Good Wives, Wise Mothers, and Their Working Men: Gender Perspectives on *Nihonjinron*

Thesis

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to look at the ways in which nihonjinron theory (a theory of Japanese cultural uniqueness) can impact the identities and practices of Japanese women and men. Dealing with some of the most popular and well-researched nihonjinron practices, such as the ie system of family structure, groupism, and status hierarchy, I argue that the notion of cultural uniqueness can have practical implications in everyday life, and can promote feelings of apathy or inevitability.

Of particular importance for this work is the promotion of a hegemonic masculinity promoted by nihonjinron theory through the vision of the Japanese salaried worker, and its impacts at work and at home. These white-collar salaried workers, or sararīman, are seen as uniquely Japanese, and are often cited as the driving force behind Japan’s rapid economic growth in the postwar period. This uniqueness promotes an adherence to certain behaviors that can prove to be detrimental to gender egalitarianism.

In my chapter on media representations of gender in the workplace, I analyze two works in order to see the interactions of gender and cultural uniqueness. The focus here is on working women and their negotiations of gender in an often male-dominated sphere. The pressures of Japan’s traditional family structure can also have an impact on working women and their career choices.

While nihonjinron practices are not themselves problematic, the notion that they are uniquely Japanese and therefore part of a “Japanese character” can encourage an adherence to certain gendered norms. Japanese men and women are of course not without
agency, however, and neither *nihonjinron* theory nor gendered practices remain constant in Japanese society.
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Introduction

*Nihonjinron* is an area of scholarly and popular discourse that reached the peak of its popularity in the 1970s with works including Chie Nakane’s *Japanese Society* (1970) and Doi Takeo’s *Amae no Kōzō* (The Anatomy of Dependence: 1971). *Nihonjin* is easily translated as “Japanese people,” but as Harumi Befu points out in his anthropological work *Hegemony of Homogeneity*, the translation of *ron* is slightly more problematic (2001: 2). It can mean an argument, discussion, or thesis, and is found in the Japanese terms for quantum and evolutionary theory. The use of this term suggests a certain amount of scholarly theorization; however, a large portion of the literature on *nihonjinron* is written by popular authors and is consumed by the general public. In Befu’s extensive research on the subject, he noticed that while there has been much discourse, both scholarly and popular, and written by Japanese and foreign authors, a feminist perspective remains conspicuously absent. He claims that the vast majority of literature (he cites a bibliographic listing put together by the Nomura Research Institute² that contains nearly 700 titles written between 1946 and 1978, and he suggests that this number now greatly exceeds a thousand works) is written by men who consequently control the overall nature of the discourse (Befu, 2001: 7, 44-5). Sociologist Yoshino Kosaku goes further in suggesting that a significant amount of the native discourse on

1 Names of Japanese individuals are given with the family name followed by the given name in the customary Japanese fashion, except in the case of ethnic Japanese writers working in English, such as Chie Nakane. Long vowels will be indicated by a macron over the letter, except in cases where the word is commonly used in English, such as Tokyo.

2 The Nomura Research Institute is a Japanese think tank and consulting firm founded in 1965.
uniqueness is both created and disseminated by men in the business world. He writes that businessmen “are regarded as one of the most qualified group of commentators on society and culture and also as creators of new types of collective and cultural identity” (169).

At the center of the discussion is the idea of Japanese “cultural uniqueness.” This genre of work describes the cultural practices and ideologies of Japan, and highlights the differences between these and the habits of other nations. Cultural anthropologist Anne Allison describes two techniques commonly employed in nihonjinron discourse. The first is the assertion that Japanese cultural practices are distinctly different from the practices of others. The second involves using Japan’s cultural uniqueness to define its unique practices (Allison, 1994: 80). For example, a proponent of nihonjinron might argue that workers share a particular group mentality because they are Japanese, and because they are all Japanese, these workers display a commonly shared group mentality. Oftentimes these unique practices are explained using other elements of Japanese culture that are considered to be unique. Nakane, for instance, discusses “groupism” as a cultural phenomenon stemming from another aspect of Japanese culture: the system of family structure and hierarchy (1970).

Nihonjinron has not been a constant in the Japanese cultural discourse, however. During the American occupation of Japan in the early postwar years, the country suffered something of an “identity crisis.” The ie³ system of family structure was seen by the international community as backwards, and was abolished shortly after Japan’s defeat. Befu claims that at this time, the country went through a period of “blaming Japan’s

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3 The ie system is Japan's traditional household structure. This concept will be described in greater detail later in this paper. For a more comprehensive look at the ie system, see Nakane 1970.
tradition for Japan’s misery” (2001:138). He goes on to say that “the discourse on Japan’s identity of the late 1940s and the 1950s became one of comparing Japan with the West, especially the United States, the foe that vanquished Japan, as Japan’s way of convincing itself how wrong it was” (Befu, 2001: 137). The American occupation of Japan can, in some ways, be likened to colonization. As Nicholas Dirks writes in the introduction to his book on colonialism and culture:

Although colonial conquest was predicated on the power of superior arms, military organization, political power, and economic wealth, it was also based on a complexly related variety of cultural technologies. Colonialism not only has had cultural effects that have too often been either ignored or displaced into the inexorable logics of modernization and world capitalism, it was itself a cultural project of control (1992: 3).

Similarly, Japan's military defeat soon became a cultural struggle of “national identity.” Not only did Western media gain in popularity during this time, Japanese media also reflected an interest in such things as exoticism and the ideals of romantic love. Let us examine *shōjo manga* as a representative popular media in Japan. A large number of famous *shōjo manga* (girls’ comics) artists of this immediate postwar period created stories set in “other” locales such as France or Germany⁴. However, beginning in the 1980s and continuing into the 1990s, there was a shift in settings from the exotic to the local. While there were still works being produced that were set in foreign countries, there was a noticeable trend of writing stories with a Japanese setting. This shifting of settings as seen in these *manga* for girls coincided roughly with what Befu describes as an “ascendancy of positive cultural nationalism” (2001: 139). This search for the

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⁴ Several members of the group of *manga* artists known as the Showa 24 set their stories in European countries, particularly in France and Germany. Hagio Moto, Ikeda Riyoko, and Takeyama Keiko are just a few members of this group who wrote stories set in these locales. Hagio Moto's *Jūichigatsu no gimunajiumu* (*Gymnasium in November*) is set in a German boarding school, Ikeda Riyoko's historical romances *Berusaiyu no bara* (*The Rose of Versailles*) and *Orufeusu no mado* (*Orpheus's Window*) are set in France and Russia respectively, and Takeyama Keiko's *Kaze to ki no uta* (*Song of Wind and Trees*) takes place in a French boarding school (Schodt 1983: 93-103).
“Japanese identity” could be one of the main reasons for the interest in *nihonjinron* by the general population in the 1970s. Befu goes on to argue that ideas of cultural uniqueness created a sense of self-confidence to overshadow the defeatist attitude present since the end of the Second World War. A result of this discourse was that Japanese citizens began to see that their cultural values, “if they were not any better than those of the West, at least they were just as good” (Befu, 2001: 139). This newly positive attitude may have caused more people to take stock in the theory of “Japanese uniqueness” and might explain why the discourse remains popular today.

Befu describes this field of study as one that is consciously selective, and as most of *nihonjinron* literature has been written by Japanese authors, they can focus on those aspects that are in sharp contrast to practices in other cultures (2001). There is no lack of work done on this subject by foreign scholars, however, and there has been some contention both within the field and between researcher and subject. As Allison found during her field study in a Tokyo nightclub, many people she interviewed did not see the nightlife activities of salaried workers as either something that could be included in “Japanese culture,” or as a phenomenon worthy of study (1994: 147-8). However, looking at such practices can bring about a greater understanding of gender dynamics, and therefore such routine practices should also be considered. It is important to have a number of viewpoints within the discourse in order to create the richest field of knowledge possible.

Drawing on previous work in the field, as well as essays by scholars of gender studies, I hope to present a view of *nihonjinron* from a gender theory perspective. For the purpose of this work, I am less concerned with the actual uniqueness or universality of
the social practices or thought processes of Japanese people. Rather, I'm interested in studying how the idea that these practices are unique to Japan can impact the lives of Japanese men and women. There are always concerns when looking at the cultural practices of a group from the outside; personal beliefs and experiences in one’s own culture can color perceptions about what is being studied. In this situation, however, I am in agreement with anthropologist Takie Sugiyama Lebra in believing that the discourse on nihonjinron can benefit greatly from a number of different perspectives (278). This paper will look at some of the more direct, obvious effects of “cultural uniqueness” on the lives of Japanese women and men, as well as some of the secondary, and often unintended effects. I will deal with a few of the most well-known and extensively researched aspects of the nihonjinron discussion, namely group structure, ie (family system), and status hierarchy.

Japan is still viewed as falling behind other developed countries in the arena of gender egalitarianism. According to the 2010 Global Gender Gap Report5 (World Economic Forum, 2010), Japan ranks quite low for a first-world country: 94 out of 134 ranked countries (this is up from 101 in 2009, but down from 80 in 2006). While nihonjinron discourse and its practices as largely patriarchal products, have most likely been contributing factors in producing these grim numbers, there are some aspects of nihonjinron theory that have benefited, or have the potential to benefit Japanese women. These are not direct, intentional benefits, however, and nihonjinron discourse ultimately creates more hurdles than advantages for women. This discourse may also have consequences for men as well by creating a hegemonic masculinity that is promoted as

5 This study evaluates countries using a number of criteria including economy, politics, health, and education and ranks them accordingly. In comparison, the United States ranks 19th, China ranks 61st, and Zimbabwe and Belize rank just above Japan at 92nd and 93rd respectively.
being “uniquely Japanese.” While the cultural practices themselves certainly have direct impacts on the lives and choices of both men and women, I will argue that the “unique” nature of the discourse creates particular difficulties for a movement towards egalitarian gender ideals. The concept of Japanese cultural practices as natural phenomena that are inherently “Japanese” promotes feelings of inevitability and in some cases apathy. These feelings act as hindrances to change in the circumstances of women in Japan. In spite of the disadvantages faced by Japanese women from *nihonjinron* discourse and practice, they are certainly not without individual agency. There is evidence to suggest that some women and men are dissatisfied with their situations and are unwilling to submit or resign themselves to what is seen as the Japanese norm.
Chapter 1: Culturally Shared Beliefs and Their Effects on Behavior

Individual practices aside, the “unique” or “natural” nature of the nihonjinron discourse creates difficulties for women in Japan. When something is seen as “natural,” it reproduces that particular stereotype at the individual level. Sociologist Shelley Correll produced a study on how self-assessment of math skills affected personal decisions to pursue education and careers in the fields of math and science. She found that “cultural conceptions of gender” did in fact have an impact on the aspirations of women and men (Correll, 2001). One of these “cultural conceptions” that Correll is talking about is the idea of men as “biologically superior” when it comes to math. Although there is certainly reason to be skeptical of these theories of biological superiority, a theory does not always have to be accurate in order to affect the behavior of an individual. Simply the belief that it is true can have an impact on any number of things, from self-assessments to life choices. The belief need not even be held by the individual. If an individual knows that others believe in such stereotypes or cultural norms, this can have an impact on one’s behavior and choices (Correll, 2001).

In the case of math skills, of particular importance is the biological nature of the argument. Certainly the shared cultural idea that math and science are more a domain of men than of women is enough to color perceptions, but as Correll argues, exposure to reports of a “natural” affinity causes an increase in the belief of the stereotype (2001: 1697). A widely-shared knowledge of a cultural stereotype can influence the actions of
individuals, this may also help us explain the ways in which *nihonjinron* affects both men and women.

In looking at an example from anthropologist Anne Allison's case study on hostess clubs and Japanese corporate masculinity, we can see how *nihonjinron* as a study on the uniqueness of Japanese society can have real consequences for the lives of women in Japan. One woman interviewed by Allison held a personal belief in the ideal of a “romantic” marriage as well as an egalitarian partnership. Her husband also had the same feelings about “parallel roles” in their marriage. After a few years, however, the wife said that their once ideal relationship had “congealed into a traditional, gender-specific one” (Allison, 2001: 105). As a *sararīman*, or salaried white-collar worker, this woman’s husband was faced with pressure from his employers to spend long hours working overtime and going out with colleagues after that. Rather than blaming either herself or her husband for the change, the woman claimed that “outside factors” led to the transformation of their marriage to one that conformed to a cultural norm. Blame was instead attributed mostly to the work environment of a *sararīman*, although the woman interviewed expressed no anger or bitterness at the situation. *Sararīman* at large firms typically face this sort of pressure to put in long hours of overtime at the office, and additional hours socializing with colleagues and clients.

The expectation that a *sararīman* will work these hours places the responsibility of childcare and housework completely on the woman. Even those who hold egalitarian views on work outside of the home become constrained by these gendered stereotypes. Women who choose to work outside of the home whose husbands also work do not see a drop in their expected contribution to housework. As Allison points out: “the expectations
and pressures of the husband’s job are not reduced simply because his wife chooses to work; increased absence of mother from the home doesn’t usually result in the increased presence of father” (2001: 106). In this example of a sararīman’s family, we can see how gender operates at several different levels. Despite one’s personal beliefs about gender and what roles are appropriate for women and men, the knowledge that others adhere to particular gender norms can affect how a person makes decisions. The interpersonal relations between husband and wife are also affected in this situation. The prolonged absence of the sararīman can put a strain on husband-wife relations, and the dynamic can change from a romantic love to something akin to love between siblings. The woman interviewed by Allison reported that what had started out as romance transformed gradually as outside pressures increased. They became two people living together with different schedules and different social activities with a relationship more like family than lovers. Both parties saw this new situation as a conformity to the Japanese social norm (Allison, 2001: 105-6).

Such practices are normalized in a number of different ways. Chairmen and presidents of prominent Japanese companies will sometimes write on the unique Japanese qualities of their business practices and works of this kind may also be part of a recommended reading list given to incoming employees. Works such as these can serve to validate the lifestyle of the Japanese salaried worker (Yoshino, 1992: 141-2). In this way, sararīman can explain and give greater meaning to the practices that they experience daily. Through the many works written on the salaried worker in Japan, we can see that the practices themselves are not simple stereotypes lacking in foundation. The idea that such practices are unique to the Japanese workplace and are therefore
expected of all the salaried employees can serve to remove agency from those affected. While uncompensated overtime and after hours outings with colleagues cannot legally be demanded by an employer, the fact that these practices are expected of the Japanese *sararīman* can be enough to influence the actions of the individual.

Though some *sararīman* are unhappy with being kept away from home late at night, this is not necessarily enough to keep them from following the prescribed cultural practices, and dedication to one's job often supersedes any obligations at home. A selection from the comic *Sararīman Senka*\(^6\) shows a salaried worker who, after a long day of work returns home to a son watching television and a wife who serves him beer and food. After the man is finished, he signals to the woman, who brings him a check for the food and drink he consumed. The audience then realizes that this is not the *sararīman's* family at all – it is actually a bar created for men who are away from their families due to job transfers (Shōji 4:18-19). While work may frequently keep salaried workers in Japan away from home, the family remains an important aspect of Japanese society, and carries its own cultural norms that are naturalized by *nihonjinron* discourse.

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\(^6\) This comic was a weekly comic in Kodansha's *Shūkan Gendai* magazine, which, according to Kodansha (2008), circulates over 630,000 copies per week. The magazine is marketed to working men, and contains, comics, news articles, and pictures of young women.
Chapter 2: Ie and the Japanese Family Structure

The family structure of *ie* has its roots in the Confucian tradition. Filial piety was a central tenet of this system, which was applied not only to the family unit, but also to the nation as a whole. Inside the family, children were to be respectful and subservient to their parents, and every member of the family had a duty to obey the head of the household, who was generally the oldest male in the family unit. As a stipulation of the Meiji Civil Code of 1898, registration was mandatory for all people through the system of *koseki*, a method of record-keeping which had been in use for centuries, but became modernized following the Meiji Restoration. Unlike in Western countries, Yoshizumi argues, Japanese citizens were not registered individually; instead, registration was cataloged by family. One member was registered as the family head, and all others were placed in the register in their respective positions. Family heads had ultimate and final authority with regards to family matters, including marriage arrangements, and financial decisions. Under the Meiji Civil Code, those who refused to submit to the will of the patriarch could be driven out of the family (Yoshizumi, 1995: 186-7).

During this time, women had no legal recognition as citizens, and were seen as unfit to control assets and property or to be given parental rights. Only in the cases of death, disability, or abandonment by the husband could a wife gain legal rights as a parent. Marriage was not a decision made between two people; rather, it was often a matter that involved the whole family. Neither women nor men under a certain age (25
for women and 30 for men) were allowed to marry without the permission of the head of the household, and most of the time, a spouse was chosen by one’s parents. The procreation of children was the most important indicator of a successful marriage, and in the event that a woman could not conceive a child, she could be divorced, even against her will. A male successor to the family line was of the utmost importance. Although the Meiji Civil Code assumed a policy of monogamy, it was still considered socially acceptable and oftentimes necessary for a man to take mistresses in order to ensure that he fathered a male heir (Yoshizumi, 1995).

Japan’s current civil code was adopted in 1947, following the revision of the Constitution and the nation’s defeat in World War II. There were a great number of legal gains for women through the enactment of this law. They now had control of their own finances and were free to divide their assets from their husband’s. Upon divorce, both parents could seek custody of children, and women were granted the right of inheritance in the event of their husband’s death. The consent of any family member was no longer required for an individual to marry, and the institution “came to be viewed as the pursuit of happiness of the husband and wife and their children” (Yoshizumi, 1995: 189). Despite these legal changes, the attitudes of the public were still firmly rooted in the recently abolished ie system, and adjustment to women’s new liberties was not immediate. In cases of marital dissatisfaction, women were still not as likely as Western counterparts to divorce their husbands. Likewise with a husband’s involvement in an extra-marital affair, often women would rationalize the behavior, and choose to remain in the relationship. This is generally attributed by scholars to a difference in social norms and attitudes about marriage between Japanese and Western women. The family was still seen as an
individual’s primary “group,” and as such, it was important to protect the harmony of the relationship, which often meant that women stayed silent on the matter, whatever their true feelings were.

As Chie Nakane points out, the term “uchi,” loosely translated as “household,” is also used to describe one’s in-group. She stresses the importance of one’s in-group, which supersedes all other relationships, including familial ties by birth. For example, when a woman marries and moves into her husband’s household, this becomes her new in-group. Thus, her relationships with a mother or sister become less important than her new relationship with her mother-in-law (Nakane, 1970: 4). With the focus being placed on the new in-group created through marriage, when quarrels arise between a woman and her mother-in-law, the woman generally lacks the support system of her own family, and such disputes are kept in the domain of her current household, with little consultation or discussion with “outsiders.” Nakane notes that elsewhere, in particular in India, there is support among wives living even in different villages, and she claims that this is a characteristic of Indian society that Japanese women are envious of (1970: 11).

As Nakane’s book was written forty years ago, there has certainly been a great deal of change in household dynamics. Sodei Takako, in her article on caring for the elderly, argues that family ties such as those rooted in the ie system have been weakening since this system was officially abolished after World War II (1995: 221). She notes that studies have shown that even if a woman is living in the same house as an elderly in-law, she is less likely to be a caregiver than a woman was in the past (Sodei, 1995: 217). However, Sodei mentions a “dependence” of the elderly on the younger generation, even when still able to do things for themselves (1995: 224). This propensity to depend on
one’s children comes not only from the Confucian-based *ie* system, but is also a form of *amae*, or dependence, which Doi Takeo has written about at length as a characteristic unique to Japanese society. These two aspects of *nihonjinron* create a system where the elderly are more likely to be cared for at home, and in fact, this care begins at an early age, relative to other countries. Sodei states that in Japan in the mid 1980s, 4.2 percent of people over 65 were confined to bed, compared to only 5 percent of people over the age of eighty in the United States around the same time (1995: 224). After taking into consideration the very long hours worked by *sarariman* in Japan, this leaves women overwhelmingly taking up the responsibility of caring for elders in addition to any children the woman might have.

Letters to popular advice columns suggest that tensions between wives and in-laws are common, and while trouble with in-laws is certainly not a unique situation for Japan, the increased prevalence of the primary family caring for elderly parents can make tensions much more problematic. The responses to these letters often urge wives to relent and accept their situations as the natural progression of their family situation. Instead of suggesting alternate arrangements, the counselors will often respond with ambiguity. While there is the understanding that the home belongs to husband and wife, there is also the belief that one’s parents also belong in the house. Instead of giving advice on how to confront the problem or change the behavior of the other person, counselors will often suggest that a change in attitude for the advice-seeker.

In one particular letter\(^7\), a working woman complains that her mother-in-law is never satisfied with the state of the house, and will redo all of the chores that have

\(^7\) Translations of these letters from Japanese into English were done by McKinstry and McKinstry. Because the original letters were not reproduced, I depend solely on their translations of the letters found in their work.
already been completed. She goes on to write: “I broke down crying and I asked my husband what married life was supposed to be like, but he just dismissed me, telling me to stop worrying about trifles” (McKinstry and McKinstry, 1991: 114). The husband's dismissive attitude suggests that there is no problem at all, and that this is, in fact, what married life is like. While the wife recognizes that this strained relationship is a problem, her husband advises her not to be concerned. The respondent suggests that even if the wife feels that she is being insincere, she must accept what her mother in law does around the house and praise her for it. This advice clearly conveys to the wife that she must hide her own feelings on the matter, and accept what is culturally demanded of her (McKinstry and McKinstry, 1991: 115-6).

In this instance, cultural practice and discourse work together in creating this situation. The reality of contemporary Japanese society is that there are few options available to families when it comes to caring for the elderly. The discourse which says that it is normal and expected for a housewife to care for the elderly limits her agency and can discourage her from seeking other options. Even when it is the elderly parent wishing for separate living situations, the advice is much the same. In one letter, the counselor says to the elderly correspondent “Remember that you all comprise one group, and what is good for the group as a whole is good for each individual” (McKinstry and McKinstry, 1991: 143). The counselor goes on to advise the man to put all ideas of living in a separate residence out of his head.
Chapter 3: Gender and Group Structure in Japanese Society

This important focus on the group extends outside of the family circle, and is viewed as a critical feature of the Japanese workplace. As noted, Chie Nakane, well-known for her work on Japanese group formation and structure, argues that Japan’s groupism is rooted in the ie system of the household. The ideal of the family group is often extended into the work environment, in part to create an atmosphere in which workers are responsible to one another as they would be in a family. Groupism can be defined in different ways, and it is important to first define what Japanese groupism is. Groupism in Japan is defined by Nakane as being composed of a frame and an attribute (1970: 2-5). For example, the frame might be the company that one works for, and the attribute would be the position of the individual within that company. In this case, the frame would be of primary importance, which is part of the reason why the group is such a critical concept.

A focus on group mentality begins early in life for Japanese children. As students, they are placed into small groups within their class. These groups, called “han” have a variety of functions. One of the most visible activities involving these han occurs at lunchtime. Unlike schools in the United States, students in Japanese elementary and junior high schools do not generally eat in a cafeteria setting. Lunch takes place in the classroom, further reinforcing the idea of one’s class as an “in-group.” Students also do not take their own lunches to school. Instead, the entire class (indeed, the entire school,
including teachers and staff) eats the same school lunch (kyūshoku). Kyūshoku offers students no options, as it is a set menu and therefore expected to be eaten by everyone, regardless of personal preferences and tastes. In each classroom, the student han take turns on a rotating basis serving kyūshoku to the rest of the class. Each student in the group is responsible for a different task, which includes passing out milk, dishing out food, and leading the class in ritualized expressions of gratitude before eating. Every han will have the students’ desks arranged as their own separate group, and most conversation and interaction takes place within the han. After lunch is over, many groups will designate students to perform tasks of cleaning up. Instead of each student being responsible for his or her own dishes, often one student will clear the utensils and another student will be in charge of recycling milk cartons, for example. These tasks are all gender-neutral, with boys and girls sharing the responsibilities equally.

This group structure in the classroom will serve to introduce students to a system that will be present in many aspects of their adult lives. Because this focus on group cooperation begins so early in life, it will be seen as a natural progression when groupism is later emphasized in the workplace. A growing emphasis on English language learning has perhaps helped to further accentuate the cultural differences found within the school setting. Non-Japanese assistant language teachers are often asked to highlight the differences between the practices of Japanese schools and those of their native country. With the presence of these non-Japanese English language teachers in Japanese classrooms, students gain a greater awareness of these differences, particularly the practices involved with eating lunch and wearing uniforms. These uniforms are another way of creating a group identity within a school setting. Most public schools in Japan
require physical education uniforms for students beginning in the first grade until the end of elementary school. Generally in junior high schools there is a normal school uniform to accompany the gym clothes. Within a given city, school uniforms become a means for identifying a student’s affiliation with a particular junior high or high school. Each institution has a distinct style, and they are easily identified by those living in the community. These uniforms serve to create an even stronger sense of belonging by giving visual boundaries to the group. For example, each grade in junior high may be associated with a color, such as green for first years, blue for second years, and red for third years. The color of a class will remain the same for the duration of their time at the school.

Likewise, the homeroom teachers will often stay with the same class throughout, creating the sense that the class is not changing from “first-years” to “second-years,” but rather the group is moving forward as a whole entity.

Another school activity performed in groups is the daily cleanup of the school that usually takes place after lunch. There are no janitors at public schools in Japan. Instead, all the cleaning is done by students and teachers. Because the cleaning groups are comprised of both boys and girls, the cleanup chores are surprisingly gender-neutral. Students of both sexes will sweep floors, empty garbage, or dust, with no gendered stigmas attached to these actions. It is therefore interesting that while food service and cleaning are activities done by both girls and boys in school, these things gradually enter the realm of “women’s work” by the time those same students reach adulthood. The migration of such tasks from gender-neutral to gendered is most likely due in large part to the structure of the Japanese workplace and by what are considered to be societal norms shared by the general population.
Yoshizumi Kyoko, in her article on the institution of marriage in Japan claims that “Western societies” are opposite-sex oriented as opposed to Japan, which is same-sex oriented. She argues that it is much more difficult for opposite-sex friendships to form in Japan than it is in other countries (Yoshizumi, 1994: 190). This lack of opposite sex relationships is further compounded by the “absent father” trend and the emergence of the “kyōiku mama” (education mother). With the husband working late more often than not, wives will thus turn their full attention to their children. Due to the extremely competitive nature of high school and college entrance exams, families will spend large amounts of time and money to ensure the child’s success, and mothers often take a more important role than fathers, in large part because they spend more time at home with the children. These kyōiku mama are thought to work just as hard, if not harder than the student who is actually preparing for the exams. A student’s admission to a particular high school or university is determined by her or his success on that institution’s entrance examination. Mothers play an important role in facilitating their children’s entrance into the desired “school group.” Acceptance to a prestigious school can set one up for a desirable position at a top corporation. Most of the major businesses hire their new employees from the top universities in the country. In entering a new company through this practice, the individual becomes a member of another in-group: the workplace.

This idea of “groupism” is one of the most commonly cited aspects of Japanese society that is described as unique. Anthropologists focusing on nihonjinron often use Japan’s geography to underscore the “natural” phenomenon of group mentality. As an island nation, there are very real, physical boundaries that separate Japan (“inside”) from others (“outside”). In some ways, the more abstract, but no less real boundaries found in
the “groupist” tendencies of Japanese society mirror those of Japan’s geographical situation. Some proponents of *nihonjinron* theory believe that natural disasters such as earthquakes and typhoons have helped to shape Japanese society’s focus on the group. They claim that the cooperation that was required for a community to rebuild and thrive in the wake of a natural disaster in earlier times was the foundation for Japan’s focus on the group. These scholars argue that there is a connection between “environment and culture” (Befu 2001: 17). Correlations have also been made between the cooperative nature of rice cultivation and the “groupist” mentality of Japanese society by scholars and non-scholars alike. In earlier times, for the success of the rice crop, it was necessary for the community to work together in order to ensure a good harvest (Befu, 2001: 21). This nature emphasis only adds to the argument that *nihonjinron* practices are a result of circumstances unique to Japan and therefore not found anywhere else in the world.

The uniqueness of groupist practices is one of the popular explanations for the rapid economic progress in postwar Japan. The *sararîman* is held up as the “special breed of worker” that was behind this progress. This vision of the Japanese salaried worker has been promoted both domestically and abroad. For instance, six editions of the *Illustrated “Salaryman” in Japan* have been published by the Japan Travel Bureau for consumption by English-speaking foreigners in an attempt to show a representation of the typical *sararîman* based on fact and observation (1991). Despite attempts not to generalize, the *sararîman* has emerged as the primary example of the Japanese man.
Chapter 4: Shikata Ga Nai and the Sararīman Lifestyle

In many ways, the sararīman has become a caricature in the Japanese imagination, and as such, may be contributing to the widely held notion of cultural uniqueness. Looking at the behaviors and attitudes of American men in comparison, I will attempt to map the relationship between nihonjinron theory and the image of the Japanese sararīman. The image conjured in the minds of his Australian students when Professor Romit Dasgupta asks them to visualize a typical Japanese man is a clear example of the pervasive image of the sararīman:

a neatly groomed, middle-aged, grey-suited, briefcase-carrying, white-collar male office worker who leaves his home in the suburbs early each morning, commutes in an overcrowded train to some faceless downtown office block, and ends the day by lurching drunkenly back to the suburbs on the last train after a drinking session with colleagues or clients (118).

Dasgupta goes on to note that for his students, the reality of Japanese masculinity is probably not the sararīman archetype, but rather, it is “more likely to be a bleached-haired, sun-tanned, young working holiday student or backpacker” (118). In this case, the students' realities and perceptions do not match up. Part of the reason for this continued stereotype of a Japanese masculinity is the prevalence of nihonjinron in the popular discourse and media not only in Japan, but also abroad. Japan's “economic miracle” in the postwar era led to the development of what we now know as the sararīman. In 1962, the London Economist published a story called: “Consider Japan,” which was arguably the beginning of study on Japan's economic situation (Johnson, 1982: 3). With the
emergence of articles such as this one, Japan's period of self-loathing after its defeat in World War II began to give way to *nihonjinron* discourse. Political scientist Chalmers Johnson describes a “national character” explanation for Japan's economic success, which argues that “the Japanese possess a unique, culturally derived capacity to cooperate with each other” (Johnson, 1982: 8). To understand the gendering of office work in Japan, we must first examine the qualities of a typical workplace. Of course all businesses and places of employment are different, but these practices can be found in many kinds of companies, both small and large.

The work habits of Japanese men, in particular the habits of *sararīman*, have had tremendous impacts on the lives of women, both inside and outside of the home. The typical Japanese workplace differs from a typical American workplace in several ways. While Japanese companies offer their employees an ample amount of yearly vacation time (*nenkyū*), most of those workers will take very little time off, and rarely will an employee use all of his or her allotted *nenkyū*. This means spending less time with one’s family through the use of vacation time. If one does go on a trip, there is an expectation that the worker will bring back gifts for bosses and coworkers. This practice of gift-giving highlights the familial nature of Japanese workplaces. In some ways, the gifts that one brings back for coworkers is actually an apology for leaving the rest of their group, even for this short amount of time.

Overtime operates in much the same way as vacation time. Often, Japanese workers are expected to work overtime without receiving compensation. Policies generally state that the company cannot require employees to work more than a certain number of hours per week, but in reality, workers will often stay late at the office without
receiving extra pay. Some workplaces offer *daikyū*, which acts like vacation time. For every hour of overtime worked, employees are allowed to take off one hour of work. Like *nenkyū*, however, many Japanese workers will accrue overtime hours, but will not officially record them as overtime hours, or will not use them to take time off work.

While there have been some changes in workplace conditions since the 1980s, the shift tends toward a change in the attitudes of men than of women. There seems to be a generational gap forming among white-collar workers. Those of the older generation who still remember the days of guaranteed lifetime employment remain more committed to their jobs, whereas younger employees who broke into the workforce during a difficult time of recession have differing views on company loyalty. Workers of a younger generation are more likely to change employment, and therefore feel less pressured to take on overtime work and put in the long hours that define a *sararīman*’s career. Or perhaps Japanese men have become aware of what women in Japan may have known all along: that the job of a *sararīman* simply isn't worth it. Japanologist Charles Lummis's take on the situation is that “Japanese women, after taking a good look at male society, decided that it wasn't something worth imitating, but that, instead, there was something valuable within the culture of women which was lacking in the male culture” (237). According to Lummis, this is one of the qualities that sets Japanese and American feminism apart: an idea that achieving equality need not mean that women must adopt male practices. In fact, this idea that women need to emulate men seems to run counter to what feminism is really about, either in America or abroad. But although women are not taking part in some of these business practices personally, that does not mean that they are not still affected by them in indirect ways.
Sometimes the group-oriented nature of a workplace will extend into an area that is between work and home. Most companies or places of work will have several scheduled outings during the year, where colleagues will go out drinking together. These parties celebrate a wide range of events, including welcoming new employees, saying goodbye to employees leaving the company, or the end of a major project or event. It is much more common for colleagues in Japan to go out drinking together after work than in the United States, for instance, where there is generally more of a distinction between work and one’s life outside of work. In a country where this distinction is more pronounced, an outing of this nature would be an unusual mix. It would be far more common for workers in this situation to unwind with friends after work rather than with coworkers. This kind of outing in Japan is taken to another level entirely in some of the largest Japanese corporations. In Anne Allison’s fieldwork on the women of the mizu shōbai (literally meaning “water-business,” it refers to the night-life of Japan) and the sararīman that patronize them, she explains the practice of settai or kōsaihi, which is a budgeted amount of company funds used for entertainment expenses (1994: 7, 9).

The stated purpose of settai funds is to allow managers to entertain subordinates and potential clients. According to Allison, this money is used not only for restaurant expenses and golf outings, but also at establishments known as “hostess clubs” (1994: 9). The main attractions of these clubs are the women working in them. Both the “Mama” (the proprietor of the club), and the individual hostesses are the reasons businessmen frequent these establishments. The women of hostess clubs play several roles in their interactions with the customers. Working as an employee of a club known as Bijo, Allison experienced these roles firsthand. Perhaps the most important function of a
hostess is to facilitate smooth interactions among the group of male customers. The businessmen in charge of such outings are paying in part so that the hostesses will take control of and be the topic of conversation. If there is a lull in conversation, it is the duty of the hostess to keep the talk from lapsing into an awkward silence. The hostesses light cigarettes, encourage the men to drink and sing karaoke, and cater to them emotionally (Allison, 1994).

For the sararīman who frequent such establishments, these outings provide both an opportunity to network with colleagues and an atmosphere in which to conduct matters of business with important clients. While serious decisions are made and partnerships can be formed in these clubs, Allison argues that there is also ritualistic male bonding that takes center stage in these outings. This bonding is facilitated by the hostesses, who serve primarily as the object of sexualized jokes. If a comment is made about the size of the hostess's breasts, for example, the intended recipient of the comment is not the hostess herself, but the other men at the table. Allison writes that “just as a man will call a woman's breasts flat and look to the other men, who all laugh, a man will place his hand on the breast of a hostess and look not at her but at the rest of the males” (1994: 71). Derogatory and self-deprecating jokes are also exchanged among the men present. Not surprisingly, penis size and sexual prowess are popular topics of conversation, but this rarely leads to anger or hostility, and whatever is spoken during this outing is not mentioned again, and so the often rigid boundaries between superior and subordinate are eased if not erased. This allows the sararīman to use these sexualized jokes to strengthen the ties of the group, which is so important within the Japanese corporate structure (Allison, 1994).
In this setting, sexuality and intimacy are clearly demarcated, where the intimate topics of home or spouses are rarely brought up, and it is more common to discuss other girlfriends or mistresses in mostly sexual terms. Interactions with the hostesses rarely venture into the realm of intimacy, and while attachments to individual girls may form, relationships outside of the club are generally forbidden. In his case study on sexist jokes and bonding among American men, Peter Lyman\(^8\) argues that sexist jokes “control the threat that individual men might form intimate emotional bonds with women and withdraw from the group” (2010: 153). In much the same way, when such jokes are told within hostess clubs, it keeps the atmosphere light and places all men involved at the same general level. Regardless of an individual’s situation at home, every member of the group is able to use the hostess present in order to relate to the other men at the table.

In these clubs, there is an acceptance that the actors will perform to gendered expectations. The men and women use essentialized assumptions about gender in order to react appropriately to the situation. Of course, contrary to the \textit{nihonjinron} argument, Japanese men are not a completely monolithic group of people, and not all men will share the same feelings about hostess clubs and the gendered performances that take place there. Nevertheless, these gendered scripts do assume a particular role for the participants and are used in these situations, regardless of how the performers would act in other situations. \textit{Sararīman} seem to be enmeshed in a no-win situation. On the one hand, men who don't stay late at work are termed as “sissies,” or are not looked upon as “real men.” On the other hand, those who conform to the unwritten rules of the \textit{sararīman} face other

\(^{8}\) A Professor of Information Science, Lyman also contributed to scholarship outside of his field, including sociology in the case of his work on group bonding.
issues. Anne Allison describes a selection from Sararīman Senka that features a character known as Yamada, who typifies the sararīman archetype. He works long hours, devotes himself to his job, and possesses the diligent and hard-working attitude that is the stereotypical Japanese worker. In this way, he can be seen as a “real man” and a provider. However, the character is emasculated in another respect. Because he works so hard at his job, the character admits to the readers that, at 29 years old, he has never had sex. After convincing his friend to take him to a cabaret, Yamada finally makes time for himself, as Allison points out. When he “is unable to function sexually,” the readers are supposed to view the character with “sympathy and humor” (Allison, 1994: 188-9). It is in this sense that the sararīman faces a no-win situation. Allison writes that “by one construction of masculinity, Yamada is a man; by another construction, he is not” (Allison, 1994: 189).

In other strips from Sararīman Senka, we see the sararīman away from home as the absent father stereotype. One story shows a man who is currently living away from his family during a temporary transfer. He realizes that it is Father's Day, and fantasizes about traveling home to a family that welcomes him back with gifts. When he arrives, however, he finds that that his wife children have forgotten about Father's Day and already made plans (Shōji, 1: 12-13). In a similar story, the sararīman calls home to tell his wife that he is coming home for the weekend. Unfortunately, his wife tells him, she is going on a trip and the children will be gone as well. She remarks that there is something for him to go home for, however, and in the final panel, we see the sararīman alone at the house feeding the family dog (4: 54-55).

Popular works such as these have contributed to the stereotyped images of

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9 This comic is cited in Allison's work as “Sararīman Senkyō.”
Japanese workers that Dasgupta's students were so readily able to conjure. The caricature is further promulgated by everyday instances of sararīman on trains reading sexually explicit comics that feature bikini-clad women on the front cover and sometimes contain violent, pornographic content. It is not only this naturalness leading to inevitability that puts a pressure on Japanese sararīman to conform, however. The masculinity embedded in the occupation itself contributes as well. While it was certainly not always the case that men were considered to be the primary breadwinners, this is an idea that is widely accepted today. It is generally not an option for men not to work in some capacity, and some take their working lives to the extreme. In a dialogue on the changes surrounding Japanese men, feminist organizer Nakajima Satomi expresses her concern over male retirees. She remarks that while older women have had the time and the resources to make personal connections with neighbors and friends, retired men often have nothing of the sort to fall back on after leaving the workforce. The members of this panel make note of how deeply rooted these workers are in the bureaucracy of Japanese corporate life, and discuss how for these men, work is their ikigai, or meaning for living (Lummis et al., 1995: 231). As mentioned earlier, in situations where men are mostly absent from everyday home life, the wives and children adapt to create a family unit in which the primary purpose for the man is simply to bring home a paycheck. Because wives and children take care of most household chores including cooking and cleaning, this type of Japanese man does not have the skills to function properly in a household once his job of breadwinning is finished. Nakajima states that her impression is that “most men are able

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10 This dialogue was published in Fujimura-Fanselow and Kameda's collection on feminist perspectives on Japanese women. Included in the panel were Charles Douglas Lummis – a Japanologist and professor of political science, Nakajima Satomi – a feminist organizer and author of several books on women in Japan, and editors Fujimura-Fanselow and Kameda.
to get by only because they have their wives to depend on” (Lummis et al., 1995:: 231).

Although the particulars differ from country to country, the patterns of behavior for men and women are similar. Groups of men in both Japan and America use humor laced with sexual references in order to bond together through shared opposition to the “other.” Such jokes allow members of the group to smooth over any tensions that may arise, and can unite them in solidarity. Divisions between men and women's labor exist in both countries. While the lines may be more clearly defined in some areas than others, the fact remains that neither country has attained egalitarian ideals. Men are hurt by this fact perhaps as much as women are. While one can argue that Japanese women are being discriminated against in the workplace, we can see that men in salaried positions face hardships and expectations of their own. Perhaps one of the major differences between the two countries lies in the Japanese notion of cultural uniqueness. This concept reinforces the fact that Japanese men and women behave as separate, monolithic groups, in particular ways because of culturally unique influences. Caricatures of sararīman and observers' proclivity to generalize serve to underscore nihonjinron theory, albeit unintentionally. While the particulars vary between the two countries, at the heart of the problem, we often find the same tensions at work. In order to fully understand the situations of salaried Japanese men, we must also explore the role that the “uniqueness” of the profession plays in the attitudes and behaviors of sararīman and their families.

A common theme in articles dealing with women in Japan is the inevitability of their situations. The phrase “shikata ga nai” is widely used in Japanese conversation, and it translates to “there’s nothing to be done.” In Allison’s interviews with the wives of sararīman, she heard these words when discussing the husband’s absence: “He has to
work hard”; ‘It’s inevitable and can’t be helped (shikata ga nai)’; ‘Japanese men are diligent and hard-working’; ‘That’s the way it is for sararîman in Japan”’ (1994: 104). Specifically, the last two comments speak to the idea of Japanese “uniqueness.” These quotes make a clear distinction between the attitudes of working people in Japan and the attitudes of those in other countries. The implication is that men in the Japanese workforce have no choice but to work long hours and go out drinking with colleagues afterward. It is seen as a natural and inevitable aspect of work in a Japanese corporation. Japanese men as a group are perceived as being particularly hard-working, and this “fact” is often used as an explanation for the other actions of these men. Because Japanese men work hard, long hours, they are often not expected to take a significant role in housework or childcare, and this is viewed as their natural function in the family. There have even been scholars¹¹ who argue that men are, for all intents and purposes, unnecessary to the family dynamic apart from their roles as “breadwinners.” This emphasis that is placed on Japanese men to focus almost entirely on their careers can be a contributor to inequality of roles between husband and wife. Since these prescribed roles for men and women are seen as natural, it becomes more difficult to change them.

This same feeling of resignation can be found in other interactions as well. In discussing marriages in Japan, Yoshizumi points out some of the attitudes of wives who are discontent with their marriages, and yet remain unwilling to divorce. She claims that there is a “rationalization” at work, where women will give reasons for why they stay in an unhappy relationship. Once again, there is a feeling of shikata ga nai, and Yoshizumi quotes a woman as saying: “this is simply the way most marriages are” (1995: 193).

Letters to advice columns and the responses that accompany them often do little to

¹¹ See Anne Allison, 1994, Yoshizumi Kyoko, 1995 and Yuzawa Yasuhiko, 1982
combat this reasoning.

A letter regarding marital satisfaction in the advice column of a popular Japanese newspaper garners a response that criticizes the writer for placing blame on the husband for their situation, and suggests that she learn to accept the way things are. The housewife who wrote asking for advice claims that her husband expends all of his energy on work, and that their sex life is limited to three or four times a year. She writes that they are simply keeping up a facade of married life in which they have separate bedrooms and communicate very little. The respondent, a female counselor, gives only a short reply that does not directly address the issue at hand. She writes that “the habit of blaming others deters you from determining what you can actually do about yourself. You should learn to enjoy the fact that you are now at the age when you can determine how you live” (McKinstry and McKinstry, 1991: 49). Not only does this respondent fail to give any practical advice on how to improve relations with one's husband, she seems to suggest that this housewife should not even try. Although the wife obviously wished for a closer relationship with her husband, it is suggested that she instead learn to enjoy and accept her solitary situation.

McKinstry and McKinstry note that several of the women who wrote in to the column seemed to be less angry at the husbands involved than in the “cultural style that allows the husband a great measure of sanctioned self-centeredness” (1991: 38). In a letter from a young housewife, the husband's work situation is blamed for his lashing out at home. She writes that because he must follow prescribed norms while he is at work, he shows a lack of restraint once he is home. Although she tries to change his behavior by asking him not to lash out at her, this young woman believes that the stress of his job
situation will prevent any real change in his behavior. In looking at advice column letters and responses, we can see one of the ways in which Japanese work and family structures can be portrayed as natural and unchangeable. Responses which advocate accepting the current situation and adjusting one's own attitude can serve to discourage advice-seekers from using their agency to actively make changes in their lives.
Chapter 5: Women's Language and Linguistic Choice

Japanese women are certainly not without agency, however, and in some respects, women have not only overcome the hindrances placed before them by *nihonjinron* theory, but have in fact used some of its practices to their advantage. Historically, Japanese women's language has been treated as a separate entity, and in some ways as a deviant form of the language. Women's language as described in the *Kōjien* was marked by an avoidance of words of Chinese origin during the Heian period (794-1185), and by the formation of *nyōbō kotoba* by court attendants beginning in the Muromachi period (1336-1573). In contemporary usage, women's language is typically marked by the attachment of the prefix *o*, sentence final particles such as *wa* and *yo*, and sentence medial particles such as *sa* and *ne*. Endō Orie also points out that there is no entry in the *Kōjien* for “men's language,” which seems to be an indicator that Japanese spoken by women is considered to be a deviant form of standard Japanese (Endō, 2006: 2). Endō makes the claim that a significant difference in the spoken language did not appear until Japan's medieval period. She notes that a passage from the *Kokonchomonjū*, published during the Kamakura era (1185-1333) reads “In making replies, men say 'yo' and women say 'wo'” (as quoted in Endō, 2006: 30). Speech during this time was not dictated solely on

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12 A Japanese dictionary published by Iwanami Shoten, the *Kōjien* is considered one of the most authoritative Japanese-language sources.

13 *Nyōbō kotoba* had a distinctive set of vocabulary and expressions formed through a number of patterns. For example, *moji* and *mono* could be added to existing words, and other words could be abbreviated. Like Heian period women's language, *nyōbō kotoba* also displayed an avoidance of some Chinese pronunciations.
gender, however; replies could also vary based on the social status of the speaker in relation to the listener. “Wo,” for example would only be used by a woman when addressing someone of higher status. We can clearly see then that Japanese “women's language” is inextricably linked with power.

Confucian tradition was one way in which power and status not only defined the roles of women, but also affected their use of language. A number of manuals were written by both men and women outlining proper speech and behavior for women to follow, and in effect defining what it meant to be a Japanese woman. Linguistically as well as culturally, the Edo period (1600-1867) brought greater restrictions for the behavior of women and limited their access to scholarly pursuits, with men such as Matsudaira Sadanobu writing that for women, an ability to read kana was sufficient and that “trivial matters” of the home would be all they should concern themselves with (Endō, 2006: 42).

Part of the effort to direct women's speech was undoubtedly derived from a wish to retain a sense of “tradition.” Modernization is generally linked with masculinity, and as this phenomenon takes place, women often bear the task of retaining the traditional practices and customs. While men of the Meiji and Taishō periods (1868-1912, 1912-1926) lived under the nationalistic policies of a “wealthy nation and a strong army” (fukoku kyōhei), the women of Japan were bound by the tenets of ryōsai kenbo, or “good wives and wise mothers.” The founder of the Meiji School for Women, Iwamoto Yoshiharu, advocated a blending of Western rights and Japanese traditional values for

14 A daimyō (territorial ruler) and eventual advisor to the shogun, Matsudaira was an influential figure in the Tokugawa regime and also wrote on topics of Confucian morality.
15 The Japanese writing system utilizes two syllabaries in addition to Chinese characters called kanji. These syllabaries are referred to as kana (hiragana and katakana) and are mainly used in verb conjugations that cannot be expressed with Chinese characters and native Japanese words.
the advancement of women, but the focus was still on women's position as either a wife or a mother. It was not until liberal thinkers such as Ueki Emori began to champion Japanese women that their potential as productive members of society was argued. Magazines for women during the late 19th and early 20th centuries were generally one of two types: promoting women's rights, or promoting the ideology of ryōsai kenbo. Magazines of the latter type continued to promote the use of “gentle” language and stressed *kana* usage as appropriate for women (Endō, 2006).

Pre-modern Japanese society created an ideal that Japanese women were encouraged to aspire to, and they were given guidelines on their speech and behavior. Women's language was not looked down upon, but was generally respected by men and women alike. This admiration for women's language carried on into the modern period as well. Noted Japanese linguist Kindaichi Kyōsuke wrote in 1942 that “Recently it has been noted that Japanese women are superior to the other women of the world in terms of their beauty and quality. The relationship between the correct language of Japanese women and the Japanese feminine ideal is a rare phenomenon in the world” (as quoted in Endō 2006: 81). This idea of Japanese cultural and linguistic uniqueness created expectations that all Japanese women, being in possession of such qualities as an inherent part of their “Japanese-ness,” would claim women's language as part of their identity. Pressure from the West to modernize and the wartime atmosphere contributed in large part to this promotion of language practices that were “uniquely Japanese.” Perhaps the growing interest in *nihonjinron* both domestically and abroad also influenced the linguistic studies in women's language that came out during the 1970s and 1980s.

The gradual decline of the polite (*keigo*) and humble (*kenjōgo*) forms often linked
with women's language has caused concern over their potential disappearance and the “corruption” of the Japanese language. Eleanor Harz Jorden argues that such critics “overlook the fact that the 'pure' language they miss is simply the ‘midareta nihongo’\(^{16}\) of another generation (Jorden, 1990: 3). In modern times, the use of feminine language has become a choice as opposed to an expectation. Janet Shibamoto notes that there were concerns in the 1970s about the ramifications of “women's language” on the ability to gain employment or enter positions of power (1985: 4). I believe that recent studies such as those done by Inoue Miyoko show that women can indeed use polite and even feminine speech even when in positions of power. Such women are able to manipulate their language in order to achieve goals and feminine language can be advantageous in certain circumstances.

Even personal pronouns, which textbooks\(^{17}\) for second-language learners of Japanese will tell you are firmly set as either male, female, or neutral have shown more flexibility among young Japanese speakers. Girls sometimes use *boku* and even *ore* to express themselves, often switching between these and the more gender-neutral *watashi* as the situation calls for it. While it is certainly possible that young girls' use of pronouns associated with masculinity can be viewed as simply a phase of youthful rebellion, I believe that the notion of “gender” is a fluid construction, and that the way most people perform gender varies within different contexts and at different points in the life of an

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\(^{16}\) *Midareta nihongo* means disordered Japanese. In this context, Jorden is arguing that the pure language of one era is a deviant form of another era.

\(^{17}\) Early in my experience of studying Japanese as a second language, I remember being resentful that there were words that, as a woman, I was discouraged from using. As a newly realized feminist, I decided to use masculine forms such as *-zo* or *darō*, and as a result, I was told by my Japanese friends that I sounded like a junior high school student. I found it interesting that they had not said that I sounded masculine when I used this kind of language, but that they believed instead that I simply sounded young, either because young children don't properly understand linguistic gender differentiation, or because of adolescent rebellion against gendered norms.
individual.

Inoue's research on women's language in the workplace seems to support this idea. In an interview, a manager named Yoshida discussed how her language choice changed with her responsibilities in the company. Early in her career when she was still a minor employee, Yoshida used language however she liked. Upon promotion to a higher position, however, her strategies for communication changed from speaking as she liked, to staying “in the middle” (Inoue, 2006: 232-3). She believed that her use of distal style facilitated smoother interactions, no matter if the addressee was male or female. As a female manager, Yoshida felt that she stood out enough without worrying about how her linguistic choices might set her apart from others, so she felt most comfortable being neither too assertive nor too deferential. Inoue also spoke with a male section chief named Fujita who used a similar strategy for communication to Yoshida's. He was described by coworkers as soft-spoken and polite, using distal style when conversing. For Fujita, however, it was not simply a question of being polite, but rather of treating everyone equally. He further believed that as a professional, there was no room in his linguistic repertoire for harsh or loud speech. Through this example, we can see that polite language, which is associated most often with women's language, can also be a viable tactic for male professionals as well.

In discussing “women's language,” we are perhaps making the mistake of creating a monolithic category of “Japanese women,” which is where the theory of nihonjinron becomes problematic. While Japan is known for being one of the most racially homogenous nations of the world, the linguistic habits of Japanese women are influenced by a number of factors, including class, age, and region. Inoue recalls growing up in an
area where “women's language” was not used by the average person, but was heard only on television. It was not until she moved to Tokyo that she heard it spoken face-to-face. Similarly, it may be more common to hear it at different stages in a woman's life.

While language use in pre-modern Japan was certainly guided by the patriarchy, the language of modern women in Japan seems to be more removed from male oversight. This was perhaps influenced by an influx of Western thought as well as through the efforts of Japanese feminists to gain a more equal standing with men. It appears that women are freer today to make their own linguistic choices, whether that involves embracing women's language or using it merely as a strategy for communication. Indeed, if Nakane's argument that status supersedes gender is correct, then the promotion of status hierarchy in the Japanese workplace would benefit Japanese women in a linguistic sense. Higher status would allow women more options when speaking with others, and with subordinates in particular.

The negotiation of power in conversation requires control over one's language use, and both masculine and feminine speech styles have roles to play in such interactions. The idea of “women's language” as uniquely Japanese does, however, seem to challenge linguistic choice for women and places them in a category separate from men. When a lack of assertion and soft-spokenness are viewed as common traits of the “Japanese woman,” and believed to be “natural,” there is a greater pressure to conform to such ideals, even if one does not carry those same beliefs. Polite or feminine speech does not always correlate with deference, however, and such language choices can even be used to show assertion, problematizing the notion that “women's language” is equated with weakness.
Chapter 6: Media Representations of Gender in the Workplace

Gender in the workplace has become a popular theme in contemporary Japanese media. Girl's comics, such as *Kimi wa Petto* and *Hatarakiman* have been adapted into live-action television dramas, and have garnered large audiences. Both series began as *manga* in the early 2000s and enjoyed successful runs.\(^\text{18}\) Although these stories are only representations of Japanese life, they reflect, and perhaps also help shape cultural practice. Both titles focus on career women\(^\text{19}\) in their work and home lives. The ability of working women to choose their own career paths is one of the most important themes for both series. Both protagonists face pressures to conform to the Japanese model of the working woman, and to accept the *sarárimàn* lifestyles of their boyfriends.

In *Kimi wa Petto* (You are my pet), we see an immensely successful career woman named Iwaya Sumire, whose personal life has just taken a hit due in large part to her career aspirations. Her success and her height, which is tall for the average Japanese woman, have created an irreparable rift between her and her fiance. At the beginning of the show, he has left her for a shorter, less successful woman who, when first introduced, is tall for the average Japanese woman.

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\(^\text{18}\) Ogawa Yayoi's *Kimi wa Petto* was the winner of the Kodansha's 2003 *shōjo manga* award ("Kodansha Manga Shō", 2006) and ran from 2000-2005. The television adaptation was written by Omori Mika, and had a ten episode run between April and June of 2003. Polling group Oricon conducts surveys of favorite artists of *manga* fans, and Anno Moyoco, the author of *Hataraki Man* ranked 8th and 4th in 2006 and 2008 respectively among female respondents ("Nana no Yazawa Ai", 2006; "Suki na Mangaka", 2008). Anno's *manga* began in 2004, and is still running. The drama adaptation was written by Yoshida Tomoko and Matsuda Yuko, and ran between October and December of 2007.

\(^\text{19}\) *Kyariaūman* in Japanese, these women are the counterparts to *sarárimàn*. Career women are different from “office ladies” (commonly referred to as OL) in a number of ways. OL often work for a short period of time and quit their jobs to get married or raise children. Career women have a higher status and more opportunities for promotion than OL.
is eight months pregnant. Iwaya faces some issues of identity and self-worth going through this change. To make matters worse, she is demoted from the external affairs department of her newspaper to the lifestyles department – a decidedly lower prestige job than she held previously. The reason for the transfer is a dispute between her and the department head that begins when he makes sexual advances towards Iwaya, and ends when she punches him in the face. While this is obviously an overly dramatic rendering of a relatively common incident in the Japanese workplace, the gender dynamics at work are much less forced (Omori, 2003).

Through this story, we see the double standard imposed on women in a “man's” workplace. The wives of sarariman do not face the same issues of inferiority that Iwaya's ex-fiancé experiences. The disconnect appears when the woman is the breadwinner, working long hours, and traveling for her job. In this drama relationship, Iwaya's ex-fiancé becomes emasculated through a number of factors. With a partner who is taller, less emotional, more successful, and more assertive, the gender roles in the relationship are completely reversed from the traditional norm (Omori, 2003). While inequalities can certainly exist in successful relationships, when women hold the advantage, a unique set of problems arises. With masculinity so entrenched in the national character of the sarariman, it is little wonder that so many Japanese men base their maleness on workplace success.

Performances of gender are particularly salient in “Kimi wa petto,” especially among the female characters. In the wake of her failed relationship, Iwaya struggles to reconcile her working self with her female self. When a former love interest, Hasumi Shigehito, resurfaces in her life (and coincidentally takes over her old position), Iwaya
makes conscious efforts to perform her femininity. It proves to be more difficult for her than for her rival in love, Fukushima. An OL\(^{20}\) of lower status than Iwaya, Fukushima displays her femininity in more outwardly obvious ways. For her, work is simply an opportunity to meet a young attractive *sararīman* so that she can quit her job to marry him. When Fukushima speaks in public, or to a male friend or colleague, her voice and word selection are decidedly feminine, and she takes performance to a literal level as well. At one point in the series, she creates a story where she is being harassed by an ex-boyfriend, and turns to Hasumi, asking to stay at his apartment. In this way, she is actively creating a situation where the man has an opportunity to flaunt his masculinity by being a protector of the woman. As an independent, *aikido*-trained woman, Iwaya cannot perform her gender in the same way, and it becomes quite awkward for her when she tries to do so (Omori, 2003).

Towards the end of the series, Hasumi is offered a position as a journalist abroad, and he asks Iwaya to go with him. Unable to leave her life and her career behind, and unable to open up emotionally to Hasumi, she refuses, and remains in Japan. As these kinds of transfers are common in Japanese companies for *sararīman*, it is assumed that the two could not remain together because for Hasumi to refuse a transfer for the sake of Iwaya's career would be unthinkable. This kind of practice and the expectations attached to Japanese salaried men make it almost impossible to cultivate a relationship between a *sararīman* and a career woman. It is because of this system and its expectations that we see a new type of relationship form in *Kimi wa Petto*.

\(^{20}\) OL is an acronym for “office lady,” and is pronounced in Japanese as ōeru. This term is used for young women working in white-collar office jobs, particularly as clerical workers. They are sometimes described as *shokuba no hana*, or flowers of the workplace, because these women are often young and pretty (Brinton 1993: 151).
Throughout the span of the show, Iwaya develops a relationship with a younger man who stays with her as a “pet.” She is shown as seeking out alternative lifestyles after leaving her broken relationship. She supports this younger man financially, which is something that Iwaya's male colleagues find intolerable. They argue that a man who will let himself be fed and supported by a woman has no sense. In that scene, Iwaya becomes upset, saying that the ideals of a man supporting a woman are old-fashioned, and that it should not matter who pays the bills, as long as the two people are mutually supportive (Omori, 2003). The manga and drama versions of the story differ slightly with regards to the pressures that Iwaya faces from work with respect to her personal life. The drama version of her boss believes that her relationship will adhere to the norm supported by nihonjinron thinking. He assumes that since Hasumi will fulfill his sararīman role, Iwaya will quit her job in order to fulfill her role as wife (and eventually mother). Her boss then states that this is the reason he does not like working with women (Omori, 2003 June 04). In the manga version, however, her boss is seen begging her not to quit her job to get married and tells her that they will discuss it later (Ogawa, 11: 24).

We see two very different attitudes being portrayed by the same character. The character in the drama holds an older view of the Japanese workplace: one in which the sararīman lives for his job and the female workers (both career women and OL) leave their jobs just after becoming settled to marry the aforementioned sararīman. He has resigned himself to the fact that this is the way that the Japanese business runs and simply takes it for granted that this is the same path that Iwaya will take. On the other hand, the boss character from the manga undoubtedly recognizes that this is the typical pattern that emerges between male and female workers in Japan, but instead of resignation, we see
agency. He actively approaches Iwaya and asks her not to leave her job, effectively going against the nihonjinron theory that such a choice would be the natural course.

_Hatarakiman_ (Working Man), originally written by Anno Moyoco is similar in setting to _Kimi wa Petto_ in a number of respects. The protagonist of _Hatarakiman_ is actually not a man at all. Matsukata Hiroko is a 28 year old career woman working as a journalist. At the beginning of the series, she is dating a man who works as much as she does, leaving them with little time to spend together. Eventually, Matsukata faces the same major choice as Iwaya in _Kimi wa Petto_. The final episode of the series is called “29th Birthday... Time to Decide Between Love and Work!!” (29歳の誕生日...恋か仕事かの決断の時!!) and the main character must decide if she will follow her ex-boyfriend when he is transferred, in hopes of a new start on their relationship, or continuing to focus on her career and ending any chance of her and her boyfriend reconnecting (Yoshida, 2007 Dec 19).

As she is trying to make these important life decisions, she faces different pressure from her friends and her colleagues. Her married friends tell her that it must be nice being able to think only of herself while they all have husbands and children they need to care for. The underlying suggestion is that such women who put off getting married and having children are selfish and individualistic (a word also used to describe Iwaya). These friends are suggesting that normal Japanese women should be focusing on the family at such a point in their lives. Here, individualism is frowned upon, and family groupism is held up as the ideal. Matsukata argues, however, that even for a woman, the group ideal can be reached through the workplace. She claims that she is not thinking only about herself, but that she still has a group depending on her in the form of bosses
and colleagues. In the end, there is both a movement against, and an upholding of

nihonjinron practices. Matsukata forgoes marriage and even turns down an offer at a
larger company so that she can stay in her current job. These close ties among colleagues
that are espoused by nihonjinron discourse aren’t limited to male sararīman, and they can
affect career women as well (Yoshida, 2007 Dec 19).

While pressures to adhere to the norms for working women are portrayed in both

Kimi wa Petto and Hatarakiman, what is more important is the agency of the main
characters. While they may see other women quitting their jobs to support sararīman
husbands, both realize that it is a choice and not an inevitability. Both series show that
such a lifestyle can certainly be rewarding and is right for some working women, but in
the end it is a choice. These two stories present a lifestyle for working women that, while
not following the same track as most office ladies, career women can find their ikigai in
work. While these are only representations of situations in the Japanese workplace, they
can perhaps encourage real women to consider that while quitting a job to start a family
and support a husband is some people's idea of happiness, Japanese women should not
feel that it is natural or the only option available to them.
Conclusion

By its very nature, nihonjinron discourse contributes to feelings of inevitability in contemporary Japanese society. As Befu points out, there is a great deal of nihonjinron in the popular media (2001: 7-8), and a sense of uniqueness is prevalent among the masses. When aspects of a culture are seen as “natural” or “unique,” there is a sense that nothing can be done to change a situation. We see such feelings of resignation in the interviews conducted by Allison and Yoshizumi, and in the analysis of women in the workplace by Kawashima. This atmosphere of inevitability is a serious hurdle for Japanese feminists working towards egalitarian ideals (1994; 1995; 1995). As discussed previously, the attitudes about gender that are held by an individual are only a part of the story. The actions and choices of an individual are not predicated solely on one’s own thoughts and beliefs. Cultural practices and the discourse surrounding them can also affect the ways in which gender is performed.

Although it is an overused generalization for describing “Japanese culture,” the phrase “the nail that sticks up gets hammered down” has some relevance to this discourse. Gendered norms can, in many ways, “hammer down” the egalitarian spirit of an individual, be they female or male. The understanding that stereotyped beliefs are held by a significant portion of the community is enough to influence how a person “does” his or her gender. The idea of nihonjinron creates an expectation that, because certain aspects of culture are “uniquely Japanese,” they will be observed by the populace as a whole or
be perceived as being a uniform trait. Therefore, in order to conform to existing social norms, one may end up “doing” culture or “doing” gender. It may be through actions done consciously, such as the hostess “doing deference” to the customers, or as a foreigner “doing Japanese culture” by speaking in a certain way, or by a sararīman acting in the interests of his “in-group.” It may also be a result of unconscious factors, such as a gradual shifting of roles due to outside factors like child-rearing and occupational expectations.

Despite the hurdles that nihonjinron theory creates for women in Japan, the cultural practices and the discourse itself are not inherently bad. Gender-neutral groupism at the early stages of childhood development is generally egalitarian in practice and it allows boys and girls to work cooperatively and share tasks. The system of hierarchy that exists within the Japanese business model can also bring advantages to women workers. Because of the focus on hierarchy in Japanese companies, status generally supersedes sex in inter-personal relations. Nakane notes that although Japanese women are almost always ranked lower than men, it is not their sex, but the fact that most women do not have the status required to be ranked higher (Nakane, 1970: 32fn.). While this structure has the potential to create a more equal playing field in the workplace, Japanese women (in fact, women all over the world) face certain difficulties in attaining a position of seniority. Regulations and straightforward policies that limit subjectivity in the workplace that can bar women from positions of seniority are certainly beneficial. The problem occurs during child-rearing years. Because it is almost a certainty that the father will not stay home to raise children during the early years, and because childcare outside the home is expensive and difficult to find, mothers in the workforce are more likely to leave,
and the interruption in work experience can be detrimental to their careers. The ideal of the sararīman as the quintessential Japanese worker makes this reality more difficult to overcome.

Societal norms demand that the Japanese man work hard at his job and provide financial support for a family. Nihonjinron theory has proposed the idea that this unique brand of worker is naturally endowed with the characteristics that allowed for Japan's rapid economic growth. For this kind of employee, work is his ikigai – his reason for living. To change such a formula would be to deny what is natural and unique about the Japanese working man. And yet we see resistance to this model, despite arguments on the uniqueness of Japan's hegemonic social norms. Future study on this subject would certainly benefit from a closer examination of a generational gap in nihonjinron ideology. The popularity of this theory has perhaps already begun to wane, and we may be seeing some of the effects already. What may have started as women challenging the model of the OL who quits her job to get married and raise a family, could be developing into young men who challenge the model of the sararīman and opt instead for lower-paying part-time jobs that offer greater amounts of freedom.

Responses to some current letters to advice columns also suggest that attitudes about the sararīman model of the Japanese worker are changing. A recent letter describes a situation in which the husband is hardly involved in the lives of his children. The writer of the letter recalls an instance when their second-born son caused an incident in which the police became involved. She then wrote “Nevertheless, my husband didn't cooperate, saying 'I'm busy with work.' And yet he went out to play golf.”

21 “Tokoro ga otto wa 'shigoto ga isogashi' to kyōryokusezu.' Soredeite, kyōmi no gorufu ni wa dekakete ikimashita.” Translation mine.
2012). The respondent, a university professor, was sympathetic to the writer's plight, and suggested that if she is able to support herself economically, divorce may be the right course of action. There was also an acknowledgment that the absent husband model is not ideal to creating a successful marriage, as the response also noted that the writer's husband lacked the qualities necessary to being a father.

The image of the Japanese salaried worker that was so normalized in the 1970s and 1980s has been challenged in recent years. The state of the Japanese economy has changed in such a way that jobs are scarcer and lifetime employment is no longer the norm. The incoming generation of Japanese workers will not have firsthand recollections of the years of economic prosperity in Japan which helped to promote nihonjinron theory and practice. They will, however, remember the economic distress that has hit so many countries in recent years. Perhaps the downturn of the global economy will lead to a greater focus on similarities rather than differences, and will downplay the notion of Japanese cultural uniqueness.

While the practices espoused by nihonjinron theory are not themselves problematic, the idea that they are uniquely Japanese can promote the feeling that all Japanese people should adhere to them, regardless of the individual situation. Multi-generational families supported by the ie system may work for some, but are not the only solution. The group system may facilitate cooperation in the workplace, but when it supersedes one's own family, this close-knit group structure can cause problems for both men and women. The ability to choose has been a common theme in recent years. In both Kimi wa Petto and Hatarakiman, the characters face pressure to conform to a number of cultural norms that are often presented as unique to the Japanese workplace or family
structure. While this works well for some characters, it is not right for all of them, and their choices become important turning points in their lives. There should be a respect for both *nihonjinron* theory and the practices associated with it, but that respect should be tempered with an understanding that although the group is certainly an important part of Japanese society, that same group is inevitably made up of individuals who cannot be reduced to a simple, monolithic bloc.
Works Cited


