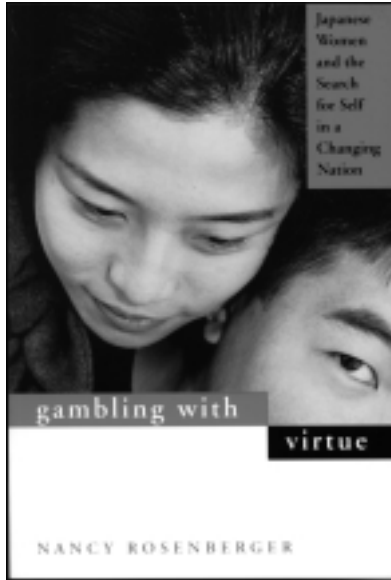


Gambling with Virtue

Review >
Japan

How has the notion of self changed in Japan over the last three decades of the twentieth century? Apart from this important question, Nancy Rosenberger examines the hybrid versions of personhood that three generations of Japanese women have created since the 1970s.



By Sabine Frühstück

There are many likeable aspects in *Gambling with Virtue* and, as any good book does, it opens up a number of avenues for future research. A particular strength of the book is the great variety among the women who speak from these pages. Rosenberger begins with a description of the lives of housewives and female teachers at a rural high school during the 1970s. In part 2 she visits urban and rural housewives, urban working class women and countrywomen, middle-class working women with a high level of education, women with full-time and part-time jobs, as well as

married and single women during the 1980s. In part 3 she returns primarily to housewives and young single women of the 1990s.

The immediacy of the lively descriptions of conversations about important life choices, self-perceptions, and perceptions of other women, who differ considerably in their geographic location as well as their class and age, make this book enjoyable to read and a welcome addition to a body of anthropological works about women in Japan. This body of literature has grown considerably since the publication of such ground-breaking books as *Women in Changing Japan* by Joyce Lebra, Joy Paulson, and Elizabeth Powers (1976) and *Japanese Women: Constraint and Fulfillment* by Takie Sugiyama Lebra (1984), which set out to show how far Japanese women have come in moving away from a traditional feminine ideal that expected them to be domestic, subservient, and self-sacrificing.

Out of public sight?

Each part of Rosenberger's book begins with an introduction to the main elements of 'public discourses' that serve as a background to the conversations and observations that she describes in the three sections of the book. This structure is rather ineffective, however, as it sets up an artificial gap between a mostly anonymous,

monolithic, and presumably male 'public discourse' and individual women's diverse decisions, achievements, frustrations, and views. Rosenberger argues in her introduction that people's ideas and practices are shaped throughout their lives by ideas and actions that 'come from families, schools, workplaces, media, state policies, national ideologies, and the global marketplace' (p. 4). But the women whose voices the reader gets to hear appear, if not as passive victims of 'public discourse', then at least as merely reacting to and somehow dealing with what has been created by someone else. The processes by which women contribute to these national discourses in important ways, as politicians, journalists, teachers, and other important roles remain out of sight.

If nothing else, the great number of books by women for women published in Japan – from semi-academic publications to advice books by (in some cases prominent) feminists and their opponents within and outside of the academy – testifies to the fact that women have become much more involved in (and ultimately also responsible for) the creation of the discourse on social expectations concerning women. I do not believe that the complexity of these processes should be sacrificed for the sake of simplicity and accessibility.

It is certainly safe to assume that women's lives in Japan have changed quite a bit between the 1970s and the 1990s, and the differences in attitudes among the different women that Rosenberger presents are quite striking. When she sets out to show these changes, however, I sometimes wondered whether individual differences were not mistaken for historical ones. For example, it remains unclear to me why the 1990s would have been any more significant than the 1980s or the 1970s in terms of the difference that women's personal choices were making. At least throughout the modern period anxieties about the danger that independent and individualist women may pose to social order and stability have evolved dramatically. This has been the case from the fight for suffrage since the early twentieth century to the legalization of the Pill in 1999, from the 'modern girl' of the 1920s to the independent career woman (or *tonderu onna*) of the 1980s and thereafter to the so-called 'parasite singles' (*parasaito shinguru*; single working women and men who are criticized for living with their parents instead of founding their own household) of today. Indeed this subject is worth pursuing as a broader research project.

By employing the somewhat worn concept of front stage and backstage spaces that Japanese women move in and switch back and forth between, a concept expressed in a kind of 'double consciousness', Rosenberger seems to suggest that elsewhere and

perhaps at an earlier time, lives were more consistent. The performance skill that Rosenberger claims Japanese women needed for social success, were unnecessary then. In this way, the book highlights the need for an in-depth comparative, intercultural, historically grounded (and hopefully demystifying) study of the self, individuality, and individualism. A study of that kind would have to integrate a critical analysis of the culturally and historically diverse procedures of homogenization, as well as its opposite, diversification.

As it stands, however, the book should appeal to a broad readership interested in post-war and present-day Japanese society as well as women's studies, anthropology, and sociology – in fact, all those who still need to be convinced that 'Japan is not homogeneous despite national efforts to make it so' (p. 3). ◀

- Rosenberger, Nancy, *Gambling with Virtue: Japanese Women and the Search for Self in a Changing Nation*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, (2001), 180 pp., ISBN 0-8248-2336-2

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