

Urban Japanese Housewives: At Home and in the Community.; The Japanese Educational Challenge: A Commitment to Children.



Review Author[s]:
William Kelly

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Urban Japanese Housewives: At Home and in the Community. By Anne E. Imamura. University of Hawaii Press, 1987. x+193 pages. \$18.00.

The Japanese Educational Challenge: A Commitment to Children. By Merry White. Free Press, New York, 1987. x+210 pages. \$18.95.

MUCH good ethnology is inspired by simple puzzles of daily life. The sociologist Anne Imamura found herself in 1970 living on the edge of a *danchi* housing complex and wondering what the women of the *danchi* were doing all day: what went on inside their tiny apartments, what drew them out into the surrounding neighborhood, and how they connected their sense of home and their image of community. These questions eventually provided the basis for a year's fieldwork in 1977-1978 in a western Tokyo bedburb, 'Santama City', which she reports in this engaging volume, *Urban Japanese Housewives*.

Santama City tripled its population in the postwar decades with an influx of families of corporate and government employees, who found housing in company apartments, *danchi* complexes, private rental apartments, condominiums, and single-family houses. In the spirit of the 1970s Age of Localism, the city attempted to integrate the newcomers and revive a civic commitment by constructing new community centers. Imamura based herself in the first of these centers and immersed herself in its program of clubs and activities for the good wives and wise mothers of the New Middle Class. She supplemented these observations with in-depth interviews of fifty housewives and a survey of a larger random sample.

In the late 1970s the Santama housewives juggled the predictable role triad of mother, housekeeper, and wife. Many insisted that these could be combined successfully and satisfactorily, although not without cost. The generally absent husbands and the ever-present young children kept them always on call. They were not captives in their 3DKs, but their felt domestic priorities structured their forays into the outside world. They could fit only the most flexible social activities into their sporadic, small blocks of free time, and their community engagements were limited to and justified as those that complemented their housewife identity. Imamura found that few of these women had any strong, permanent attachments to their neighborhood or city as community, nor did many significantly participate in civic affairs. Most were concerned about maintaining a modicum of cordiality with neighbors, and enjoyed their weekly circles at the community center. Still, the city's programs of institutional and spiritual community-building seem destined to fail. 'Hometown' to these women was a contradiction in terms.

Imamura's profile of the urban housewife reinforces several other studies that have drawn similar pictures, including those of Christie Kiefer, Suzanne Vogel, Takie Lebra, and Linda Perry. Imamura offers two distinctive contributions. The first is to test for the influence of housing type on the housewives' definitions of their roles and their community. Surprisingly, her study suggests that it was only modest and indirect (pp. 63-64). Age, education, and husband's job correlated more strongly.

Secondly, Imamura uses Helen Lopata's 4-stage model of the woman's adult life-course to explore how changing pressures and possibilities reconfigure the housewife's role-set over her adult life. She does this effectively, although she might have drawn more attention to the ironies of each stage. For example, in the absence of in-laws,

parents, and, for that matter, husband, the first years of ‘becoming a housewife’ are often an apprenticeship by mass media. The next several years do bring an ‘expanding circle’ of babies, but also a shrinking world of friends and outside activities, given up for an exclusive concern with one’s children. The ‘full-house plateau’ of her 30s and 40s is in fact a rather empty nest, with the kids at school and *juku* and the husband at the peak of his work commitment. As the children marry and move, she does face a ‘shrinking circle’ in her later years, but in one respect, the retirement of her husband (from *sararīman* to *sodai gomi*) adds an often unwelcome burden to her day. Still, combined with the sample’s variations in housing type, this life-stage model provides an important time-space perspective to her role analysis. This analysis is further enlivened by a set of eight vivid, individual portraits of Santama women (Chapter 9).

That children are the life metronome of Imamura’s women of Santama would come as no surprise to another sociologist, Merry White, whose *The Japanese Educational Challenge* is deliberately styled as a portrait of education, and not merely schooling. That is, like those who demonstrate that secrets of high productivity in Japanese workplaces are not to be found in the atmospherics of company songs and morning exercises, White argues that the successes of Japanese education are located at a more fundamental level than exam scores and fact cramming. Japan is a society ‘mobilized for education’, and the ‘interlocking, overlapping, mutually reinforcing responsibilities’ (p. 73) felt and shared by parents and teachers provide the support and motivation for children to perform and achieve. The disposition to learn is rooted in the nexus of early relationships and fostered by continuing cooperation between home and school. It is this ‘set of environments’ that is White’s subject.

This is a book with a clear message, apparently addressed to an audience of American educators in much the way that Ezra Vogel was trying to shake the stereotypes and shape the opinions of American policymakers in *Japan as Number One*. I have no doubt that, to its credit, it will upset their conventional thinking. To make her case, White usefully surveys a wide range of topics: the history of Japanese education, the contemporary school system from preschool to high school, recent educational reform initiatives, the dynamics of child socialization, and cultural conceptions of childhood and parenting. The author’s overview may be too brief for the specialist, but it does force the reader to contextualize the particulars of classroom and curriculum. Propositions such as ‘the central human relationship in Japanese culture is between mother and child’ (p. 21) may make the timid social scientist wince, but to hold and educate her audience, White must necessarily simplify and generalize.

This is understandable, but I fear that the framework in which she casts her argument will prove misleading. That is, the contrast she draws between American education and Japanese education is one between a system with contradictions and a system without contradictions. American ‘unfettered’ individualist ideals are at odds with institutional imperatives, while the Japanese ideal of a sociocentric self insures that there is ‘no conflict between the goals of self-fulfillment and the goals of social integration’ (p. 27). White certainly knows and occasionally points to problematic elements of Japan’s ‘mobilization for education’. However, if one holds to an identity of interests between individual and society, these are at most only surface difficulties.

Such a characterization misrepresents institutions and attitudes into which are built fundamental tensions and ambivalences. Japanese educational policy, like that of any

present-day nation state, uneasily embodies the competing aims of sorting absolutely for a talented elite and teaching broadly for a trained citizenry. The homeroom at school and the study desk at home; blissful elementary years and anxious secondary-school years; standardization within schools and stratification among schools; public schools and private *juku*. The Japanese arrangements of the 1970s and early 1980s may have distinctively and effectively distributed responsibilities and compartmentalized pressures to obtain practical results while retaining popular support. If so, this was not because of a seamless match of personal aspirations and societal aims, nor because the school experience and schooling outcomes were broadly standardized. Rather it was because the promise of 'new middle class' prosperity and the pressures to follow certain pathways masked (for the moment) underlying antagonisms between a meritocratic standard of achievement and pluralistic conceptions of development.

And outcomes matter. White reports that both mothers and teachers, like tea masters and calligraphers, emphasize process over product: 'understanding "the Way"' is more important than the "perfect" product itself' (p. 99). I do not doubt her; as parent and teacher, I make similar claims. Yet while this may be profound Zen insight, it can be disingenuous education talk. When doing well in school is so firmly linked to getting ahead in society, the products—students for the universities, employees for the workplace, and mothers for the homefront—are very much to the point.

The problem, I believe, is that a direct leap from cultural values to generalized behavior shortcircuits both power and history. Even the chapter on legacies of the past curiously dehistoricizes. It may be true that 'education during the past 200 years . . . has reflected a tenacious consensus that Japanese society should be fully mobilized around and for children' (p. 50). Yet institutional configurations in those centuries were hardly stable; themes and mechanisms of social control and social mobility were variously promoted and subordinated. 'Getting ahead' and 'getting along', as Earl Kinmouth has suggested, have been sharp divisions in Japan's modern educational consensus. Moral Education courses in 1983, for example, may enshrine 'Japanese common sense' (pp. 16–17), but in 1933, they served a more sinister mobilization and a more insidious concern for children. The author is quite right to insist that the particulars of schooling are not easily extracted from the cultural norms of socialization. But it is equally true that these cultural norms cannot be disembodied from their specific historical expressions. As White observes, Japan can serve us not as a model but as a mirror. Still, we must resist the temptation to polish the mirror to a gleam.

One crack in the mirror appears in the light of these two books taken together. Work, family, and school have come to intersect in ways that produce a rigid and pervasive gender tracking of men toward public careers and women toward domestic careers. It is probably unintended, but nonetheless telling, that only one of White's eight sketches of students and teachers is female—the sixth-grader Tomoko. It is no small irony, too, that the 'educational mamas' have been given the central role in reproducing this societal order of men who take care and women who give care.

Both Imamura and White contribute to our appreciation of what Takie Lebra has described as the paradoxical 'constraints and fulfillments' in Japanese women's lives. But they do not adequately incorporate the realities of working into their models of the urban housewife and the educational mama. Housing and education have reinforced one another in postwar Japan as subtle and effective pressures that deny women

public careers yet force them to take paying jobs. The successes of schooling and the satisfactions of mothering must be measured in terms of the restrictive, gendered definitions of professional opportunity and parental responsibility. That is to apply, as White herself would have it (p. 8), a standard, not a model, to contemporary Japan itself.

WILLIAM KELLY
Yale University

Country Textiles of Japan: The Art of Tsutsugaki. By Reiko Mochinaga Brandon. Weatherhill, Tokyo & New York, 1986. Illustrated; viii + 152 pages. ¥4,000 or \$29.95.

Tsutsugaki is a specialized dyeing technique that is characterized by designs of a bold and dramatic nature. On a bridal bed cover (*futonji*) a large phoenix displays its magnificent plumage while sitting among the dense foliage of a paulownia tree. A large ceremonial wrapping cloth displays a pair of colorful mandarin ducks sporting among snow-covered bamboo at the water's edge. These *tsutsugaki* textiles are representative examples of the genre and are two of the pieces illustrated in *Country Textiles of Japan*. The book was published in conjunction with an exhibition of *tsutsugaki* textiles held at the Honolulu Academy of Arts in Hawaii, and most of the pieces shown are from the Academy's own textile collection. Reiko Brandon's account documents the exhibition and presents much background information relevant to the field of Japanese textile history.

The first chapter introduces the art of *tsutsugaki*. The author strikes the proper note both in terms of her style and also in her choice of emphasis. She examines the historical and societal context of *tsutsugaki* textiles, and paints a vivid picture of rural Japan in the late Edo and Meiji periods. She subtly leads the reader to an awareness of not only the art object itself and its contextual environment, but also the people who made and used *tsutsugaki* textiles.

The close interplay of textile production and consumption that has been evident in Japan, particularly in the countryside, is a theme introduced in the first chapter and elaborated upon in the second. Today the consumer is removed from the sources of production and usually does not understand or appreciate the process. In earlier and less technological cultures the producer and consumer were often one and the same person. Specialized textile skills, when needed, were provided by textile artisans, who were well-known and respected members of their communities. Whether the textile was produced at home or purchased from a local artisan, the consumer understood the value of the end product. Such awareness and respect for cloth were an integral part of rural Japan and this integration is effectively brought to life in the second chapter, which describes the various functions of *tsutsugaki* textiles. Bed covers, wrapping cloths, banners, and baby towels are among the types of utilitarian textiles that could be decorated using the *tsutsugaki* technique. The country bride took to her new home a dowry of textiles, mainly decorated with bold *tsutsugaki* designs depicting family crests and auspicious symbols.

The following chapter considers the topic of motifs. Many surviving *tsutsugaki*