおける日本女性のイメージの更新

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西洋の文化は、昔から日本人女性の“謎”に興味を掻き立てられてきた。外国のジャーナリスト・学者・研究者達にとって、伝統的な日本の家庭における女性の役割とこれとは相反する現代のビジネス界におけるキャリア・ウーマンの立場にみられる矛盾は、特に魅力的なテーマである。本論文では、日本語の出典と英語メディアの評論の対比を通して、時に時代遅れで、固定観念に囚われた日本のキャリア・ウーマン像への反論を試みる。具体的には、職場における日本女性の役割定義や女性総合職に関する誤った描写についてである。このような視点は、家庭における日本の男性像や男女の役割分担についても示唆する。こうしたイメージの脱構築後、英語メディアにおける“誤訳”の陰に潜む原因について論文の最後で考察する。これら全体を通して、日本女性が直面している変遷していく社会や家庭や職場における現実といかに西洋のメディアで頻繁に報道されている構図とは異なるかということに光をあてることができると考える。