

Tracy Pa  
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### The Role of Women in Japan

My three weeks in Osaka had been a dream. I've never fallen in love with a city as much as I did with Osaka. Osaka is thriving, energetic, hospitable, and most of all, understanding of my cultural background. Before arriving in Japan, I was afraid that my host families and Japanese people wouldn't accept me because of the Chinese-Japanese animosity due to World War II. Part of the reason why I wanted to go to Japan was to ease the tension between these two cultures and allow my family a new perspective on modern Japan, and not on the bitter past. Both of my host families saw beyond our cultural differences and allowed me to have the best summer of my life. My host families were the highlight of my Osakan adventure.

I feel really fortunate to have two host families. My first host family was Ban-san. She is a very energetic woman and taught me many aspects of the Japanese lifestyle. When I first met Ban-san, I was very intimidated by how quickly she spoke Osaka-ben (the dialect of Osaka) and how limited my Japanese vocabulary was. After I was formally introduced to Ban-san and she learned of my Japanese name, she cheerfully exclaimed, "Well Aoi-chan (my Japanese name), are you ready to immerse yourself in Japanese?" I've never met someone so confident and cheerful. I had assumed that Japanese women were all submissive and quiet. I was quickly thrown aback, but with my limited Japanese, I replied, "Yes, *nihongo wo oshiete onegaishimasu* (please teach me Japanese)." Ban-san smiled and that was the start of my Japanese adventure.

After a few days of exploring her Japanese-styled, tatami-floored house, I noticed a little cabinet with tiny dolls. I asked Ban-san if she would explain to me what the dolls represent. She shared with me that those dolls were called *hina ningyou*. In Japanese culture, March 3<sup>rd</sup> represents Girl's Day, where young girls would put out the *hina ningyou* on display. This festival is called *ohina matsuri*. Ban-san explained to me that girls can only display these dolls for one month; if girls displayed them for longer, the girls wouldn't be married off in the future. At the end of the month, girls had to cover the dolls' eyes and hide them under the shelf. If they didn't put these dolls away, the superstition of being unmarried will stand. I was appalled by the cultural restrictions on girls, because on Boys' Day, now known as Children's day, boys did not have the superstition of not being married. Ban-san also voiced to me her discontent on this tradition. She disapproved of how in Japanese hierarchy, men were always on top and women always came second. She said males always have special privileges. The sexism that occurs in many cultures, as well as American, was portrayed through the traditions of *ohina matsuri*. Ban-san wishes that there wouldn't be limitations on women, but continues to be skeptical towards the future. That night was my first encounter with sexism and the role of women in Japan.

At the end of July there are many festivals all over Osaka. From Namba, a popular shopping street, to the subway, I would see young and old women in *yukata* (summer kimono). I admired the intricate details of the *obi* and the floral designs of *yukata*. One afternoon, Ban-san presented to me a beautiful *yukata* that she thought suited my personality well. She wanted me to be beautiful in the *yukata* as I continue my adventure in Japan, attending various matsuri or visiting different places in Kansai, such as Kyoto, where Ban-san brought me during family weekend. The *yukata* was a black with white peonies and purple butterflies. The accompanying *obi* was pink, also with butterflies on the embroidery. I had never received anything so beautiful in my life. As I received the gift, my heart fluttered with content, thanking Ban-san with the

deepest gratitude of my heart.

My second host family was Tani-san. They were an older couple living not too far away from Ban-san. Although I was saddened that I was to leave Ban-san, I was once again intimidated by my limited Japanese. I hoped that I could continue learning Japanese and Osaka ben from my new host parents. On the first night, Tani-san took me out to eat *okonomiyaki*, a dish that was famous in Osaka. It was delicious. They continued to show me their kindness by introducing me to activities that Japanese people did during the summer, such as barbecues outside, lighting fireworks, and, my favorite, eating *kakigori* (shaved ice) at night. It was so much fun being able to further immerse myself into the culture. But as they were preparing these activities, I noticed Mama (my host mother) and her daughter, Hiroko-san were the ones doing the domestic work, such as cooking and cleaning, while Papa (my host father) and Daisuke-san, Hiroko's husband, relaxed and chatted with one another. This housewife lifestyle is considered to be typical for women in Japan, as much as, if not more than, in America. Throughout my stay with Tani-san, I realized that Mama did a lot of the housework, fed the pets, cleaned, cooked, and was the one who tried to get to know me best. In my eyes, she was a super woman for being able to do so much at once. At first I was disappointed that the male characters in family weren't involved in domestic work, but I came to realize that in Japanese culture, women have certain roles that could only be fulfilled by females.

During family weekend, Mama brought Aisha and me to Nara after a grueling session of tea ceremony with Tachibana-san, Aisha's host mother. Tea ceremony was by far the most difficult activity that I had to experience during my trip to Japan. It took so much perseverance and patience to be able to sit in that certain way for hours. I appreciated Tachibana's patience with introducing me to tea ceremony. Mama noticed that I didn't have a fan when I was doing tea ceremony, so during my trip to Nara, she bought me an exquisite fan. This fan was complimentary to my *yukata*, pink with purple butterflies on it. I was once again touched by such thoughtful gifts from Mama, just as I was when I received the gift from Ban-san. Although in Japanese culture, I noticed that men don't openly display affection, Papa bought me two *omamori*, charms. One was for general protection and the other was for luck for marriage. Through the *omamori* for marriage, I understood that Papa's subtle gesture of kindness towards me, like the superstition with the *hina ningyou*, stemmed from the fact that all parents want to see their daughters, or in this case, host daughter, get married. The desire to insure that daughters will be married is a symbol of how much daughters mean to their families; parents only wish for their daughter's happiness.

These three short weeks in Osaka made this the best summer of my life. My Japanese has improved greatly and I have picked up more Osaka-ben from my host families that I had expected. While in Japan, I witnessed sexism and the role of women in Japan. Although I feel that women are submissive in Japanese culture, I also saw their strength and ability to provide so much love and care for their families. By living with my two incredible host families, I have learned not only about traditions, language, and culture, but what it meant to be part of a Japanese family. I thank the San Francisco-Osaka Sister City Association for providing me this one in a lifetime opportunity. This adventure will reside in my heart forever.