

Steger, Brigitte & Angelika Koch (eds). *Cool Japanese men: studying new masculinities at Cambridge*. 233 pp., illus., bibliogr. Zurich: LIT Verlag, 2017. €29.90 (paper)

Japan has long been aware it has a gender disparity problem. The family model centred on female homemakers and male breadwinners became the norm in the post-war decades. While still favoured by many, it has grown ever less attainable in recent years, not least because of the drastic changes in Japan's post-1990s economic landscape. The nation's protracted economic slump has had far-reaching effects for the labour market, increasingly threatening men's ability to follow the established path of landing a corporate job for life and starting a family. It has also laid bare the negative economic and social consequences of the gender imbalance in the workplace and at home. Japan ranked 110th (out of 149) in the World Economic Forum's 2018 Global Gender Gap ranking, far behind other developed economies, scoring especially poorly in categories related to women's economic opportunities and political empowerment. Official initiatives to support women in the workplace have had only limited effects. While the number of female workers has increased in the last few years, the quality of their employment has not – they take up part-time jobs and work in low-productivity sectors. One of the most widely circulated news stories in Japan in 2018, which epitomized entrenched gender interests, revealed the systematic blocking of female applicants by a well-known medical school in Tokyo.

However it is not only women who have to contend with the normative gender ideas. Just as traditional family patterns and the accompanying established gender roles are being challenged in Japan, either proactively or through socioeconomic necessity, Japanese concepts of masculinity are also due for a vital update. *Cool Japanese men*, edited by Brigitte Steger and Angelika Koch, is a collection of articles exploring this subject. This compilation of lively and thoroughly researched chapters introduces us to some of the specific dilemmas Japanese men face when they seek to express their manhood in ways that push at the boundaries of the socially and culturally mandated masculine status quo. Additionally, because men form and act out their masculinities not in isolation but vis-à-vis a female audience, the book provides us with a compelling peek into the ways Japanese women participate in shaping masculine hierarchies.

A common theme that emerges from the book's chapters highlights a departure from seeking work-related fulfilment towards self-fulfilment based to a large extent on leisure activities. Since so many Japanese men's lives today deviate from the traditional patterns prescribed for them by mainstream society, the normative salaryman masculinity embodied by a white-collar worker fiercely dedicated to the company, who is a largely absent husband and father figure, may finally be losing its sway. In this context, *Cool Japanese men* provides interesting insights into the media discourses that help promote new, softer masculinities and some of the ordinary men who try to go against the norm.

Or do they? The book's chapters are right to conclude that many of the changes that purport to chip away at the unbalanced gender dynamic appear to be superficial, if not outright cosmetic, as demonstrated in Tso and Shirota's chapter 3, which discusses the new cultural representations of ideal corporate male appearance and personal etiquette. Even in an ostensibly rebellious and anti-authoritarian setting provided by a mixed-gender university hip hop dance club, the uneven access to reputation-building resources between male and nominally equal female members frustrates the meritocratic potential of dance, as Mesimäki discusses in chapter 4.

Read together, the main chapters can be seen as representing different stages, or aspects, of male Japanese adulthood: starting with a university extra-curricular club, moving on to a corporate job, and finally enjoying family life (Vassallo, chap. 2), or otherwise finding fulfilment through surrogate 'relationships' with female pop 'idols' (Dent-Spargo, chap. 5). This gives the collection a cohesive, common-sense quality, but it also means that the book's range of representation is limited to what are all essentially various expressions of middle-class, productive, urban, white-collar, heterosexual masculinity. As a social group, such men are already well represented in media and popular culture. However, their dominant status and spending power make them a useful target for neoliberal marketing initiatives designed to convert gentler and more caring modes of masculinity into forms of consumption. This is consistent with the shift from the patriarchal tone of post-war-era industrial capitalism towards the softer, service-orientated economy of the twenty-first century. As the book also observes,

Japanese men may be merely giving themselves a media-inspired, consumerist makeover, while the entrenched gender structures remain largely unchanged. Anyone with an interest in contemporary Japanese society will find value in this timely and engaging collection, but I recommend it especially for advanced students in the field.

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