

Disappointed Love of a Generation

By Corinne Bret

In hypermedia Japan truths fly through the air like publicity spots cross living-room television screens. Rapid, concise and absolute. So when one approaches a single woman aged thirty (more talkative than a man on the subject) on the problem of amorous relations, the first sentence is practically always the same: there are no good men. The rest of the commentary is scarcely more positive concerning the male sex.

Japanese men at the end of the century, of all ages are weak, spineless, uncultivated, lacking in curiosity for anything other than their work... In contrast, the women are hyper-cultivated, intelligent, well-turned out, full of humour, curious about everything, very sure of themselves. In brief, the WOMEN have everything to offer, while the MEN have very little.

Despite making numerous efforts to meet men (at parties, clubs, and through arranged meetings), they certainly do not find men to their liking. For the MEN are not, or are no longer, what they are supposed to be, or ever were. As a consequence of this state of affairs: a generation of women in their thirties desperately single, and one or several generations of men more than ever condemned to workaholicism.

The truth be known: there is not a single man worthy of being a husband on the archipelago. Sign of the times, the increasing number of marriages of famous Japanese women with foreigners seems to attest to the fact - as we hear via the media.

On a more serious note, the post-bubble, otherwise known as the crisis that Japan is facing seems to be the backdrop for the dryness of romantic relations of a generation of young women. However, a different future had been promised them. A little over a decade has passed, that is to say since the fast-paced era of the bubble, when young university graduates were spoilt

in their choices in applying for a good position in one of the best companies on the archipelago.

At the end of the eighties is the era when THE FEMALE arrives on the scene to save Japanese society and culture in peril at the end of the century, or at least to guide them toward a radiant future. Both men and women feel this way. Besides the media never stops peddling this truth, flaunting all these madonnas. The men seem to accept the new order, leaving their male chauvinism in the changing room, they start to take heed of the women, even striving to gratify their desires. The women throw themselves eagerly into work which opens the path towards freedom and finally, equality.

A fast-paced era when long days at the office end up in clubs or luxury restaurants, with weekends spent on golf courses. The hierarchy of superiors pay the expenses, as it is also the era when companies have the means to be so generous. How could it not go to their heads, all this extravagance, for these young salary women who continue to live with mum and dad. They enjoy their salary to the fullest by partaking in the pleasures of life. Shopping, travel, diverse hobbies, all this is given more consideration than marriage.

They have the time and the means to be demanding. In order to be a husband, THE MALE will have to conform to three high standards. He will be tall (at least 180 cm.), he will have a solid CV and he will be employed in a prestigious company. A little like the image of prince charming from the comic books of their adolescence. THE WOMEN choose to wait for the one who is unique, who will combine these virtues. Him or no one rather than the shame of an odd husband.

The years of the post-bubble will be

those of disenchantment. Companies forced to make cutbacks in their workforce and in their expenditures will shamelessly forget this idea of a future based on women. They are the first to be affected by the crisis.

Gone are the nights out with caviar, gone are the perks and the consideration. Hello overtime with partial pay, hello to very little thanks after ten years of hard work. In 1999, the total number of unemployed women reached nine hundred and fifty thousand, forty thousand more than in 1998.

This co-existing with the dream of the perfect salaryman, on whose salary she could live comfortably, without having to work, as her mother was able to do. For the men also are subjected to the torments of the crisis. The ideal man, if he has ever existed, has become as rare as a diamond in a grab bag. And suddenly, at the age of 35, THE WOMEN find themselves single. Some of them regret even having refused the marriage proposal of an ordinary civil servant, for it was perhaps he whose love was the sincerest, the purest.

These same magazines which predicted, analyzed, wished for, advocated or bluntly fabricated these 'madonnas', accuse them today of being too demanding, of being too headstrong. In fact, these young independent women do not want to give up today the privileges of the illustrious era.

They do not want to sacrifice anything. And even if they aspire to marriage, they prefer the solitude of being single filled with satisfactions, to a stable and monotonous family life. Furthermore, if they have placed their career above everything, it was without a doubt in reaction to the general view held by most Japanese women to favour the child and husband to the detriment

of their personal aspirations.

Thirty to thirty-five years old, is it not this pivotal age where most women give up their career, either to take care of children, or because professional constraints are becoming heavier and heavier? No, certainly the 'madonnas' at the end of the eighties will never give up improving or perfecting their talents. And there will be no compromise with HIM. If she ever meets him, there will be an understanding, and everything within him will allow her the freedom of her ideas and choices, because he possesses something that she doesn't have. He will know how to draw out part of her that she still is not aware of.

Thinking that there is no man good enough for her is perhaps the partition to a hidden anxiety: the fear of suffering in love, of being wounded, abandoned. So, as in the song by the couple Jane Birkin-Serge Gainsbourg, they run away out of fear that this happiness will disappear. Behind so many requirements for her private and public life there is without doubt the fear of not succeeding in reconciling family and work. These unspoken fears rivet them to their choice. They will not therefore change their lifestyle.

However, with the objectivity that comes with maturity, many of them ask themselves the question: does all this make me happy? Why am I alive? Are they aware that this is the same type of question that the men pose?

Because THE MEN are in the middle of a major identity crisis. The Japanese men's lib movement, which is ten years old and doing well, points to a feeling of discomfort. Tired of being forced to conduct oneself 'like a man' many of them come to give vent to their existentialist anxieties.

During group meetings of reflection, they attempt to find within themselves, their identity, to unstick from their unconscious this masculine label which they now sense as an obstacle to their freedom of a thinking and active person. Very difficult to get rid of among other stereotypes, this rigid image of a Japanese man so-called heir to the bravery and rectitude of samurais of a century past. They would simply

like to be proud of themselves, and that this recognition be the fruit of their thoughts and of their own acts.

Along with the identity crisis of the individual person, the identity crisis of the salaryman, the other, the economic crisis, waves of lay-offs in mega-business mergers, has whittled down the feeling of pride in belonging to his company. Why give one's all to a company which is capable of changing from one day to the next the criteria for work, only giving importance to the result. In a society where the bond with business, harmony with the group, comes before even personal desires, this attitude of crisis is interpreted as a huge betrayal. When the system of lifetime employment crumbles, the feeling toward business is no longer as strong as that which still animates preceding generations. The young salaryman therefore disorientated will have difficulty in shining in front of a hard to please young woman.

In spite of everything, these women who think that there are no more good Japanese men, are not entirely wrong in their judgment. THE MEN still prefer very young girls, 'lolitas'. One can also think that it is this common tendency which, to the contrary, makes the main topic of magazines on a relationship or marriage between a famous man with a woman older than him.

Japanese men for the most part are not very inclined to form a strong bond with the opposite sex. They have an unfortunate tendency to flee from women who are too serious, intellectual or deep, precisely those women who didn't give up when they started working, the pleasures of daily life and of culture in particular. Therefore the trench has been dug out. THE MEN find the women too proud, while THE WOMEN judge them to be superficial, uninteresting. The ice between former-madonna and the male sex won't melt easily. But nothing is definitive: the following generation, that of twenty year olds, is creating a surprise by displaying ideas tinged with realism, freedom, tolerance and seriousness.

Boys and girls of the twenty-first century hope for romantic relations

which are stable and long-lasting. Young female university graduates are no longer afraid to marry right away. In the context of crisis, young men and women do not ask themselves the question of whether they should stop an activity at the birth of a child. Of course the young woman will continue to work, and the young man will participate in household tasks and in the care of the baby. These very young women do not see marriage as a barrier to freedom, quite the contrary. Marriage allows for stability which is the best support to undertake the realization of their dreams in a peaceful state of mind.

A sign of the present state of affairs, the statistical curve evolves. A survey which was taken in 1993 of around fifteen million young women shows the following reality: young women having graduated from university during a period of prosperity but having known a period of unemployment in the course of their career will marry late. On the other hand, those who have been touched by the crisis upon finishing their studies marry right away.

To summarize, if the thirty year-olds have trouble getting married due to their demands which combine with a generation of men in crisis, the twenty year-olds sweep away their problems.

This is going to reassure all kinds of conservatives panicked by the absence of values among the young who tint their hair pink, orange, blue and green. And what if all these 'dyed heads' only wanted to express in their own way less idealizing of love and marriage, a larger sense of reality of all kinds, all this reinforces the individual conscious, but in a manner hitherto unknown. With a touch of laughter and humour. JJI

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