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OLGA BARBASIEWICZ

The Impact of Confucianism on Modern Japanese Women's Life

Abstract

The aim of this article is to consider questions regarding Japanese culture and Confucianism, especially while researching women in Japan. The author will describe the implementation of Confucian values in Japanese society, the Confucian attitude towards the role of women and the situation of Japanese females. The article will examine the question of whether there are similarities between the situations of women in countries which implemented Confucian morals and ethics, and to compare this situations with contemporary Japanese society.

Introduction

Due to economic growth, the modernization of Japanese society which began in 1868, and the influence of American culture since the American occupation, Japan seems to be a very modern state, comparable to the Western nations. Nevertheless Japanese culture and society is still of interest to the Western scholars, because of the sense of its difference. We cannot forget that traditional Japanese culture, philosophy and religion(s) have had a great influence on modern Japanese society. Even if the American occupation had a great impact on the culture, the Japanese people (sometimes unconsciously) continue to base themselves in the norms which their nation developed over centuries.

In a time when gender studies are developing rapidly, the interest in the situation of Japanese women has rapidly increased among researchers. The stereotype images of women from the 'Country of Cherry Blossoms' are that of the *geisha*, a woman in a *kimono*, or just a smartly dressed lady with a brand handbag, the wife of a Japanese businessman, called *kaishain* in Japanese. Japanese women are considered as shy, calm, never showing their feelings, taking care of their family, usually a housewife rather than a businesswoman.

But this image is shattered when we see the young girls called *ganguro*, who wear colorful makeup and clothes, dye their hair platinum blonde, and walk down Harajuku doing everything to be considered as *kawaii*. It is so different from the traditional Japanese concept of beauty, defined as snow-white skin, natural dark hair and discreet makeup. This diversity makes Japanese culture and society even more inscrutable, and worth exploring because of this.

In this paper the author will consider the following questions regarding Japanese culture and Confucianism, especially while researching women in Japan. First, what is the position of women in Japan according to Confucian values? This is examined in the light of previous

research on the place of females in Confucian teachings and writings, as well as an analysis of textbooks for girls and the education they could receive.

Second, where can we trace the influence of Confucianism on the situation of women in Japan? This question addresses the links between Confucian teaching and the situation of women in Japan throughout its history. Studying the history of the circumstances in which Japanese women have lived and comparing them to Confucian principles for women will give us a view of the impact of Confucianism onto women's lives until recently.

Third, what is the role of women in contemporary Japanese society, and what are the rights they possess? While women have traditionally been assigned to take care of their households, the modernization and democratization of Japan have obliged the Japanese people and their government in the 20th century to treat women equally with men. Several laws were passed regarding this issue, starting from the Constitution (enacted in 1947), the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (enforced in 1986) and the law on Equal Participation in Socio-Political Activities (1999). Nonetheless, the situation in Japan shows that there is a huge difference between the number of economically active men and women, and that very few women can be found in senior political or business positions. The situation is well depicted by the Global Gender Gap Report of 2012, in which Japan places 101st.

Fourth, what is the position of women in the modern Japanese family? As mentioned above, the traditional place in the society for women was the private sphere, understood as the home. However, because of the economic decline, as well as the rise in decision-making freedom among Japanese females around the turn of the 21st century, a paradox of choice among contemporary women in Japan can be observed, according to Uta Shimada from Cambridge University. This leads to the single life, dedication to a professional career, or the final abandoning of the idea of starting a family, which used to be the fundamental role in society for women. Even if a woman decides to start a family today, she does not want to quit her job, which definitely changes the social patterns.

Finally, what is the situation of women on the labor market? The expansion of rights and the choices made by young Japanese women have resulted in changes on the labor market, which can be defined as traditional, as can be understood from the Global Gender Gap Report of 2012. Even though women in Japan should be guaranteed equal treatment, they accept unfavorable working conditions, while their husbands earn enough to compensate their wives for taking care of family life.¹

This paper focuses on gender studies, especially women's studies in Japan. It is very important to analyze the women's perspective, since as Yoshio Sugimoto claims, some academic studies have also attempted to generalize about Japanese society on the basis of observations of its male elite sector.² This also refers to research on Confucianism and Japanese society.

¹ Teruji Suzuki, 'Women's Rights in Japan', in *Prawa kobiet we współczesnym świecie*, Lena Kondratiewa-Bryzik, Wojciech Sokolewicz (eds.), Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, 2011, p. 248.

² Yoshio Sugimoto, *An Introduction to Japanese Society*, Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 2.

Confucianism in Japan

The philosophical and ethical system of Confucianism was introduced to Japan at the beginning of the fifth century. However, the ruler of Japan who implemented Confucian values into Japanese society was Shōtoku Taishi – Prince Shōtoku, the founder of the first Japanese constitution. The ‘Seventeen Article Constitution’ was the first code of moral instructions in Japan for the ruling class. It was promulgated in 604 and introduced a universal morality that conflicted with clan loyalty.³

Using Confucianism for political reasons was characteristic of Japan from the earliest times, and in the Nara period (710–784)⁴, those who wanted to make a career in governmental service had to complete schools where they were trained for governmental administration purposes, and where the Confucian classics were predominant.⁵

During the subsequent Heian (782–1185)⁶ and Kamakura (1185–1333)⁷ periods, Confucianism survived in Japanese society only because of the efforts of Buddhist priests who studied the Confucian classics, despite the antagonism between the metaphysical philosophy of Buddhism and the humanistic philosophy of Confucianism.⁸ Zen Buddhists supported the most Neo-Confucian philosophy, and they later came to dominate in the Edo period (1603–1868)⁹.

Nonetheless, the Edo saw the rise of a number of people who adopted the way of the sages as a personal creed, even if the ideological use of Confucianism did not expand.¹⁰ In that period, Confucianism became a way for its adherents to improve their social position. This was necessary as Confucians were members of the samurai class, descended from its lower layers, as samurai with no lord or master, also called *rōnin*. For this reason, during the Edo period several schools of Neo-Confucian philosophy developed in Japan. However, the ruling class tended to look on Confucian scholars as suspiciously as if they were Christians.¹¹ Watanabe claims that Japanese society was a poor follower of Confucian traditions and teachings, since the shogun, who was the effective monarch during the Edo period, neither legitimized his position through

³ F. Calvin Parker, ‘Traditional Japanese Ethics’, in *The Christian Gospel and Its Ethical Implications for Japanese Society*, PDF Version 1.2, November 2008, <http://www.jema.org/hayama/reports/Hayama1980.pdf> (accessed 15.05.2013), p. 37.

⁴ 奈良時代 *Nara jidai* – the period in Japanese history, when the capital of the country was the city of Nara, modeled after Chang’an, the capital city of Tang China.

⁵ Warren W. Smith Jr., *Confucianism in Modern Japan. A Study of Conservatism in Japanese Intellectual History*, Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1959, p. 7.

⁶ 平安時代 *Heian jidai* – also called the ‘court period’, with the capital in Heian (modern Kyoto), when Japanese art, especially literature and poetry, reached its peak.

⁷ 鎌倉時代 *Kamakura jidai* – the period where real power was held in the hands of the Kamakura shogunate, and Kamakura became the city of government.

⁸ Warren W. Smith Jr., *Confucianism in Modern Japan...*, pp. 8–9.

⁹ 江戸時代 *Edo jidai* – also called the Tokugawa period, when Japanese society was under the role of Tokugawa shogunate and the capital of Japan was Edo (now Tokyo).

¹⁰ K. Wildman Nakai, ‘The Naturalization of Confucianism in Tokugawa Japan: The Problem of Sinocentrism’, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (June 1980), p. 157.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

Confucian theory nor worshipped Heaven, but rather his ancestors according to Shintō and Buddhist traditions.¹²

Regarding this problem, Hirose Tansō (1782–1856), the founder of the Kangien (咸宜園) private Confucian academy, which was the most well-attended private school in the late Edo period, wrote¹³ an essay in 1840 entitled *Ugen (Roundabout Words)* on statecraft, where he described the schism that existed in Japanese society under the Tokugawa shogunate.

He mentioned the following six social evils:

1. The nobility act in a haughty manner toward the commoners who, in turn, ridicule the nobility for this haughty behavior;
2. The nobility indulge in unnecessarily exaggerated and ostentatious displays of pomp and ceremony;
3. The people are secretive and misrepresent the truth in order to preserve their reputation;
4. Too many people place unnecessary emphasis on a person's rank and pedigree;
5. Too many people emulate ancient customs that have grown ineffective in modern times, and base their present-day decisions and actions on past precedents that are no longer appropriate to the times;
6. There is widespread ignorance and lack of learning among the people.¹⁴

To summarize Tokugawa neo-Confucianism, three different variants of this philosophy were described by William Theodore de Bary. The first is oriented toward book learning, the second is an introspective endeavor focused on mediation, and the third consists of a disparate group of independent scholars who are characterized as neo-Confucian in their work within the established tradition.¹⁵

After the Meiji Restoration (1868) many references to the Confucian virtues appeared in primary and secondary teaching. Moreover special courses for moral teaching were compiled. In many high governmental posts of that time, references were made to ideas of harmonious unified activity by the people, of duty and responsibilities, of loyalty to the throne, and of augmenting the benevolent virtue of one's ancestors.¹⁶ It can be argued that these values are the Confucian ideas which were incorporated into the political line of Meiji government.

During the period of militarization in Japanese history, which started in the 1930s, the Japanese government started the official encouragement of Confucianism, firstly in Manchukuo. Warren W. Smith Jr. wrote:

Confucianism in Japan, because of its background of consistent anti-Westernism and its importance in the traditional Asiatic cultural heritage, was naturally called on

¹² Watanabe Hiroshi, '«They Are Almost the Same as the Ancient Three Dynasties»'. The West as Seen through Confucian Eyes in Nineteenth-Century Japan', in *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity: Moral Education and Economic Culture in Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons*, Tu Wei-ming (ed.), Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 120.

¹³ The book was published in 1855.

¹⁴ Marleen Kassel, *Tokugawa Confucian Education. The Kangien Academy of Hirose Tansō (1782–1856)*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996, pp. 9–10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

to help give an ethical justification for this 'crusade' and in other ways attest to the high ideals of the Japanese sponsored Asiatic renaissance.¹⁷

After World War II, direct references toward Confucianism disappeared from the governmental acts. Nevertheless the impact on Japanese society during the past centuries was so strong that we can easily observe the traces of Confucian virtues in social life in contemporary Japan.

Confucianism and women

Regardless of the unique culture of Japan, Confucian values regarding women's issue were similar in all Confucian countries. In this chapter the role of women will be examined according to Confucian ethics, avoiding for now any national interpretation.

Nevertheless, examining the woman problem as a social or cultural category is a brand new way of analysis; in previous studies, references to women's issues were previously explored together with the traditional concept of the 'house' (Chinese *jia*, Japanese *ie* 家), or as part of relations inside the family structure. Still this concept differed from that in China, as in Japan it marked a special kind of 'corporation' which fulfilled a hereditary social role, rather than a lineage group.¹⁸ Therefore, kinship roles are the focus point in this discussion of gender.¹⁹ Consequently, the emphasis on filial piety (*ko*), which in the Edo period meant loyalty to one's *ie* as well as the familial virtue which characterizes Confucian philosophy and ethics, can be considered as a starting point for analyzing the woman issue.

To discuss the status of women, two more notions must be described, the concepts of the 'inner zone' and 'outer zone'. They are characterized by the pictograms 内 and 外, pronounced in Chinese as *nei* and *wei*, and in Japanese as *uchi* and *soto*. Women traditionally belong to the inner area, whereas men occupy the outer part. The inner area is usually related to the *ie* 'home and family', while the outer side, belonging to men, deals with external relations and the business zone.

In the article 'The Japanese family system from Meiji restoration until 21st century' we can find a following description of the Japanese family:

First of all, we should explain the meaning of the Japanese word *ie*. *Ie* means in the Japanese language "home", the most important, coming after *kaisha* – the company – place for every Japanese person. But it is very difficult to translate the meaning of this term into Western languages. Fukutake, author of a book *Japanese Rural Society*, and Hendry who has written *Marriage in Changing Japan*, suggested to use it in English in the same way as the "House of Windsor" concept. However, the most obvious difference is that in Japan the idea of *ie* does not denote a set of relationships of such exquisite exclusivity, but implies rather the basic organizing principles around which Japanese family has evolved.²⁰ It is very important that after all reforms made

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 209.

¹⁸ Watanabe Hiroshi, '«They Are Almost the Same...»', p. 120.

¹⁹ Li-Hsiang Lisa Resenlee, *Confucianism and Women. A Philosophical Interpretation*, Albany: State University of New York Press, New York 2006, p. 47.

²⁰ Michael Jeremy, M.E. Robinson, *Ceremony and Symbolism in the Japanese Home*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989, p. 31.

in Japan, and all modernization which took place in this country, many aspects of the traditional life were influenced by them. In the Japanese language, not only the word *ie* can be translated into English *family*. Japanese took up in the 19th century a phrase *kazoku*, which became the most proper word for *family*. That is why this English term does not reflect properly the idea of Japanese *ie*. The way to understand this term is to analyze basic principles of its structure.²¹ The first is embodying the notion of genealogical line extending from the past, through the present, and into the future.²² The second is connected with the practice of primogeniture and patrilineal descent which, at least formally, subordinates the status of women in Japanese society.²³

In comparison with the status of Japanese females, Li-Hsiang Lisa Resenlee describes in her book *Confucianism and Women. A Philosophical Interpretation*, the term *nei-wai* as correlated with gender, and often equated with two mutually opposing and conflicting spheres – family and state, i.e. the separation between private and public zone; and in the Chinese case, between men and women.²⁴ She also argues that in Imperial China women were socially sanctioned to traverse the assumed rigid boundary of the *nei* and the *wai*.²⁵

In Confucian texts, the only distinction between *nei* and *wai* is mentioned by Mencius in the Confucian *Four Books* as: “What is the *nei* will manifest itself in *wai*”.²⁶ Nevertheless, there are didactic texts for women which make clear their role in the society and the obligations they have. However, some feminist writings state that nowadays, the sphere of *nei* is marginal, and Chinese women are typically characterized as submissive, oppressed, and illiterate.²⁷

However, as mentioned above, didactic texts such as *Four Books for Women (Nusishu 女四書)* were created as a parallel to the Confucian *Four Books*. This book was first completed as an anthology by Wang Xiang (1789–1852) in the mid-Qing.²⁸ The second book is *The Analects for Women (Nulunyu 女論語)* (parallel to the *Analects*) which was published during the Tang dynasty by Song Ruoxin and Song Ruo Zhao; this is a collection of advice for young women regarding relations with their in-laws or those who will help them to reasonably manage their households. However, according to Resenlee, the most influential essay written on the question of females is *Fuxue*, which can be translated into English as ‘Women’s Learning’, written by Zhang Xuecheng in the 18th century. In this text one can find the following kind of approach to the question of women’s learning:

As for women’s speech, its emphasis is on the mastery of speech. [Yet] in ancient times, words do not pass from the inner quarter to the outside world. [Hence] what is called the mastery of speech is also a fundamental characteristic of ritually correct literary art. Confucius once said: “Without learning the *Book of Songs*, one has nothing

²¹ Ibid., p. 32.

²² Ibidem.

²³ Ibidem; Olga Barbasiewicz, ‘The Japanese Family System from Meiji Restoration until the 21st Century’, *Acta Asiatica Varsoviensia*, No. 22, 2009, pp. 7–8.

²⁴ Li-Hsiang Lisa Resenlee, *Confucianism and Women...*, p. 69.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 70.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 72.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 95.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 103.

to say.” This means there is no one who is good at mastering speech without having a deep understanding of the *Book of Songs*. And this makes it clear that in women's learning one must begin by learning ritual and then move to comprehending poetry... The women's learning of ancient times always begins with rites and then poetry. The women's learning of today is the reverse; it uses poetry to destroy the rites.²⁹

This fragment is essential, because as will be mentioned in the next chapter of this paper, the one sphere in which ‘women’ became consolidated as a social category in Meiji Japan, was education. Furthermore, in Tokugawa Japan, there were many texts which emphasized the female's role, in accordance with Confucian virtues.

Martha C. Tocco argues that during the Edo period there were many writings about the need for women's education. She gives the following explanation:

In the absence of systematic study, many scholars of Japanese women's history continue to view Japan's versions of Neo-Confucianism thought on the status of Tokugawa women as devastating, as Confucian tenets confined women within the family, subordinated their interests there, and proscribed their public participation in the political realm. In fact, Neo-Confucian thought on women's education varied greatly, ranging from admonitions that highly educated women posed a danger to the state to warnings that, given their role as mothers, *uneducated* women undermined the stability of the family and by extension the stability of the state. Over the course of the period, many Neo-Confucian philosophers wrote essays on the importance of women's education and commanded parents not to neglect the education of daughters.³⁰

This quotation may serve as a good introduction towards the situation of women in Japan, which is often considered as unequal and degrading, but can also be at variance with the existing stereotypes.

Women in Japan

While talking with Japanese men about their mothers, wives or daughters, Japanese females in general, it becomes obvious that they tell informants directly that their situation is worse than that of their sisters in Western countries.³¹ Furthermore, while traveling with guided tours, even in Asian countries such as Singapore, and especially while visiting Western countries such as Hawaii or Guam, Japanese tourists are always informed to remember about the rule ‘ladies first’, at which the male tourists gasp with amazement.

We may begin an examination of the Japanese situation by considering Japanese proverbs. As in any language in the world, in Japanese proverbs we can find references toward the position of women in society.

In 1992 Hiroko Storm published an article entitled ‘Women in Japanese Proverbs’ in *Asian Folklore Studies*, in which she classified Japanese traditional proverbs concerning women on the following basis:

²⁹ Ibid., p. 112.

³⁰ Martha C. Tocco, ‘Norms and Texts for Women's Education in Tokugawa Japan’, in *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan*, Dorothy Ko, Jahyun Kim Haboush, Joan R. Piggott (eds.), Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2003, p. 195.

³¹ Based on interviews conducted in July 2013 by the author.

- A) Women in general: a. inferiority; b. stupidity; c. changeability; d. ill-nature; e. talkativeness; f. weakness; g. miscellaneous.
- B) Women in specific roles or situations: h. wives; i. mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law; j. widows; k. prostitutes; l. intelligent women; m. beautiful women.³²

If we analyze the proverbs selected by Storm regarding women's role according to Confucian teaching, we may find some which confirm women's status in the Confucian-influenced society. These include:

Nyonin ni kenjin nashi (女人に賢人なし) meaning 'There are no wise women', which may be compared with *Fushō fuzui* (夫唱婦隨) that means 'The husband initiates, the wife obeys', in which it is assumed that the one who makes the decisions among Japanese family members is the husband.

Moreover, the word 'onna', standing for 'woman', appears in innumerable proverbs, such as *onna sannin yoreba kashimashii* (女三人寄れば姦しい), meaning when three women get together there is a lot of noise, or 'onna no ichinen iwa wo mo toosu' (女の一念岩をも通す) which is translated as 'Women will have their wills', which in direct translation says that women's desires can even go through rock.

Historically, the position of women was obviously unequal with that of men. However, before the formation of the shogunate (1603–1868), women had had much more freedom in public life. Those who lived in villages often became the head of households, and voted in elections in their localities. Even earlier, during the Heian period (in the 12th century) women could keep their name and manage the assets they inherited. Compared these privileges to those prevailing at that time in the Western world, Europe would have had little to criticize Japan for. However, these rights were ultimately limited, and in the Edo period did not apply. In the Meiji period, the one sphere in which 'women' became consolidated as a social category in conjunction with the historical and cultural complexity of Japan's modernity was women's public education.³³

Although the working wife and mother was still considered as something 'unnatural' until the most recent financial crisis, the first changes to women's suppressed role were made by the aforementioned public education for women, especially by the Second World War, in which almost 25 million women were involved in social activities.³⁴

After the war, women were given rights of equal treatment and protection by the Constitution of 1946. These rights were described in Articles 14 and 24 as follows:

"All the people are equal under the law and there shall be no discrimination in political, economic or social relations because of race, creed, sex, social status or family origin" (Article 14);

"(1) Marriage shall be based on the mutual consent of both sexes and it shall be maintained through mutual cooperation with equal rights of husband and wife as a basis.

³² Hiroko Storm, 'Women in Japanese Proverbs', *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 2, 1992, pp. 168–169.

³³ Miyako Inoue, 'Gender, Language, and Modernity: Toward an Effective History of Japanese Women's Language', *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 2002, p. 397.

³⁴ Teruji Suzuki, 'Women's Rights...', p. 242.

(2) With regard to choice of spouse, property rights, inheritance, choice of domicile, divorce and others pertaining to marriage and the family, laws shall be enacted from the standpoint of individual dignity and the essential equality of the sexes".³⁵

Although the Constitution gave equal rights to women and men, echoes of previous systems, especially of the *ie* institution, based on the Confucian philosophy still remain in Japanese society. Behavior deriving from this institution, defined in the Civil Code of 1898, in which the oldest man in the family was given the supreme authority, can be observed in Japanese people in their fifties or sixties, i.e. those whose working life fell during Japan's great economic boom in the 1980s. The beneficial economic situation allowed women to take care for their family and household, while their husbands made money in companies. The situation changed with the crises beginning in the 1990s, and some women had to take on activities outside their houses to earn money to support the family. This situation separated those families which could still support themselves from the husband's income alone from those which had to change the *ie* tradition and send their women to work. Nonetheless, it was a great step toward changing the social situation of Japan, and its effects have lasted until now.

The status of women has been changing since World War II, but among the challenges that the new situation brings to Japanese females is the inflexibility of the labor force, which can be presented as an M-shaped curve, as below:

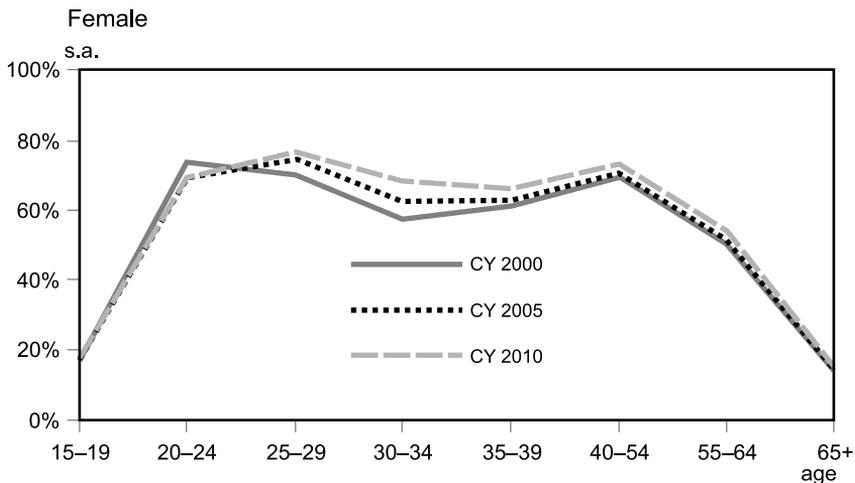


Figure 1. Lifecycle Profiles³⁶

³⁵ Teruji Suzuki, 'Women's Rights...', p. 243.

³⁶ Hiroshi Kawata, Saori Naganuma, 'The Labor Force Participation Rate in Japan', *Bank of Japan Review*, December 2010, https://www.boj.or.jp/en/research/wps_rev/rev_2010/data/rev10e07.pdf (accessed 20.08.2013).

Over the last 13 years, the M-shaped curve has become flatter each year, which means that many women have been combining their work with bringing up their children. This may be the effect of both the changing social role of women, which is caused by global trends, and the economic situation in the last two decades, which has forced Japanese females to join their duties towards company and family. But it is still women, not men, who give up their work and take care of the children.

Furthermore, according to a survey compiling results from Japan's *Vital Statistics* and the *ILO Year Book of Labor Statistics*, the number of working women has risen since the 1980s, but great social problems will be brought about by the rapid decrease in the fertility rate, as shown in the following graph:

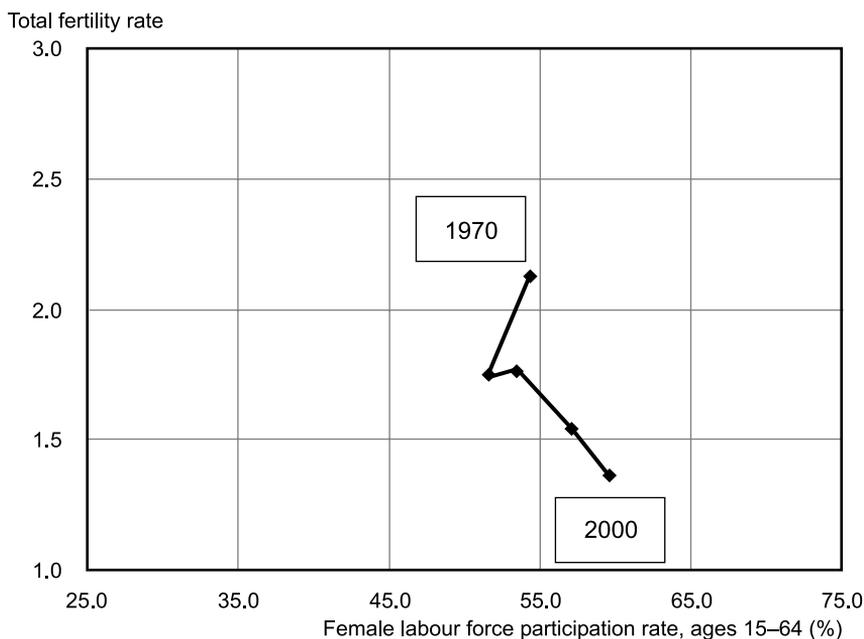


Figure 2. Changes in Japan's total fertility rate and female labor force participation rate: 1970, 1980, 1985, 1990, and 2000³⁷

Nonetheless the situation of women graduates who found positions at work in 2012 is ambiguous. When we consider all females who completed their education last year, the numbers seem to be optimistic, because 60% of those graduates who found new jobs were women. However if we skip those who got jobs in nursing³⁸, one can find that only 34% of new employees are women:

³⁷ 'International Comparison of the Social Environment Regarding the Declining Birthrates and Gender-Equality, Summary Report', http://www.gender.go.jp/english_contents/basic_data/resarches/pdf/english-1.pdf (accessed 20.08.2013).

³⁸ The nursing profession is exclusively occupied by women in Japan, whereas almost all doctors are men.

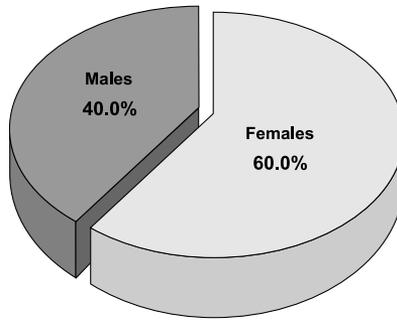


Figure 3. Total number of graduates who found jobs in 2012³⁹

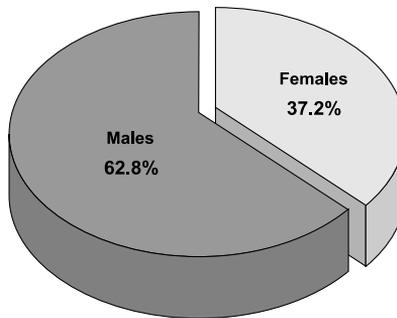


Figure 4. Graduates who found their jobs in other professions than nursing in 2012⁴⁰

It shows that although women can find jobs after graduation, the labor market is divided into those addressed toward men and women. So, there are jobs available for women but those dedicated toward men are harder obtainable for female graduates.

This trend is confirmed by a report published on gender equality and female participation, in which the percentage of women who took part in activities related to the Great East Japan Earthquake was. We may see that the proportion of women on Reconstruction Planning Committees in 2012 was very low. Only in one prefecture (Aomori) were even a quarter of the committee members women, while in the Fukushima prefecture there were less than 5% of women among the members. This example is significant, even if the Japanese government selected women for the Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission.

³⁹ *Dokuritsugyōsei hōjin'nado josei sankaku jōkyō chōsa no kekka ni tsuite* [On the results of a survey on female participation situation by the Independent Administrative Institution], Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2012, http://www.gender.go.jp/research/kenkyu/sekkyoku/pdf/h241214_iaa.pdf (accessed 20.08.2013).

⁴⁰ *Ibidem.*

Table 1. Proportions of women on Reconstruction Planning Committees⁴¹

Prefecture	Committee members	Of which women	Percentage of women
Aomori	12	3	25.0%
Iwate	19	2	10.5%
Miyagi	12	1	8.3%
Fukushima	23	1	4.3%

How does this situation refer to the rights that Japanese women received in the 1980s and 1990s? In the 1947 parliamentary elections, which were the first to give equal rights for women and men, 40 women were elected for the first time in the history of Japan.⁴² Even though such extraordinary changes have taken place in Japanese society, almost 40 years later there were still discriminatory practices, which obliged the Japanese government to implement new laws which could make the situation of women easier.

The Japanese Equal Employment Opportunity Act (EEOA), was initially enacted in 1985 and took effect in 1986. The main changes of the EEOA were conducted in 1999 and 2007. It was a great step towards changing the situation of women on the labor market. Nevertheless it did not lead to women combining family and work duties. First, the EEOA contributed to the employment of highly educated women who are younger than 40.⁴³ Second, those women, who took advantage of the improvements guaranteed by EEOA, often marry later or stay single.

There is also the problem of the gender wage gap, as women receive lower relative wages compared to their male counterparts.⁴⁴ This shows inequality, regardless of the legal regulations.

In 1999 Japanese government enacted a Law on Equal Participation in Socio-Political Activities to make women take an active part in the social and political environment. The effect was 2400 women elected all over the country in 2000, 36 seats in the lower house of the National Diet and 43 seats in the upper house held by women.⁴⁵

These examples show that even if the situation of women improves in the labor market, it causes further social problems, such as birthrate decline. This will force the Japanese government to implement new policies, such as encouraging fathers to take active part in bringing up their children, which is a brand new model in the structure of Japanese society.

⁴¹ 'Disaster Prevention and Reconstruction from a Gender Equal Society Perspective. Lessons from the Great East Japan Earthquake'. From the *White Paper on Gender Equality 2012. Summary*, Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, June 2012, http://www.gender.go.jp/english_contents/about_danjo/whitepaper/pdf/ewp2012.pdf, p. 14.

⁴² Teruji Suzuki, 'Women's Rights...', p. 246.

⁴³ Yukiko Abe, 'Long-Term Impacts of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act in Japan', *Japan Labor Review*, Vol. 10, No. 2, Spring 2013, p. 22.

⁴⁴ Yukiko Abe, 'Long-Term Impacts...', p. 28.

⁴⁵ Teruji Suzuki, 'Women's Rights...', p. 248.

Conclusion

To sum up, Confucian values had a great impact on Japanese society, even if unconsciously. The morals implemented in the Tokugawa period, which continued through the Meiji era, remained in the social values and behavior, even though they were erased by post-war policymakers.

The attitude towards the role of women was similar in other societies which implemented Confucian teaching. We may even specify the role of the woman as a person who takes care of the home and children, which was similar in China, Korea or Japan. But the contemporary situation varies depending on the political or social system in each specific country.

In Japan, the equality of men and women was implemented by the Constitution, given to the Japanese nation by the Americans. Nevertheless, the economic situation of Japan allowed the patterns described by Confucius to continue and left women at homes, fulfilling their duties as housewives and preserving the social patterns introduced ages ago.

However, the economic crisis in Japan forced the government to implement new laws which enabled women to undertake other activities than those related to running the household. This gave rise to new problems, such as a falling percentage of marriages, low birthrates and an aging population.

The only solution for these problems seems to be a total move away from the social roles described by Confucius and his disciples for both women and men, and to create a brand new society with brand new social patterns.

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