
It is easy to see why Romit Dasgupta’s PhD thesis was awarded the Asian Studies Association of Australia’s President’s Award and DK Prize for Best Doctoral Thesis in 2006. Adapted into Re-reading the Salaryman in Japan: Crafting Masculinties, this latest addition to the Routledge/Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA) East Asia Series is intimate, engaging, and especially timely amidst piped interest in corporate culture and masculinity in Japan. Coming from an intersection of Japanese Studies and Gender Studies, the monograph focuses on the markers and contradictions of being a ‘corporate soldier’, a salaryman – generally male, white-collar office workers – situated within the climate of postbubble Japan.

As Dasgupta states in the introduction, despite decades of research on the salaryman equating work with masculinity, its gendered dimension has scarcely been interrogated because ‘men’ have, until recently, been assumed to be the unquestioned yardstick. With Re-reading the Salaryman in Japan, Dasgupta adopts Gramsci’s notion of hegemony in the hopes of addressing the ‘theoretical blindness’ within the emerging literature on masculinity studies. He delves into the world of the salaryman with a simple question – ‘Who were these men?’ (p.16) Based on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, carried out over eighteen months with salarymen from two organizations in Northern Japan, Dasgupta takes readers through the lived experiences of over forty men.

In the first two chapters, he sets out an important overarching historical and social context against which the discourse of salaryman masculinity has evolved. Having established the ideology of salaryman, hegemonic masculinity, and then situating both notions in the new millennium, Dasgupta contextualizes the voices of these men within the ‘Lost Decade’ of corporate recession and bankruptcy, and the bleak prospects of long-term stable employment. While acknowledging that the notion of salaryman masculinity continually transforms - in conjunction with predominant socio-cultural, economic, and political circumstances, - the main concern remains as ‘to what extent the core assumptions that made this the cultural ideal shifted during the watershed years of the late 1990s/early 2000s’ (p.43), especially the notion of daikokubashira, a man’s ability to provide for his household. It should be noted that despite being discursive and content-heavy at times, the structure of this backdrop is clear and informed, providing a friendly induction for readers outside this academic discipline.

Over the next five ethnographic chapters, Dasgupta explores the negotiations and reconstructions of these fundamental principles of salaryman masculinity. He discursively structures their trajectories to address their ‘coming into’ masculinity (otoko); their induction into ‘full adult maturity’ (shakaijin); their negotiations between expectations in the workplace and their sense of masculinity; their management of regulated heterosexuality, marriage, and fatherhood; and their notions of friendship and homosociality. Chapter four brings a refreshing update to the present-day salaryman’s practical workday. Dasgupta conveys his informants’ sense of frustration and anxiety in their transition from adolescent masculinity into shakaijin life. While the ideal was for entrants to subscribe and visually embody salaryman masculinity, through their company’s induction training, he argues that, in reality, this process was “characterized by the simultaneous existence of dynamics of
conformity, co-option, appropriation, playful engagement, marginalization, refutation, resistance, and perhaps even subversion” (p.79). For me, this is the most insightful chapter as it effectively challenges assumptions associated with early conceptions of the salaryman.

For the uninitiated, chapter six is perhaps the most relatable segment in its discussion of the expectations and pressure to be economically productive and sexually reproductive in order to be validated in the workplace and in society. Entitled ‘Working with homosociality’, chapter seven stood out for being the most intimate. Its focus on male friendship, especially senior-junior hierarchy-based relationships (senpai-kōhai) teases out the contradictions in performing 'unambiguous prescriptive heterosexuality and... ambiguous assumed homosociality’ (p.151) in an almost sacred space of male camaraderie.

While the connections to references from popular culture are not always immediately clear for the uninitiated, the book is engaging and accessible even to a generic non-academic audience. The ethnographic material is personal and rich with subtle nuances that illuminate the theoretical and conceptual leaps set forth in the introduction. That readers will easily grow to feel attached to particular informants is, I believe, an appealing aspect of Dasgupta’s book. Going through Re-reading the Salaryman in Japan is akin to taking a journey with these men. One relates to their struggles and senses their growth and maturity through the text. I highly recommend this book to readers pursuing an introduction to Japanese corporate culture or masculinity, and intellectual wanderers seeking a literary sojourn.

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