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Performing Japanese-ness:
Tatemae pressure and negotiating the hegemonic
scripts of Japanese-ness and gender norms

ANDREW VALENTI

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Introduction

How to assess the relationship between the individual and broader society has been a recurrent theme underpinning many sociological and anthropological works. Throughout the years, many scholars have investigated this interrelation between a normative structure and how and to what extent the individual fits into this, or suffers in relation to social pressure to fit in. Kurt Lewin, the father of social psychology, argued that the social environment must be considered more carefully to understand people in their entirety (Wheeler 2008). On the other hand, the anthropologist Mary Douglas in the book *Natural Symbols* identifies a much more intricate relationship which she defines as two types of bodies – the “human body” and the “social body” – writing about how there is no natural body, but it is always a social project, often brought to conform itself to external social pressure (Douglas [1970] 2003, in Pountney & Maric 2015, p. 34).

In the case of Japanese society, one of the most common social phenomena highlighting the complex relation of the individual-society as intertwined is the notion of *tatemae* 建前. This phenomenon shows the way people act under the influence of a strong ‘social gaze’ of internalized social expectations according to societal hierarchical positioning and social norms. The origins of this contemporary social gaze have been explored as a literary genre diffused in postwar Japan, now referred to as the *Nihonjinron*. The purpose of *Nihonjinron* literature was not to represent Japan in its complexity or diverse reality; rather, it aimed to create a commonly shared culture and cultural perspective to explain the Japanese as a homogenous group that can be recognized and accepted by everyone (Goodman 2005, 69). One of the reasons that justify the social gaze

of *tatemae* is the mainstream idea for which at the basis of the Japanese culture is the presented notion of a desire to maintain social harmony more than valorize individuality.

Such “national values” that were created and represented by *Nihonjinron* literature were and continued to be transmitted from elementary schools onwards. Children are taught in explicit and implicit ways to understand the importance of the group and to act for collectivity’s sake as a “proper” and “moral” Japanese person. As they grow up and advance in their scholastic parcourse, the stressful situations they have to face in response to external expectations, however, have also shown to increase the social pressure to fit into the group evermore.

Another aspect generated by the strong social gaze of *tatemae* is gender expectation. Since the 1990s, the Japanese government has been trying to take measures in promoting gender equality (Osawa 2005). Yet, the dominant notion, which is also presented by the media, is the stereotyped one of men as breadwinners and women as homemakers. This results in gender scripts to follow create different social worlds for both. In the case of women, the influence of the prewar ideal of *ryousai kenbo* 良妻賢母, or “good wife, wise mother”, is still strong as most recent research continues to indicate. Children are taught, since their youth, to act appropriately for this gendered division of social roles. As a result, also reported in the journal *Scientific Report*, is the development of gender biases already from preschool age, with kids associating the idea of kindness with girls and intelligence with boys¹.

Despite the prevalence of this dominant discourse, Japanese society is much more diverse and is changing. However, the constraint imposed to try to fit the above-

¹ <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/10/30/national/children-gender-stereotypes>.

mentioned expectations derived from the idea of the “uniqueness” of Japanese society as pictured by *Nihonjinron* generates a sense of inadequacy for many Japanese people as found in research and as discussed in this thesis. In addition, gendered expectations also seem to represent the main cause of gender inequality, making Japan in the lowest strata of the gender gap ranking (in 2022, 116th out of 146 countries), as well as placing it last among the Group of Seven Industrialized Nations (G7)².

In this thesis, I aim to demonstrate some of the ways as to why and how Japanese society is still largely subjecting people to the internalized sense of *tatemae*; despite this country being more variegated than the way it is presented by the *Nihonjinron* discourse summed up by Goodman as the creation of Majority Culture (Goodman 2005), the difficulty for people, in particular Japanese, in feeling the pressure to identify themselves with what society expects of them; especially if they want to work in Japan, this leads to a sense of stress and anxiety. This thesis investigates first-hand how such experiences play out.

In order to listen to the experiences directly of relevant youths, I conducted interviews with 17 students aged 18 to 23. This included Japanese students born and raised in Japan; Japanese or half-Japanese students who moved to Japan for their studies; and international students with different experiences living in this country. This is described in more detail in the methodology chapter. I chose this diversified group to be able to observe and explore in more depth how and if Japanese social pressure works in relation to nationality or specific social experience of growing up or living in Japan; from

² <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/07/13/national/gender-gap-ranking>.

previous observations and conversation it was assumed, and also found that a stronger sense of “social obligation” would be felt by the Japanese or Japanese-look-alike students.

Chapter I: Literature Review

1.1. Discourse on Japaneseness

“Who are the Japanese?” was an overarching question asked by what later became constituted under the name of *Nihonjinron*. One of the main critiques raised against the *Nihonjinron*, which literally means “theories about Japanese people”, is that it tried to answer this question in a too simplistic way, contributing to creating what Roger Goodman defined as “Majority Culture” (Goodman 2005). Goodman outlined how trying to condense some kind of essence of Japanese society in a static and approximative system has led to also its mystification. As a consequence, it is possible to find, among the characteristics of Japan, things such as its sense of groupism, its focus on maintaining harmony, or exhibited consensus represented as unique Japanese qualities. Based on this, there is a conception and representation of a homogeneous and monolithic society, that as Goodman and others showed blurred an understanding of reality with an ideology and was never representative of the whole reality.

Another relevant element of *Nihonjinron* discourse is the way it is constructed to contrast with supposedly “Western” values. The reasons for creating such binary narratives are of course also historical in that for many years subjected to the control of the U.S., Japan attempted, by using the terminology used by Dean Kinzley, a “reinvention

of tradition” (Goodman 2005, p. 67) to present its own uniqueness and national identity. Concerning this point, Goodman claimed that it is grounded on “the assumption that ‘culture’ is not a given in any society but is socially constructed and manipulated by particular groups with the economic and political power to do so [...]” (Goodman 2005, 67). Constructing ‘culture’ through invented narratives is also what Michel Foucault showed was the power of discourse in constituting what becomes seen as ‘truth’ at particular moments in history, here, upon which the idea of Japanese uniqueness and homogeneity has been built. According to Foucault, discourse indicates the set of communicative patterns used within a political community, by which knowledge is created through framing discursive ‘truths’. In other words, the written and spoken language used to present reality in a society largely influences its perception of the world (Pitsoe & Letseka 2013). Similar to what Goodman wrote, this implies that Foucault’s discourse is “a tool for the social construction of reality [...] an instrument of power and ideological control” (Pitsoe & Letseka 2013, 23). This aspect can be easily observed across Japanese society including in the political field; as an example, in one of his several speeches, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe presented the LDP campaign “Take back Japan”. On that occasion, Abe made use of some dialectic strategies, such as emphasizing Japanese industriousness, to build a “new” strong, kind, and proud (強い *tsuyoi* / 逞しい *takumashii*; 優しい *yasashii*; 誇り悪 *hokoriaku*) Japan by the promotion of its traditions and history (Nakahara 2021), creating the idea of a past Japan in this way and creating a nostalgia for “the good old days” and Japan’s “true” essence.

Through the theory of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, it is possible to look at how this ideology is being reproduced within Japanese society in more detail. Bourdieu

elaborated on the concept of *habitus*, indicating with this term a set of perceptive schemes, including thoughts and actions, common to all the members of the same group, which brings them to judge the world the same way (Wacquant 2008). These unconscious behavioral patterns are internalized by the individuals by way of a continuous exposition of particular social conditions. Therefore, they are shared by people subjected to similar experiences even as each person has a unique individual variant of the common matrix (Wacquant 2008, 267). This results in the acceptance of everyday life, which is taken for granted. Such experience, for Bourdieu, takes the name of *doxa*, “a set of shared opinions and unquestioned beliefs that bind participants to one another” (Wacquant 2008, 270).

‘Culture’ understood in this sense is the embodied way society is reproduced, based upon a discourse that spreads as an ideology and stratifies people in certain ways, according to learned social expectations, norms, and attitudes institutionalized across or rather as making up ‘society’. Through a constant exposition of such discourse, people develop their embodied understanding and disposition, or *habitus*, a set of thoughts that becomes part of their reality and make the order of things seem natural. Once these ideas become firmly rooted within the individual and structured as a society, it leads to what Antonio Gramsci has called “cultural hegemony”. This term identifies the form of a cultural and moral domain of a community; this is what is realized within a ruling group – the representative of the “Majority Culture” – able to impose its direction on social life through daily practices and shared beliefs until this starts to be considered the normality (Lears 1985). Among the cultural aspects that became part of the mainstream ideology in Japan is the dichotomy of man/productive role and woman/reproductive role and which, therefore, sees the male breadwinner as the predominant, hegemonic figure in Japan, as discussed in the next part.

1.2. The performative aspect of gender

In Japan, one of the dominant beliefs of the mainstream culture is the gender division of roles, where the woman is responsible for household tasks and childrearing, while the man is the breadwinner, representing the main (and sometimes the only) family income. Such distinction between gender roles is what Foucault theorized as “dividing practices”, the practice of dividing individuals into categories with the purpose of making them easier to be influenced (Gershoni 2022, p. 4). Therefore, the notion of biological differences between women and men is being perceived as something natural, and the idea of women as the weaker sex has been legitimized (McNay 1992). In this sense, the classification of “male” and “female” with their respective unique features has to be considered a social construct as well. The compound of Foucault’s idea of dividing practices and the one elaborated by Gramsci of hegemony, it becomes easy to understand the reason why the figure of the man is predominating in Japan.

Drawing upon this view in elaborating her conception of gender is Judith Butler. According to her, gender is marked by its performativity, coming into existence only through actions carried out by social actors (Ransome 2010). In the first chapter of her book “Gender Trouble”, she observes how “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Salih 2002, p. 55). In other words, the idea of gender is embodied by reiterating certain actions that eventually lead to an embodied *habitus*. One of the implications of that is what some feminist theorists refer to as a gender regime, namely a set of social practices, “each of which has

elements of an ideology built into it [...] but which are most obvious as material practices and structures that constrain and enable social interaction based on the sex and gender of the social actors” (Ransome 2010, 276). Gershoni argued how this ideology can be observed on a daily life basis in the way gender is represented in public and in warning signs. Despite the tempts to increase gender equality, in particular in the work field, through the former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s economic measure of “womenomics”, the way gender roles are represented makes this goal difficult to achieve, as the traditional images of the salaryman and the childbearing woman are still predominant (Gershoni 2022, p. 3). This idea is perpetuated also through media, like manga, particularly common among youth and therefore with a relevant influencing power. In his article, Holtzman (2018) mentions Aya Kanno’s work *otomen* (オトメン), a manga series about Asuka, a high-school male student considered very masculine since his ability in sports such as judo or karate, but that at the same time has a passion for “girly things”, like sewing, cooking, and eating sweet foods. Throughout the manga, Asuka tries to hide his “girly” side, by playing the part of the super-masculine guy. Like other Japanese people, he does not agree with this discourse, nor at the same time contradicts it; therefore, he has to live a double life, where he can do what is socially accepted that a man does in public, while he carries on with his passions considered more appropriate for a girl only in secret.

The above-mentioned theories and ideas about the performative aspect of gender and the way gender norms are constructed are mirrored in the experiences collected through the interviews in this research, effectively showing the practical realization in people’s daily life in Japan of such normative norms and structures, both pointing to how

people negotiate and resist these hegemonic notions of how they ought to behave, but also the existence of a strong level of social pressure to conform to *tatemae* expectations.

Chapter II: Methodology

2.1. Focus and limitations of this research

The main core of my research focus is on where *tatemae* in Japan is generated from and how influential it is in people's life. To have a deeper comprehension and understanding of such social processes, I conducted 17 open-ended ethnographic interviews. The interviewees are all Soka University students aged 18 to 23, including Japanese students born and raised in Japan; Japanese or half-Japanese students who moved to Japan for their studies; students from Korea, with an Asian perspective, and South America, with a Western background, living in Japan for more than one year. As mentioned at the end of the introduction, I chose this diversified group to be able to observe how Japanese social pressure works differently according to people's nationality and background and to understand if such a phenomenon of a specific Japanese social gaze has a stronger impact on Japanese or Japanese-look-alike students. To preserve their privacy, I use fictional names.

Although it has been a choice that took a long time to be completed, I decided to conduct interviews talking directly to people to listen and understand their specific experiences and points of view – something that is impossible to pursue through generalized questionnaires. I initially began using questionnaires but found that as many times I needed to add follow-up questions, and experienced how constraining and limited this methodology was when the aim was not to achieve more superficial generalized data but an in-depth understanding of complexity. As expected, in the case of the Japanese interviewees, getting them to share their real opinions has been revealed to be a hard task as many preconceived ideas about what an “interview” is existed. Most of them came to behave somehow formal despite a relationship of friendship that bonded us. In some cases, I was asked whether the answers I got were pertinent to my topic revealing to me in a way exactly the topic I was exploring, how one feels one should conduct oneself according to a certain standard of “correctness”. To make them more at their ease, I then sometimes pretended to conclude the interview, while keep asking them questions. It was interesting to see how they would start sharing with me more about their point of view, putting aside their *tatemaie*, or public performance. Naturally, after making them realize that it was what I was doing, I always asked them for their permission for using such material for my thesis. Hopefully, they also came to look in different ways at this issue loosely referred to as *tatemaie*.

2.2. Interviewees presentation

Hiromi, 21, and Koichi, 20 years old, are both from the region of Kyushu, where they studied before moving to Soka University. Hiromi came back from her study abroad

program in Canada a few weeks before our interview, where she experienced for the first time by herself a brand-new culture. She likes living in Japan, but her Canadian experience made her open her eyes in front of the actual problems in Japan related to social pressure and gender disparity, and her desire is to apport a valid contribution to change such situations. Koichi, instead, is still unsure about his future, although he too mentioned his preference for living outside of Japan due to the too strong social pressure of his country.

Yuto is a 20-year-old student from Kanagawa. He is currently living by himself in Hachioji, close to the University campus, where he said he prefers to stay because of the higher chance to interact with international students. He in fact shared with me how it is easier for him to interact with non-Japanese students, due to his straightforward personality.

Hinako comes from Shizuoka, and she is 20 years old. She shared with me since the beginning how her studies and efforts are oriented toward having a chance to live outside Japan one day. Her English level is in fact very good, and she experienced, even if just for a short period, life abroad.

Yumi is from Tokyo, and she is 23. She studied abroad for a short period, but her high knowledge of Japanese culture as well as the various social issues affecting Japan derives from the fact that she is majoring in Japan Studies.

Kentaro, of 21, like Hiromi and Koichi, comes from Kyushu and he spent his formative years there, moving to Hachioji around 2 years ago. One of the first things he mentioned to me is how Tokyo felt more rigid in its rules and people's relations seemed colder. He does not speak English and he has never traveled outside Japan, so the only

way he experienced an international atmosphere is by interacting with International students.

Megumi and Takahisa are 19 and 23 years old Japanese students that I interviewed together. Megumi is from Tokyo; she shared with me that since she studied at Soka Tokyo Schools, her experience was relatively good (although she mentioned feeling more at ease now that she entered University). Takahisa too studied at Soka School but in Kansai, his city of origin. His personality is incredibly “western-like”, meaning open and free to share his opinions without worrying too much about people’s reactions. He told me how living one year in the U.S. has been influential in developing this behavior, and that because of this he is sometimes judged, but he apparently does not care at all about it.

Yuka and Keiko are two young women of 18 years old that I had the chance to talk to during my part-time job at the University Language Center. They came there to practice their English, and eventually, we finished talking about Japanese and its culture, so I took the chance to ask them some questions that they happily answered. Both of them eventually agreed in being included in this thesis. Both come from Mie prefecture, and their experience is fairly similar (they have never been outside Japan, but they are studying English to eventually be able to experience life abroad soon).

Chikako is a 20-year-old woman from Osaka, where she grew up and studied before coming to live in Hachioji as a student. She has never been outside of Japan and, similarly to some other students I interviewed, the only interaction she had with different cultures is through the international students at the University.

Chihiro is a Japanese student, born and raised in France. She is 23 years old, but she moved to Japan when she was 18 for studying at Soka University. She grew up in a mixed environment, where she learned the Japanese language from her parents, but still

used mainly French in her daily life. Although her perfect ability to speak Japanese as well as her “Japanese appearance”, she says how she does not feel she belongs to this society, since it is too different from her own culture and ways of thinking.

Nanako, 21 years old, is a student born in Japan to Japanese parents, but she moved to Macao when she was still a child, where she grew up and studied until graduating from high school. Same to Chihiro, her Japanese is at native-language level, and in fact, she is seen as a Japanese person until she switches to Cantonese, the language she feels is her primary one.

Hannah, 22, is a half-Australian and Japanese student. She learned Japanese from her mother, but she was born and raised in Australia, where she acquired her cultural background. Although she seems not to have too many problems in conducting a comfortable life here in Japan (also thanks to her language skills), she shared with me her desire to leave this country, as she does not feel it is a good environment where to eventually put her roots in.

Ari and Dal are a 22-year-old young woman and man who moved to Japan from Korea three years ago. Both of them want to go back to Korea after graduating, or in general to another country different from Japan. Ari’s experience focused more on her difficulties in communicating with Japanese here, and how in particular at the very beginning she struggled to understand people’s real intentions. She can also speak in English (during our interview she kept switching from one language to another), but she explained how her behavior somehow changes when she has to speak in Japanese, especially during meetings of her club or seminar, where she feels she carefully has to choose the words to use. Dal instead appeared apparently less affected by Japanese society, where he feels he can be himself without big problems (as this is part of his

personality, he mentioned). Still, he feels how Japanese society gives importance to conformity, with several unspoken rules that are hard to understand if you are a foreigner.

Ana (is this her real name? if so, change it) is from Latin America; she is 22 and she has been living in Japan for more than 2 years. She comes from a Western background, and therefore when she reached out to Japan for the first time, the cultural impact was strong. She did not seem to be too bothered by Japanese culture, also because she knows that her remaining experience here is not long.

Chapter III: Constructing Japanese personhood

In Japan, education is universal, so anyone can access it (at least for its compulsory duration, the first 9 years), and it is supposed to provide not only skill knowledge but also to teach ethics and values of the society in many implicit ways. We can observe this aspect already during kindergarten and, after it, the elementary school, where children are encouraged to live and think not only as individuals, but as part of fitting in with broader group norms and identity: this socialization model takes the name of *shuudan seikatsu* 集団生活, or “group living”. As Cumming argues (1980, in Sugimoto 2021, p. 107), for example, students from a young age are responsible to do tasks such as serving lunch in the classroom or cleaning the premises. According to Cumming, doing these works should help to develop “whole people”, in order to promote equality within the group. This finds some correspondence with Sugimoto’s first of the “four models for understanding Japan”, which is the monocultural model, characterized by group orientation and homogeneity (Sugimoto 2021, p. 29). The importance of group

life is also stressed because part of the reform agenda of education of the past 20 years, as it aimed to form people with “social and emotional skills to sympathize and work well with others” (Cave 2016, 25). In other words, to prepare the future generation of workers to properly fit the Japanese society.

Thus, we can say that if, on the one hand, this approach is fair and equal, and promotes the other’s support as well as discourage competition, on the other hand, the idea and aim of “group living” do not allow students to show their diversity but rather encouraged them and mold them to fit a certain standard that is constructed as being “Japanese”. However, this seems to be in contrast with the stated goal of the reform agenda, to “develop people with individual drive who could think for themselves and come up with creative ideas” (Cave 2016, p. 25). This connects up with exactly what many workplaces and companies in Japan find lacking currently in a globalized economy,³ namely individuals with creative and alternative ideas. What is, then, the main goal of Japanese education, is it developing individuals with a strong sense of self, or as people who act for their group’s sake to maintain the status quo while constraining individual initiative, diversity or new ways of doing things?

An example of this paradox is given by Hendry (2019), who described how children are taught a “proper way” to behave, which means they have to be bright and cheerful and any other behavior becoming labeled as *okashii*, “strange”. Moreover, as observed by Ben-Ari (1997, in Hendry 2019, pp. 64-65), if a child does not join the main group of the class, it is ignored for the sake of the group itself, experiencing social pressure to join in the group to avoid being excluded.

³ <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/japan-innovation>.

I also found this to match what was mentioned in my interviews. Yuto mentioned how, when he was a school student, he felt different from other students because his behavior was far from the other kids, who sometimes labeled him a “weirdo”, of おかし
い, the same term used by Ben-Ari (1997) to describe the school culture dynamics of the primary school he observed. Moreover, without thinking too much about what others could think about him, he often promptly answered the questions asked in class – something that apparently is not done with such vigor, as pupils are expected to show humbleness; for this he was negatively judged by his classmates. This has been confirmed by Kentaro: “At school, girls feel they have to follow the image of the ‘cute Japanese girl’ that they may have learned from the media or by watching their favorite idols, so they are all apparently shy and they barely answer questions in class for not being spotlighted”. Hiromi also shared with me her perspective as a Japanese girl related to this point: “When I was at school, I could not always voluntarily answer the questions that were asked. This is because, as a Japanese girl, I should not stay under the radar, but rather I have to act in a ‘standard way’”. She further explained to me that with “standard way” she meant the general stereotyped idea that people have about Japanese girls, which is being kind, gentle, humble, and so on. In trying to find a reason for this, Hinako said how actually they are not directly taught such things at school. Rather, they learned this “proper way to behave” by observing the world around them and eventually doing what everyone does. Eventually, all the students end up acting similarly to the others due to social pressure, unspoken but always present. She explains, “we are not taught such behavioral manners, still we can feel when something is correct or not, there is a sense of ‘social obligation’ that is always there”.

In addition to this, *shuudan seikatsu*, or ‘group activities’ play an important role in influencing students’ minds. Talking to Yuka I have learned how belonging to a specific group is essential for not being judged negatively, and that’s also why many students decide to enter a club or a circle during their school life. “If you don’t do so, you may be easily excluded and even bullied”, she explains. In this group interview, Keiko followed up by saying how many times she had to follow what her group was doing despite sometimes it was in contrast to her own opinion, so as not to stand out and being left behind. “This made me really stressed because my will and my actions were not going in the same direction”. A similar experience came from Takahisa as well. When he was a high school student, he was part of the baseball club. There, he had to conform to many rules, although unspoken and non-mandatory, such as shaving his head, to conform to the group. “You must belong to a group: staying alone is definitely not seen as a positive thing”, which made him conform to certain group behaviour. Megumi, whom I interviewed together with Takahisa, agreed with him, sharing with me that she had the same experience since she was a junior high school student. “Now that I am at the University, I feel I can be a little bit more myself, compared to the past. But still, sometimes I have the fear to be judged if I get too far ‘from the group’ in my opinions and my actions”.

In this way, the social gaze reveals to be greatly influential for Japanese people, who grow up giving more importance to maintaining a sense of status quo rather than showing their real feelings or acting the way they would like, feeling fear of being ostracized or lack of belonging.

3.1. “Never been outside but want to go overseas to acquire a more open mind!”

The sense of social constraints the Japanese interviewees were feeling strongly emerged as they started to ask about their experience abroad. Some of them have never traveled outside Japan, and the only international experience they have had is interacting with foreign students at the University. However, something that all of them shared is the (stereotyped) idea that life outside Japan is subjected to fewer limitations and rules. Yuto mentioned how life abroad is attractive to him because “they can speak freely, act freely, do whatever they want without thinking about what people think of them. In other words, they have a completely different mindset, less stressful”. The same was for Chikako, who explained to me that, although she thinks to be mainly on the loose by all the Japanese social rules, in particular since she started University, she still thinks there are situations in which she has to pay extra attention to the environment around her when doing something, “for not bothering others”. However, she added, “in my opinion, there is no need for this *kenson bunka* 謙遜文化 (culture of being humble, which she further defined as a culture where people should refrain from being really themselves). Rather, people should express more freely their personalities and their opinion. Like you European guys do (indicating me)”. Koichi, who instead lived in Australia for a short period, shared with me how he is conscious that things such as hiding one’s *honne*, or true feelings can be found not only in Japan. “In a sense, we can define it as *kyōshiki* 常識 (good sense), and that’s fair enough. But I think that here the main problem is that many people are too worried about the image others have about them, about how they appear in public: that’s why they are not likely to speak out”.

3.2. When appearances are deceiving: how aspect influences social judgment

As previously mentioned, *tatemae* is a characterizing aspect of Japanese society, and people have certain expectations towards the Japanese, and consequentially towards all those looking like Japanese. Such phenomenon comes from the assumption that all Japanese are one unique, homogeneous group that shares the same beliefs – an idea based upon the discourse of Japaneseness, as argued by Goodman (2005). An example that confirms this theory is the experience of Chihiro, a student born and raised in France in a Japanese family. Thanks to her parents, she could learn Japanese at home, and once arrived in Japan, she did not face any linguistic barriers. However, the first difficulty emerged once she realized that people here were not looking at her as a *gai kokujin*, but as a Japanese person. “When I was in France, I could feel I was diverse from others due to my cultural roots, I could identify myself more as a Japanese. When I arrived in Japan, though, I gradually started to feel I was not belonging in this country. Now I feel more like a French person in Japan”. The major source of stress eventually came from the environment, by what people were expecting from her. “There are various aspects of this culture I don’t like, such as the strong formality you should maintain when you are outside. I feel my behavior has changed since I came here, but it can’t be helped, my name is Japanese, and my aspect is Japanese, so people expect me to have certain manners. However, since I didn’t grow up here, there are many things that I don’t know, and so people sometimes think I am a not well-educated Japanese”.

A similar experience is shared by Nanako, a Japanese student who was born in Japan and eventually moved to Macao, where she studied before coming back here. “My

parents are Japanese, but I feel more Chinese because Macao is the place I grew up. But now that I am in Japan, I can't choose: for people, I am Japanese, or at least until they don't hear me speaking in Cantonese". I eventually asked her what this implies: "I have to be aware of all the tacit rules that are part of this society, such as behaving accordingly to certain situations, or being able to use properly the 敬語 (formal language). This is what Japanese etiquette requires". A slightly different case, but with similar outcomes, is the one of Hannah. She is in fact half-Japanese, born and raised in Australia. Differently from Nanako and Chihiro, she is not looked at as Japanese. Yet, people around her have some assumptions, as she is expected to know better than others how Japanese society works. "I was part of a club at the University a few years ago. There I found a high-context hierarchical and inflexible group, far from my personality. For example, one of the rules was to greet each of the *senpai*, something extremely formal for me. No one, however, explained to me what I had to do: I was simply expected to be able to do everything correctly. I felt like an outsider, and probably since I am half-Japanese the pressure I felt at that time was stronger. There I noticed how different I was from other Japanese. I eventually left the club".

We can see how some aspects related to the constructiveness of Japaneseness emerged and are felt by foreigners who, even though they don't look Japanese, they felt a strong sense of social gaze. However, according to the interviews that I lead, the degree of influence to which they are subjected is determined by their cultural background. In the case of Ari and Dal, as Korean culture is close to the Japanese one, they did not have particular difficulties fitting into this society. "To be honest, I know that I am not aware of many social issues because Korea is sort of the same", stated Ari, who explained to me

how *tatemae* is a phenomenon that you can find also in her country (although she used this term with the meaning of “put a good face on it”). “Japanese *tatemae* is different, and many times it’s really hard for me to understand what people really want to say. Getting closer to people may be a tough task sometimes”. She also mentioned how, despite her skills in English being lower than in Japanese, she feels more at ease talking in this language as she does not have to think too much about what words and expressions to use. “I am studying in a Japanese faculty, which means that I mainly have to talk with Japanese speakers in my daily life. When I have to write down an email or participate in a discussion in class, I feel really nervous, because I can’t freely express my opinions, and I can’t openly say that I agree or disagree with something”. The same point of view has been shared also by Dal. “Maybe, considering my personality I don’t have many problems in being myself here in Japan. However, in Japan, there are many unspoken rules, something that people don’t teach you. The social expectation is really strong, and I can see around me here at the University how many Japanese students can’t express their real selves because of this. For me is not such a big deal since I will most likely go back to Korea once I graduate, but still sometimes is nerve-wracking”.

Very different, instead, seemed to be the experience that I could hear from Ana, who has a cultural background far from the Japanese one. In fact, when I asked her about her experience in Japan, she shared a very positive perspective. “The opportunities here, compared to my country, are way higher, and at the same time this is a safer place, so I must say I feel really good being here. Culturally speaking, Japan is poles apart, but that’s normal, it’s part of the diversity you can find in the World”. Despite that, she was totally aware of the pressure generated by social expectations, but differently from the other interviewees, she was not apparently feeling affected by it. “Sometimes I can feel people’s

eyes on me, but I don't feel I have to change anything about myself. Maybe, at the very beginning, I was afraid of breaking some rules, but now I'm more confident in living here, and I don't care at all about what people may think of me".

With what emerged from these interviews, it has been possible to confirm the important role played by schools in constructing personhood, namely a particular type of representative of people – that is what Cumming (1980, in Sugimoto 2021, 107), defined as “whole people”. In this context, the group acquires the main importance while the individual personality fades into the background. In this way, people struggle in standing out from their group; in other words, it becomes hard for them to go against the predominant collective *habitus*. Similarly resulted for Japanese or half-Japanese people grew up outside who, because of their cultural identity and their appearance, are subjected to strong pressure as they requested to act accordingly to the social norms of this country, to share the same *doxa*. This is the milestone in developing a sense of a “homogeneous society” (Goodman 2005). Dissimilar has been the case for International students, who appeared to be influenced to different degrees, but they showed a higher sense of freedom from such social restrictions compared to Japanese and half-Japanese students, even as they become aware of such social pressure to conform to certain expectations they maintain a stronger ability to negotiate these tacit rules.

Chapter IV: Changing gender relations in contemporary Japan

A basic point to discuss is how gender inequality somehow continues to be central to structuring Japanese society. I here start with the assumption, adopted by the feminist social theory starting from the last century, that gender is both culturally and socially

constructed, and moreover, that it is actively and consciously produced by social actors (Ransome 2010, 270). Gender ideals have been shown to be also an ideology, as argued for example by Connell (2008), something that is generated especially through social structures and institutionalized practices where the interactions both institutionally and personally in the everyday life are built upon certain assumptions about gender. In Japan, a significant example of this process is provided by the school setting. Belarmino and Roberts (2019) have observed how gender expectations at schools are different for boys and girls. In their research, they found, for instance, how in some cases there is preferential treatment of boys, as they are generally called on to answer questions in class before the girls (Belarmino & Roberts 2019, 281). This is part of constructing a culture and attitude of privilege and hierarchies that come to be seen as natural for children growing up in this social environment to see men in leading roles and women as assistants or in supportive roles.

4.1. The advantage of being a man in Japan

What was discussed as reported above by Belarmino and Roberts (2019) in relation to gender expectations has come out of the interviews that I conducted as well. Talking with Hiromi, I have learned that, as a girl, she was taught the importance of being humble, something resonating as attractive in the Japanese context where such specific cultural parameters are set for expectations towards appropriate behavior of girls. “As a Japanese girl, I got to learn that I should not stay ‘under the reflectors’ (meaning that they should not stand out), so I always had to act in a ‘standard way’, which means acting as all the girls do. In this sense, I could not, for example, voluntarily answer all the questions

that were asked in class (even if I knew them): first I had to wait for someone else willing to do that – usually a boy – and then maybe sometimes I could give my answer. Even here at the University, you can still see this thing happening. Girls never raise their hands, and neither do I.” Kentaro mentioned something similar but adding new details. “Girls at school are usually really influenced by *manga* and *anime* characters, or by popular idols, which embody an idea of ‘purity’ of ‘cute Japanese girl’. I think that this is an additional reason why they are all shy and barely answer questions in class in front of everyone.” Yuto explained to me that there are some tacit rules that everyone knows and should follow to not stand out negatively. One of them is letting the boys cover leadership roles since it is generally sensed that this is not something appropriate for girls. “I remember that, during the sports festivals, girls were not even taken into consideration if we had to decide on a group leader. It was not only us but also professors who did not usually give them the chance to do so”. Not only girls, however, but also boys are negatively affected by these social norms at school, being unable to express their personalities and rather finding themselves to conform with the majority. Koichi, for example, told me about a monthly routine in his school for checking students’ hair length. “Boys’ hair had to be right above the ears, no longer than this. You could not protest against it, that would have influenced professors’ opinions about you. School is the place I have experienced gender disparity the most, but I could realize how weird and pointless are these rules are just once I left Japan and I could see how people in another country live. Why people can’t just be themselves?”, he sighed in frustration. Throughout all the interviews, however, what also emerged was how everyone agreed that living in Japan as a boy is incomparably easier than being a girl. “There are no doubts that boys are definitely freer than girls, who have to learn to follow behavioral rules since from school, such as us sitting down

properly, speaking properly, don't be rude, and so on. Compared to them, we can basically do whatever we want. I also think that life for girls here must be stressful: they have more limitations, for example at night, while we can go around without any worries" Kentaro explained. "It's definitely easier for a man to live in this society than for a girl. We have more opportunities, better chances, and fewer expectations that we need to respect," were comments followed up by Yuto.

Although all the Japanese girls I interviewed said to feel more unrestrained by these rules than the above comments may indicate, they also admitted to being still largely influenced by the opinion that people around them may have. Hinako defined it as a sense of social obligation, "which is constantly there, I can feel it everywhere, it can't be helped". When I asked her to elaborate, she eventually answered "it's the 周りの目, the gaze from people around me." Using this expression together with 人目, literally 'the eyes of people', she indicated the constant pressure derived from the felt gaze of those around her, and broader gendered societal norms and values. "That's why even now that I am at University, I can't behave as I want. Every time I try to do so, I am judged for it. One day because I don't put make-up on, appearing too shabby in front of people's eyes, another day because I speak too frankly, and that's not something that a graceful girl should do".

How to then appear in public emerged to be an important aspect of their daily life for almost all the Japanese female interviewees, even for those who experienced life abroad, free of this social gaze being out of the Japanese social and cultural context. Hiromi, for example, had just come back from a 4-month-long experience in Canada and the United States, where she learned how to live in accordance with her will, or how she

wanted to live rather than according to the felt people's potential judgment. "For example, the first time I wore a pair of shorts was when I went to Canada a few months ago. Everyone there put on whatever they want. When, on my social media, I started posting photos of myself (something that here in Japan I would barely do, to not appear too vain to others), my female friends texted me, saying that Canada was changing my personality, that Hiromi was not that person. (but) It was still me, I was just free". I eventually asked her if, after this period outside Japan, she was able to keep acting as she used to do in Canada. I proposed to her to try to sit down at her ease, as she was assuming the classical "formal sitting style" that girls are taught as a way to express their interest in listening to their interlocutor, symbols of an earnest personality that is presented as attractive in Japan, and a way of showing their sincerity⁴. She explained she eventually gave up behaving in a freer way according to herself, and also here in front of me gave up sitting in a more relaxed way after a few seconds. "If I wasn't in Japan, I would do that without any problems. But here, I naturally feel constricted to behave like a 'standard Japanese girl'. It's stronger than me, it's something that no one tells you, but you feel you have to do. It happened also a few days ago. I had an interview, and we were told to wear anything we wanted, but I thought that since I am a girl, wearing a white t-shirt would be better, to display a cleaner and more ordinate image of myself". Thus, we see here the felt existence of a social gaze particular to gender expectations that have a strong influence on personal behavior with potentially much wider implications for personal inspirations, fulfillment, and broader societal change in terms of gender parity.

⁴ <https://aikatu.jp/archives/472961>.

4.2. A new generation, a new awareness

Throughout the interviews I conducted, it clearly emerged how all the students are keenly aware of the strong pressure their environment exerts on them. In many cases, according to the opinions I could hear from them, gender inequality deriving from social expectations is so rooted in society that it is still very hard to change. However, the efforts to go against this system certainly are not lacking, from both the boys' and girls' sides I could also detect a strong agency and wish for change. "I think that being a girl in Japan is very hard sometimes, you can feel people's eyes many times wherever you go: on the bus, walking on the street, and also at the university. For example, recently I was told by a professor that I should pay more attention to my outfits, that my skirts are too short. "*Onna no ko rashii*" is perceived as a compliment here in Japan for girls. However, this definition may not fit all the girls' personalities. It definitely does not fit mine, but I don't care", is the experience coming from Chikako who is strongly aware that she does not want to be molded into this idealized type set by Japanese norms for girls and women. Yumi shared with me how she is concretely acting for standing up against what she feels as gender discrimination. "I am aware I daily live accordingly to a stereotyped image of the woman for Japanese. I am trying to challenge such stereotypes, though. In this last period, I was busy with 就活 (job hunting), and I knew that if I wanted to have a chance to get the job, I had to conform to some social rules, such as putting makeup on and wearing a skirt, since I am a woman. But when I was asked what I am studying and what I am interested in, I thought that it was the perfect moment to speak out. So, I shared with

the interviewer that thanks to my actual studies, I am ever more aware that women are constrained by some social unfair rules, such as having to wear a skirt for an interview, whereas men are freer in this sense. I don't know if speaking openly has been somehow influential in this, but I eventually got the job".

Kentaro too expressed his point of view about gender disparity in Japan. "For me is sometimes hard to live in Japan: I am a boy, so people expect me to work hard, constantly. But if it's so hard for me, I can't imagine how it should be for girls. Being a girl in Japan has definitely more cons than pros, in my opinion". The same position was taken also by Yuto, who clearly states his position against these gender norms. "Girls really have too many rules to follow. On top of that, they are not safeguarded at all. You can see everywhere how much the female figure is very sexualized to please men. I really hate this". Koichi defined such phenomenon as *danson jyoshi* 男尊女卑 (male domination over women), apparently more visible in the areas distant from Tokyo. "In my hometown (in Kyushu), such male chauvinism is really strong. There, we have a saying: 'if a boy is born, it's a stroke of luck'. I have never realized why girls were socialized to obey to social rules so rigorously, compared to boys. But growing up, and in particular, after experiencing a different environment outside Japan, I understood why".

Thus, we can see from these ethnographic interviews that young people clearly experience the gender norms and expectations surrounding them in ways that do not sit easily with who they want to be, or how they would like society to be. All of them indicate a desire for change whereby they could live in ways freer to themselves, less categorized and defined by gender binary norms, the kind of disciplinary power that Foucault argued

makes for ‘governable’ citizens, and clearly also maintain an authoritarian and conservative culture.

Conclusion

Tatema in Japan is a concept that has been supposedly used to describe a key part of Japanese culture more than 1000 years ago (Trinidad 2014). All socio-cultural contexts have certain forms for *tatema*, or expectations of public performativity and publicly felt gaze as to how one is supposed to behave. However, in Japan we can also see a particular post-Meiji and particularly post-1945 form of coherence of a public gaze that continues to be reproduced and contains a strong impact on people’s daily life; much of this social gaze is being reproduced through social institutions such as media and schools, and then play out as a form of strongly felt peer pressure. This contributes to forming certain embodied practices or *habitus* establishing strongly defined boundaries between what is considered normal and what is not; specifically, a generalized and stereotyped notion of Japanese personhood constructed upon the discourse of Japanese uniqueness derived from the *Nihonjinron* type of social practices. Individuals become in turn social actors reinforcing this gap between normality and abnormality in the collective imagery, as also seen in the interviews. The group social force can be felt strongly as a kind of *shuudan seikatsu*, collective daily life and what has turned out to be crucial in making people feel they are wrong in behaving differently, to the point of refraining from expressing their real personality due to the influence of the group gaze. In this thesis, I investigated how such influence, or as argued by Gramsci, cultural hegemony was reflected in the interviews conducted.

In general, all of the interviewees agreed with recognizing the existence, in Japan, of strong social pressure, which has been defined with different terminologies throughout the interviews (建前, 周りの目, 人目, all of them used to indicate the same concept or similar aspects) and has different levels of influence in their life, but with a negative connotation in all the cases. For example, Yuto explained how, since his character differs from the stereotyped one of a “normal” Japanese, he is often judged because he is considered not able to “read the air” (空気を読む), that is, assess the social situation and behave according to expectations as required by ‘mature’ individuals in specific contexts. On his side, he explained how he does not want to suppress his real identity just for living more comfortably in Japan, although this makes it harder to communicate with other Japanese. Hiromi mentioned instead that she was not aware of such a cultural aspect of Japan until she went for studying abroad in Canada some months ago, and then she experienced how free she could be, to do anything she wanted without being subjugated to people’s judgements. However, after coming back to Japan, she found herself constricted to conform again to the “standard” image of a Japanese girl, in particular so as not to be negatively judged by her Japanese friends. This indicates the way peer pressure is a significant lived form of broader societal norms and expectations, that forces people to conform to the mainstream ideology of Japaneseness, or Majority Culture as proposed by Goodman (2005).

It has been also possible to observe how this pressure plays a different role according to people’s appearances. In the case of half-Japanese or Japanese students who grew up outside Japan, the sense of constraint in following the social expectation was stronger, as in the case of Nanako, who mentioned how in many situations she has been

taught how to behave in a proper way for a Japanese, although they knew she was a foreigner. “People tell me I have a ‘foreigner aura’, but still, they expect me to be Japanese. I was even taught how to bow correctly once”. A totally different perception came from Ana, instead, who was born and raised in Latin America in a non-Japanese family. “I will never be the way people want me to be here. I am this way, and they have to accept it. Anyway, I think that Japanese people don’t have much expectation towards *gaikokujin* (foreign people), especially if they come from a Western country”.

Gramsci’s concept of the power of hegemonic discourse and the way these are embodied in everyday behavior as proposed by Bourdieu emerged also in the second part of the research, where I could observe how gender norms are constructed since school. This implies girls being subjected to more manner-rules to follow, also influenced by media, in order to embody the image of the “good Japanese girl”. These behavioral norms have a long tradition as they referred to the woman’s ideal of *ryousai kenbo*. However, as both observed by Okamoto (2013) and emerged from the interview, such norms are still prevalent in many subtle ways nowadays. One of the most shared examples by the students I interviewed was the importance of humbleness to perform their femininity, which resulted in girls withholding from speaking out in class or using a moderate outfit as much as possible. “Even now, at the University, I can see in some of my classes how girls and boys sit down in separate spots, divided from each other, and girls really rarely raise their hand for answering a question in class in front of everyone”, was one of the observations made by Hiromi, who herself admitted to being still largely influenced by those around her, despite her experience abroad let her get to know a different and freer environment.

However, something unexpected at the time I started to work on this research is the great awareness that the interviewees seem to have in regard to the social issues I have discussed. In fact, on the one hand, the issues related to the gender gap appear to be still far from being overcome, as also shown by the latest gender gap ranking⁵. On the other hand, all the students I talked to, regardless of their country and culture of origin, resulted in having different levels of awareness about gender inequality in Japan. As in the case of Yumi, who spoke out in favor of women's positions in Japan during a job interview. "Naturally, I was a bit concerned about the reaction the interviewer might have, but it came out naturally when she asked me to talk more about what I am studying right now. I felt it was the perfect moment for saying something and making my studies to be concrete". Not only female but also male counterparts are well aware of the patriarchal hegemony ruling in Japan, and all of them, despite their different life experiences, expressed their opinion against it. Koichi, for example, mentioned how he had never realized how life for girls could be more rigid until he went to study abroad. "When I was in Australia, I was shocked by how girls and boys had pair opportunities there. In contrast, Japan is lagging too much behind". "There should not be differences in roles between men and women. I don't feel any difference, and I hate the way women are treated here", added Yuto more pessimistically, as for him, he thinks a long time is still needed before gender equality can be realized in Japan as they are so far from the ideal.

In conclusion, I can say that the issues and results emerging from this research imply how escaping from the social judgment generated by the Japanese *tatema* social practices resulted in being a highly complicated matter, especially for young Japanese

⁵ <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/07/13/national/gender-gap-ranking>

people who wish to change what they feel are anachronistic and authoritarian cultural traits; the main reasons are the way that Japan as a place seem anchored in reproducing its patriarchal traditions, having among this outcome a male-centric hegemony, a strongly authoritarian cultural sensibility that work in many subtle ways. Nevertheless, the interview material collected also highlighted the implications of raising consciousness amongst young people of this current reality of social pressure to conform, not the least also due to the greater chances of international cultural exchanges students have compared to the past, and with youth willing to actively speak out in support of creating a more equal social environment in which they can more freely fulfill their dreams and aspirations.

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