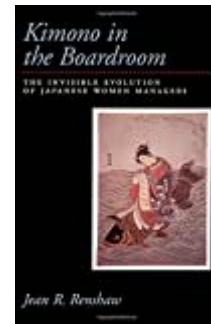


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jean R. Renshaw. *Kimono in the Boardroom: the Invisible Evolution of Japanese Women Managers.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. x + 289 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-511765-3.



Reviewed by Christienne L. Hinz (Department of Historical Studies, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville)

Published on EH.Net (September, 2001)

Jean Renshaw's *Kimono in the Boardroom, the Invisible Evolution of Japanese Women Managers*, attempts to bring to light the lives, character traits, motivations, and methods for success found among a small but growing cohort of Japanese women managers who are struggling to make or find a place for themselves in a society in which the very existence of the female managers is oxymoronic. Renshaw, a self-described "manager, business owner, and professor of management," clearly states that her research goal is an applied one. Her work attempts to create a concrete number of suggestions to help Japanese businesses tap the human resource potential represented by underutilized Japanese women. Renshaw argues that the presence of Japanese women at the very highest levels of management would both necessitate and drive the transformation of Japanese managerial techniques and Japan's business world, giving birth to a more holistically human, more humane corporate citizen.

Renshaw's research questions are timely, apt, and yet deceptive in their simplicity: who are Japan's female managers? In which industries do they tend to congregate? How have they negotiated cultural, institutional, legal, or personal barriers which typically exclude the vast majority of Japanese women from managerial hierarchies? Why are Japanese women managers invisible? What character traits, organizational or in-

stitutional environments, laws, or cultural trends help Japanese women managers to succeed in their chosen vocations?

The crux of Renshaw's argument is that Japanese women managers do, indeed, exist despite the assertions of Japanese nay-sayers, most of whom are male. Moreover, these women share certain traits and experiences; and these predispose them for non-conformist behaviour and life-choices. For example, Renshaw argues that birth order is an important variable. Supporting her argument with the secondary work of Frank Sulloway's *Born to Rebel*, Renshaw observes that eldest daughters without male siblings and youngest daughters are disproportionately represented in her interview sample. Another common experience that Japanese women managers share, according to Renshaw, is a relatively permissive, achievement-oriented, gender-neutral socialization as children. Successful female managers also seem to share non-sexist, foreign, or otherwise strong childhood role-models such as the cartoon character Sailor Moon. Renshaw cites post-secondary education or considerable experience abroad, and bilingualism as experiences common to successful women managers. Perhaps most interesting, she finds that Japanese women managers tend to fall into one of two age cohorts, either the 20 to 30 year cohort, or the 40 to 50 year co-

hort. She theorizes that both 20 to 30 year old and 40 to 50 year old women experienced a Japan whose dominant paradigms were in flux, either as a result of the devastation of the Second World War, or because of the unprecedented wealth of the 1970s and 1980s or because of new and popularly held notions of basic gender equality, as represented by the 1986 Equal Employment Opportunity Law. Women between the ages of 30 and 40, however, were not similarly influenced. Although Renshaw does not interview broadly among non-managerial or unsuccessful managerial women, she nevertheless argues that their conformity to traditional gender roles is the result of having been raised by parents who “lived through the difficult war and postwar years and wanted the ‘good life’ as they remembered it, for their children. Part of that remembered good life had included homemakers, full-time wives and mothers, taking care of the house and children while men, the samurai economic warriors, went off to battle the corporate world” (p. 100).

Kimono in the Boardroom also attempts to classify the methods by which Japanese women succeed in management. Renshaw asserts, although she does not supply supporting evidence, that “[w]arlords and samurai provided the models for current management in Japanese male-defined corporations” (p. 157). Making liberal use of the exotic image of feudal Japan, Renshaw sustains the analogy between modern managers and the samurai class of the medieval period when she explains the paths by which women seek the exclusively male-defined world of business: “Family-business warriors” are women who inherit businesses from their parents. “Warrior entrepreneurs,” are women who begin their own businesses after repeatedly encountering “glass ceilings and sticky floors,” that is, institutional barriers preventing female career advancement. “Warriors taking over,” are women who find means to purchase defunct businesses and revive them. “Warriors breaking out” are women who choose to seek upward managerial mobility in foreign corporations, within Japan or as expatriates.

Renshaw argues that Japanese women managers have remained invisible despite their slowly increasing numbers because of social and cultural norms which on the one hand, deny their existential reality, and on the other, force them to manage from behind a “shoji screen,” in low-profile positions. As marginalized people, Japanese women managers, respond to their circumstances by engaging in a range of coping behaviours (adopting, adapting, and transforming) which mask the reality of their power from male peers, from society in general, from other women seeking access to the up-

per echelons of management, and even from the women managers themselves (p. 139).

Kimono in the Boardroom is a timely study. Renshaw’s research questions have been only inadequately, if at all, answered by scholars of Japan, scholars of Japanese business, scholars of Japanese women, or scholars of women in business. However, as an academic work it stumbles in a number of critical areas. The most fundamental is, perhaps, its uncomfortable and unresolved treatment of audience. Exactly who Renshaw intends to read her work is unclear. It hovers awkwardly between serious academic scholarship and the popular journalism that is more commonly consumed by the quasi-to-uninformed Japanophilic and Japanophobic reading public.

Because the reviewer is an academic speaking to a largely academic readership, and because certain aspects of the work are explicitly structured as scholarship, the reviewer has chosen to frame her commentary accordingly. It is to preface the reviewer’s more critical remarks by underscoring her awareness of the many technical, linguistic, and hermeneutical difficulties that a study like Ms. Renshaw’s presents. *Kimono in the Boardroom* is a bold transgression of the quite arbitrary boundaries separating the humanities, the social sciences, and applied business administration. Renshaw’s questions cannot be answered from within the boundaries of any single academic discipline. Such work requires no mere familiarity with the relevant secondary literatures; rather it requires a real fluency across the total range of related fields. The reviewer hopes that all scholars with broad, multi-faceted questions would be encouraged by Renshaw’s study; and that they would also come away from it with a heightened awareness of and respect for the complexities and problems inherent in doing cross-cultural, multi- and inter- disciplinary research.

In the opening chapter of the work, Ms. Renshaw minimizes the importance of statistical sampling in the following way: “In the course of my travels within Japan and Korea, I found successful Japanese women managers in every industrial category, and I interviewed over 160 of them. The interviews were conducted in English with a Japanese speaker at hand to clarify if necessary. While this approach introduced the danger of a biased sample, it also had advantages. Most Japanese women at management level understand English, and as an evaluator on scholarship committees in Japan, I observed that the same person spoke more freely in English than in Japanese, an observation corroborated by other

Japanese" (p. 5).

It is common for scholars in the humanities to demonstrate their discomfort (generally disguised as contempt) for the social sciences by drawing the weapon most easily drawn, cocked and fired: the dreaded criticism of "unrepresentative sample." This reviewer has little patience with the typical historian's cheap and easy slander of the research method basic to social scientific inquiry. Nevertheless, it must be stated that Renshaw's inadequate statistical sample deals a critical blow to the remainder of the project.

Renshaw's core informants were drawn from "a pre-selected sample of successful women managers ... found in the members of Keizai Doyukai, the Association of Corporate Executives, which is one of four powerful industrial organizations in Japan" (pp. 97 - 99). Based upon these contacts, she then expanded her informant pool through series of cascading personal introductions.

Apparently neither Ms. Renshaw nor her editors appreciated the painful circularity of the work's introductory arguments, which are the result of the aforementioned methodological errors: 1) the project was based upon women informants belonging to an elite and extremely discriminating organization; 2) the informants were all, to some degree, bilingual; and 3) the author was referred by these informants to others who were also bilingual. From this incestuous sampling, Renshaw reports that "[s]eventy percent of the women managers... interviewed went to school or lived abroad at some time in their lives. Many had gone abroad as children with their families when their fathers worked or served in the military in another country" (p. 123). She continues, "[a]nother route to the awareness of alternative culture is language. Women said they seemed to learn second languages more easily than their brothers, and research substantiates this tendency for girls. The learning of a second language is related to expanding thought patterns, creativity, and innovation" (p. 124). That Renshaw concludes that Japanese women managers share similar family cultures and formative childhood experiences should surprise no one. After all, she interviewed people who were friends and colleagues. The only surprise is that despite her apparent awareness of the dangers inherent in statistical sampling, Renshaw failed throughout the text to match her analysis to the extremely narrow scope of her data.

Secondly, Renshaw neglects to rationalize her statistical material with a cogent definition of the manager. She asserts that a "manager focuses the energy of a group

and mobilizes resources of money, people, information, plant, equipment, and markets to accomplish goals.... The Japanese women interviewed for this book meet the definitions of manager as they successfully direct organizations, carry on business within the national and international economy, and handle affairs of state, of corporations, of small home businesses, and of families (p. 97)." However, her statistical treatment of female managers by industrial category is based on data drawn from labour and gender studies published in the International Labor Organization's *Yearbook of Labour Statistics*, and in the Japanese Census. She does not investigate the standards which produced these data, or offer even the briefest commentary upon whether or not (or to what degree) they reflect Japanese managers as defined in the study.

Furthermore, Renshaw's research sample does not adequately represent the range of managerial roles included within her definition. Small home businesses are, for the most part, absent in her qualitative analysis because so many of her interviews seem to have been conducted with executives in national, international, or multinational firms. The Japanese definition of "success" in business no more reflects Japanese women's participation in the economy than would Western definitions of "success."

Even more problematic than her management of statistical sampling, Renshaw's project is crippled by her inability to speak or read Japanese. She breezily minimizes this problem by claiming that Japanese scholarship interviewees tend to speak more frankly in English than in Japanese (p. 5). She does not question the meaningfulness of such frankness, nor does she problematize Japanese self-representation to a foreign interlocutor. She does not consider the impact of the Japanese translator's presence on her interviews. Finally, Renshaw seems completely unaware of the fact that the problem of translation is not whether or not her informants can understand her, but whether or not she can understand as well as correctly interpret their utterances in English. There are many places in the text where, in this reviewer's experienced, informed, and carefully considered opinion, Ms. Renshaw has incorrectly understood the intent and nuance of her informants' utterances.

Among the most damaging flaws in *Kimono in the Boardroom* is the author's failure to correctly contextualize her subject matter within the greater history of Japanese women, and within the history of Japanese business. She seems unfamiliar with current secondary

scholarship on Japanese history, the changing roles of Japanese women, and abundant anthropological and sociological studies of Japanese culture. She repeatedly and inaccurately interprets national mythology as historical fact. For example, in chapter three, titled, "Sex Roles, Creation Myths, and Worldview: Japanese and Western Historical Perspectives," Renshaw mixes and matches mythology and history to create a narrative intent on locating powerful female role models for modern Japanese women:

"Evidence of prehistoric society in Japan indicates that, like most prehistoric societies, it was probably matriarchal.... The temple at Ise is still honored as the temple of the supreme goddess, Amaterasu The Goddess of Creation, Amaterasu Omikami... survived as the ancestor of all Japanese.... [T]he gleam of feminine possibility hides in the dimmest recesses of the memory bank for both men and women.... In the West,... collective societal memory of feminine goddesses had been buried and denied.... In the Japanese memory bank, there is more recent knowledge of women as leaders" (p. 60-62).

The only primary historical evidence provided to support this extravagant psycho-mythology of the Japanese is Hiratsuka Raicho's oft-quoted essay which begins, "in the beginning, woman was the sun." Furthermore, the secondary works upon which Renshaw's analysis rests are two: a single quote by Motoori Norinaga, as translated and reprinted in deBerry and Keene's textbook *Sources of Japanese Tradition, Volume II*, and Marija Gimbutas' controversial monograph *The Civilization of the Goddess: the World of Old Europe*. Ms. Renshaw either did not know or failed to mention that Motoori Norinaga's construction of Japanese history served his own intellectual objectives, as well as those of the Tokugawa Shogunate; his work is not understood by contemporary historians as being "factual," as representing anything approaching an "objective" truth. And while this reviewer was spiritually stimulated by Gimbuta's theory of primeval European matriarchy and matrifocality, this work is of debatable applicability to the Japanese case, to say the least.

In fact, Renshaw's control over the basic secondary literature behind her subject is painfully inadequate. Although she drops the names of several well-respected Japan specialists, like Takie Sugiyama Lebra, Takeo Doi, Kathleen Uno, and Mary Brinton, she seems unable to actually incorporate such scholarship into a coherent the-

ory within her own work. Furthermore, the truly interested reader will be continually frustrated by the paucity of footnotes, and by faulty bibliographic citations which chronically omit the actual page numbers corresponding to referenced arguments and data. It is, therefore, almost impossible for readers to utilize this text as a research tool, to corroborate, correct, or even to enter into a stimulating dialogue with the author about her interpretation of the academic works with which her own research is engaged.

Indeed, Renshaw's theoretical analysis relies far too heavily upon the writing of popular Japan commentators like Norma Field (*In the Realm of the Dying Emperor*), Masao Miyamoto (*Straightjacket Society*), and Christopher Wood (*The End of Japan, Inc.*). She also supports her theoretical analysis of Japanese culture using such New York Times Best-Selling books as John Gray's *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, and Leonard Schlain's *The Alphabet vs. the Goddess*. Some of Renshaw's analytical examples are based upon her own primary interview data, but also includes disorienting cameos from Hillary Rodham Clinton, Barbara Bush, and Connie Chung. The overall result is a somewhat surreal mixture of Japanese culture, fantasy, stray facts, and shocking historical error, such as "feudal Asia was roughly parallel in time to feudal Europe, but the Asian form of feudalism was more complex and highly evolved, and it continued into the nineteenth century, deriving structure from the sophisticated and hierarchical Chinese civilization," or "Japan officially abolished the class system with its postwar constitution of 1946." Unfortunately, Renshaw's hard work in the field is imperfectly, and inappropriately supported by this veritable mosh-pit of half-baked information, misinformation, and blatant oriental exoticism as generated in popular literature.

In *Kimono in the Boardroom* Ms. Renshaw has asked a series of pertinent, potentially paradigm-challenging questions. She has brought quantitative and qualitative research methods together despite the mutual hostility that has, at times, informed the relationship between their proponents. Lastly, she has attempted to move beyond theory into applied research in order to offer concrete solutions to the cultural barriers which deny Japanese women access to managerial leadership. Although this particular work does not succeed in achieving its goals, Ms. Renshaw has nevertheless set worthy guideposts for herself, and for others who are working in the field.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://eh.net/>

Citation: Christienne L. Hinz. Review of Renshaw, Jean R., *Kimono in the Boardroom: the Invisible Evolution of Japanese Women Managers*. EH.Net, H-Net Reviews. September, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5482>

Copyright © 2001, EH.Net and H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission questions, please contact the EH.NET Administrator (administrator@eh.net; Telephone: 513-529-2850; Fax: 513-529-3309). Published by EH.NET.