

**Essay  
by  
Isabella Fong**

**“A Different Kind of Woman”**

As an American girl, I admit that I had false assumptions about Japanese culture, especially my misguided stereotypes of Japanese women. Before embarking on the transformative journey and ambassadorship, my views of Japanese women were shaped mostly by what I knew about young girls' *shoujo* manga, “OL” office ladies, and *Memoirs of a Geisha*. But after breathing and living a life guided by Japan's gender norms for three weeks, I have become more aware and informed about the true gender dynamic in Japan. Most of all, the Japanese women that I had met not only refuted my stereotype of feminine and fragile *Yamato Nadeshiko* women, but also taught me my own personal strengths and courage.

With a vague idea of how a typical Japanese household was run, I mistakenly believed that most Japanese female adults were simply homely housewives. My first host mother, Yuki Yamawaki, was a dutiful mother and wife. At home, she would take care of her young children, but also cook, clean, and spend time with me, her guest. Her amiable expressions and warmth was the glue of the family. However, she was not only the epitome of filial piety, but also the owner and designer of her own line of hand-made handbags. Little did I know that Japanese women could be both housewives *and* businesswomen. Living with my second host mother, Kayoko Sasaki, I experienced a hybrid mix of Japanese and American culture. The Sasaki family, having lived in the US before, embraced American habits while keeping to their Osakan roots. From Grandmother to Mother to Daughter, whether it was McDonald's or *shabu-shabu*, English or Japanese, I learnt how to harmonize my American tendencies with an Osakan lifestyle. Even when chiding me, my host mother had the gentleness of Japanese speech but with a directness so distinctly American. Yes, both host mothers fulfilled their duties as *okaa-san*, but they strived to be much more than homemakers. They redefined motherhood, keeping Japanese tradition while blending in a contemporary twist.

With an erroneous assumption, I then imagined Japanese women always being the dependents of men in the workplace. Without a doubt, Japan has had a past in which women have been underrepresented and subordinated in the workforce. In modern-times, more and more Japanese women are working, rather than staying at home. Nevertheless, I never would have imagined how quickly the gender employment gap was closing. The I-House staff was considerably and mostly women. From charismatic authorities Kido-san and Ohno-san who were in charge, to the wonderful and knowledgeable tour guides, Hensan and Nishioka-san, and Izui-san and Watanabe-san the backbones of I-House, they were all powerhouse career women. These businesswomen and their combined femininity and strength were the foundations of the workplace. Their hard work not only benefited the Osaka International House, but also the fight against gender prejudice in Japanese employment and work environments. The women of I-House granted me not only their kindness, but also the inspiration to have confidence in my knowledge and skills as a girl despite the gender norms prevalent in Japanese and American societies.

Lastly, all my misconceptions about young Japanese women were overturned with each friendship I had made in Osaka. Mariya-san and Mai-san both guided my fellow ambassador Teresa and me around Osaka's "young and happening" places. Both had studied abroad, spoke flawless English, and had a sweet disposition and strong presence. Even though they were close to my age and had many extraordinary achievements, I was still awed by their leadership and open-mindedness. I may only hope to be as cultured and globalized as Mariya and Mai are. By chance, I had also met Mayuko, who lived next door to the Yamawaki's home outside of Osaka city. Despite coming from worlds apart, Mayuko, or Maru as I would call her, showed me how to have the respectability of a young woman while having a masculine-like responsibility. With every word or small gesture, I learnt to be sensitive and considerate of others and aware of my own behavior like Maru was. Her teachings especially helped when I befriended my host sister Rina. As she is one year younger, I had the experience of being an older sister for the first time. Taking care of Rina and her younger brother Eugene was so enjoyable and taught me life lessons about obligation and duty as the oldest "sibling" in the family. Also, Rina was so exuberant and

bold, that my idea of shy and overly polite Japanese girls was essentially shattered. This is to say that the friendships I made during my stay in Osaka showed me that our similarities as budding young women can help us cross cultural barriers and celebrate our power to change the world as girls.

With thoughts of “liberating” repressed Japanese women, I painted an ill-conceived illusion of what defined Japanese women. Ultimately, I was the one “liberated” from my own gender stereotypes and prejudices, learning to understand the gender dynamic through a different cultural lens. Japanese women were not the “followers” I made them out to be. They were leaders who melded femininity and masculinity to form the multiple roles of Osakan women in a Japanese society. It did not have to be either tradition or modernity, nor delicacy or authority. I learned that Japanese women, and in fact, all women have the potential to be everything they want and dream to be. We don’t have to be one mold or the other; we can be a different kind of woman, a woman that we define ourselves.