

## Culture, Gender and Economic History: Observations from Japan

Janet Hunter

### Culture, Economic Change and Gender

In a short 1995 article emphasizing the existence of 'cultural reciprocity', *i.e.* a two-way dynamic between culture and economic change, Eric Jones defined culture as 'bundles of behaviours and institutions.....parcelled out geographically'.<sup>1</sup> My own preferred definition of culture for the purpose of this paper is that offered by the anthropologist Robert J. Smith, namely culture as 'formal and informal rules, a learned and shared information pool, thus impacting on both the production function and the utility function, and establishing the range of choices for action'.<sup>2</sup> Smith was considering the one-way impact of culture on economic activity, but only a slight reworking is needed to incorporate the reciprocity identified by Jones.

Acknowledging the existence of this reciprocity does not immediately help us in identifying any pattern of shifting causality between the two sides, without which the relationship seems resistant to social scientific analysis. It does, however, epitomise one important feature of culture, however defined, that is often overlooked, namely that it can often be analysed as process rather than object. All cultures are dynamic and constantly evolving, something that has already been acknowledged by the literature on the institutions that we identify as part of culture. That culture may possess an overall perceived stability does not exclude its having a dynamic content.<sup>3</sup> The often illusory dichotomy

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Culture and its Relationship to Economic Change', *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics* 151/2, 1995, p.271. The first section of this paper draws on Jones work in several respects.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Cultural Context of the Japanese Political Economy', in S. Kumon & H. Rosovsky (eds.), *The Political Economy of Japan* vol.3 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Jones, *op.cit.*

between 'traditional' and 'modern' within the same cultural entity says more about the discourse relating to culture than the culture itself. However, both the dynamic nature of culture itself, and the recurrent reciprocity of its interaction with economic activity, mean that the historian, whose approach focuses on time lags and sequences of change, is well placed to advance our understanding. Cross-cultural comparison also faces us with major methodological problems, however. We may accept that culture influences outcomes, and hence is part of the reasons why certain outcomes are achieved, but the only evidence that we may have are the outcomes themselves.

As Jones notes, culture is assigned specific geographical parameters. The defining of those geographical parameters is crucial for any analysis. Culture has been assigned to regions, nation states and localities. Comparing the economic performance of these units is the basic stuff of comparative economic history and a core concern for global economic historians, as evidenced in the debates on the divergence of economic performance in the West and East Asia, or on the 'falling behind' of Africa and Latin America. Particularly in relation to the modern period, though, many of the debates in comparative and global economic history have been premised on the assumption that political jurisdictions were units of both economic and cultural activity, and hence appropriate units for analysis. The dominance of such analyses of 'national' cultures has been eroded by scholarship over the past two decades that has dealt with aspect of culture that transcend nation states, for example the work on Confucian capitalism and economic development in Asia,<sup>4</sup> or on the impact of Catholicism on the delayed development of Southern Europe.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> E.g. H.C. Tai, *Confucianism and Economic Development: an Oriental Alternative?* (Washington: Washington Institute Press, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> D. Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (London: Little Brown & Co., 1998); for an alternative view, G. Tortella, 'Patterns of Economic Retardation and Recovery in

It is clear that whatever we think culture is, it does not necessarily fit neatly either with political or economic entities. And yet my own area of specialisation, Japan, continues to be identified as possessing a 'unique' national culture that has in one way or another impacted upon its economic development and been shaped by it. It is an identification that has been sustained not just by the stereotypes and envies of outsiders, but by the Japanese themselves, in its most extreme form through the so-called *Nihonjinron*, the theory of what it is to be Japanese. This emphasis on uniqueness for long removed Japan from the normal comparative frameworks in the social sciences. It also established an overwhelming emphasis on nation and nation state as the unit of analysis.

My comments here are in part a response to this persistent perception that offers simplified cultural explanations of complex development issues, and leads me to believe that it is very hard to pin down the relationship between culture and economic activity at the macro-level. Firstly, culture is an important part of any overall explanation of economic change at the level of any single economic unit, be it the region, the state, the town, the industry, the family etc. However, the fluid and amorphous nature of culture at larger units, including the nation, make it very difficult to analyse comparatively. While I realise that global historians do have to make these ambitious comparisons, I do not believe that cross-national or regional comparisons of culture and economics are necessarily the best way to pursue this important issue. Secondly, our dependence on macroeconomic outcomes as evidence is in danger of leading us back to yet another superficial explanation of why Europe industrialised before East Asia, why Japan 'succeeded' or why Latin America fell behind. The obvious solution is the empirical one: to break up culture into its constituent parts, and to consider culture at the

---

South Western Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries', *Economic History Review* 47, 1994.

subnational level, on the grounds that regional and national cultures are never homogeneous. We already know that the so-called Confucian capitalist countries are enormously diverse, but even national populations are subdivided, among other things, by class, wealth, local origin, education, gender and ethnicity. In the same way that research of minority entrepreneurship has advanced our understanding of cultural influences, comparing subcategories of a population with their counterparts elsewhere may well be a way of helping us think sensibly about the impact of culture in global economic history. My argument is that if we look within a national or regional culture it is possible to identify global trends that embrace even a country thought of as so culturally unique as Japan. Use of the term culture by definition tends to point us in the direction of 'uniqueness', thereby limiting the opportunities for comparison, but analysis of different social categories, families or guilds, for example, which are major constituents in any 'culture', are far more feasible, and have already been explored by social science historians. Some of this cross-country work has identified similarities in the evolution of groups or organisations in countries that at the national level appear very different.

Gender is only one of the categories that subdivides national populations, although it is the most fixed and the most fundamental. If we accept that the above definition of culture embraces the social institutions of an economy and the 'mental' models' that have helped to shape them, then we are also accepting that perceptions of gender are among the factors that shape and sustain those institutions. As such gender issues must also engage in a dynamic interaction with the operation of the economy. Analysis of the issue of gender in comparative economic history presents us with a seeming paradox. On the one hand, gendered attitudes and institutions may be seen as part of geographically distinct cultures, hence prone to diversity. On the other, remarkably similar

trends in the gendering of economic activity can be observed across a range of countries and time periods. Arguing that Japan and Britain are culturally similar at the macro level, for example, would be likely to generate derision, but the trends in gender and work in the two countries during the last two centuries demonstrate many similarities, suggesting not just that cultural influences, as we know, have become increasingly global, but that there are likely to have been common processes at work in very diverse cultural milieus. Identifying the causes of both the similarities and the differences may offer insights into the culture-economy relationship.

Economists and historians have conventionally fought shy of analysing the relationship between gender and economic activity. The approach of economics has been either to treat gender as a dependent variable (like culture), or to factor the impact of gender differences on economic development into theoretical frameworks that effectively explain away, or negate those differences. Neoclassical economics has been used to argue that gender-based wage differentials are attributable to lower levels of human capital embodied in female workers, or other qualities that make women less valuable employees, or that the opportunity cost of employing them may also be lower. Gary Becker states this in somewhat extreme terms:

‘Increasing returns from specialized human capital is a powerful force creating a division of labour in the allocation of time and investments in human capital between married men and married women. Moreover, since childcare and housework are more effort intensive than leisure and other household activities, married women spend less effort on each hour of market work than married men working the same number of hours. Hence, married women have lower hourly earnings than married men with the same market human capital, and they economize on the effort expended on market work by seeking less demanding jobs.’<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> ‘Human Capital, Effort, and the Sexual Division of Labor’, *Journal of Labor Economics* 3, 1, pt.2, 1985.

While the growing interest in institutionalism has offered a framework more conducive to understanding the constraints of society's formal and informal rules, the significance of gender *per se* in the analysis of property rights, for example, has rarely received much attention. Other interpretative frameworks in economics, including that dating back to Marx, have likewise subsumed consideration of issues of gender within other analytical categories, such as the relations of production. The emergence of feminist economics, with its recognition of what Nancy Folbre has called the 'interlocking structures of constraint', has had only a limited impact on the broader scholarship. A general reluctance on the part of many economists to consider relationships of power as analytical categories has led to what feminist and women's historians perceive as an inability to address the discourses of gender and power that they have believed to be so important.

As global economic historians it surely behoves us to try and tackle the question of how and why common features of gendering of economic activity have emerged, and how far those similarities and differences can tell us something about why countries and regions have pursued different trajectories of development and growth. Such an endeavour requires us to be truly multidisciplinary. We need to try and find a way of capturing the complex relationship that exists between the practical operation of the economy, its formal and informal institutions, and the rhetoric and structures of power. Since it is in the Japanese context that I have explored these issues, that is going to be my focus here.

## **Gender in Modern Japan**

Over the 20<sup>th</sup> century the emergence of a distinct historiographical tradition within Japanese economic history resulted in a significant polarisation of views and approaches between different strands of

historical scholarship. Divisions between Marxist and neo-classical trained economists, and between economists and historians, including historians of culture, have been a major reason why economic historians of Japan have been unable to produce systematic academic analyses of the relationship between culture and economic development of the kind that would have tempered some of the more simplistic popular perceptions and cast doubt on the damaging assumption that Japan was more unique than anywhere else. In relation to an understanding of the significance of gender in economic history, those divisions have remained damaging, not least in the limited exchange of ideas between economic historians and historians of gender.

Recent work on modern Japan by cultural, intellectual and social historians, however, has increasingly identified the major extent to which perceptions of gender were fundamental to the official ideology that emerged from the 1890s, and evolved throughout the pre-World War II years. That official ideology was enshrined in both law and social structures, and gender became in effect an essential part of the recreation of tradition that has been identified by historians such as Carol Gluck.<sup>7</sup> The construction of gender that was reflected in the national orthodoxy was something more than the standard 'separate spheres' or 'male breadwinner' model that was found across countries. The Civil Code of 1899 was like that of many other countries in giving women a legally subordinate position to men, but it was less like them in locating male-female relationships firmly in the context of a family structure that emphasized continuation of the family name, offered a set of highly stylised intra-family relationships, and purported to rest on centuries of tradition. This ideal family structure then became replicated in other spheres of society, including in economic organisations, taking with it the gendered perceptions of the original. 'Family enterprises' implied more

---

<sup>7</sup> *Japan's Modern Myths* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).

than simple ownership, and the widely used terms ‘familism’ and ‘paternalism’ had highly gendered connotations. The imperial institution that stood at the apex of the official orthodoxy was not only headed by divinity, but a divinity who was also the father of the nation, the head of the national family – whence comes the identification of Japan in that period as a ‘family state’ (*kazoku kokka*). While the Empress was by analogy the ‘mother of the nation’, in the nationalistic years of the 1930s and early 1940s that epithet was extended to embrace Japanese motherhood in general. Women as such were critical in the ordering of both society and politics, and those who responded to the state’s wartime plea to increase the rate of childbirth by producing ten or more children were rewarded with the title of ‘mother of the nation’. What we find in relation to gender, therefore, is a fusion of social values, social practices and institutions, and official discourse, consequent on a constant process of interaction and synergy between state and people.<sup>8</sup> Discourses on gender were of enormous significance in holding together the three dimensions of culture identified in Prof. Osterhammel’s preliminary statement for this conference, namely culture as world view, as collectively held values, and as rules (both formal and informal).

To understand how economic activity evolved in this gendered context, and how it may have impacted on it, means that above all we have to recognise the existence of a dynamic between discourse and reality, between perceptions and social mores and economic imperatives. While ideas of embedded rationality may have implicitly acknowledged this to be the case, we need to be explicit about how it might be explored. I tried to make clear in my book on the textile labour market in pre-war Japan<sup>9</sup> how perceptions of gender shaped both the rhetoric and practice

---

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. S. Garon, *Molding Japanese Minds* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> *Women and the Labour Market in Industrialising Japan: the Textile Industry before the Pacific War* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).



of all actors in the labour market. More specifically, the gender of the workforce, which in this case was mainly female, imposed legal and other constraints on workers, obliging them to accept lower wages and limiting their ability to take advantage of normal market sanctions. Overall, the gender of the workforce, and the rhetoric and perceptions attached to gender, were critical to the labour market institutions that allowed producers to make profits and seize productivity gains.

### **Gendering Comparative Global History**

If we are going to pursue this issue in a practical context, we need first of all to recognise that the information that we have for every economy and for every stage in history is socially constructed, and that gender is a part of that social construction. We know that the economic activities of men are better represented than those of women in the historical record, and historians of gender have had to find imaginative ways of trying to compensate for this imbalance, but we also need to be sensitive to the inbuilt biases that may exist even in seemingly reliable statistical data. Take the censuses that appeared across the more industrialised countries from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example. All these data gathering exercises were bedevilled by problems such as the tendency not to define family labour as work, shifting definitions of what constituted work, and how to categorise part time or subsidiary employment structures. Many of these problems have a gender aspect, however, that did not merely act to underestimate the work of women, particularly married women, but also distorted their actual role in the productive economy. Early censuses (and some later ones) were dependent on information provided by the (male) household head, whose responses would be informed by particular perceptions of gender roles, for example, the existence or absence of social pressure to return a wife as a

housewife, or children (male and female) as unoccupied or in education. Where respondents might be illiterate, enumerators might fill in the response, and their possession of their own assumptions or prejudices could add a further source of bias. These distortions in some of the basic sources of information will differ according to each country or region, but they are often remarkable in their similarity.<sup>10</sup>

Notwithstanding these deficiencies in the evidence, however, historians of gender have pursued analysis in a number of areas that are of fundamental concern to global historians. One of these is the gendered content and social construction of work. As economies have become more developed, work has tended to move away from use value to market value. The process of economic change, particularly the process of industrialisation, with its application of new technologies, has tended not only to strengthen the division between home and workplace, but also constantly to redefine the status of different occupations. As economies have changed, the available tasks have changed, and the ways in which those tasks are perceived by society have also changed. Over the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in many places new technologies were associated with a process of feminisation or masculinisation of work, but they also generated new occupations offering new employment opportunities for both men and women. Employment opportunities for women, for example, increased enormously with the advent of new office machinery in the first half of the twentieth century, but at the same time many economies instituted marriage bars restricting women's career prospects, thereby ensuring that managerial posts were only open to men, and confirming both gender and status divisions within the workforce. Japan was no exception to this trend during the period of technological

---

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. L. Geib-Gundersson, *Uncovering the Hidden Work of Women in Family Businesses* (1998); B. Hill, 'Women, Work and the Census: a Problem for Historians of Women', *History Workshop* 35, Spring 1993.

advance that occurred from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. New openings were created for women. Telephone operators, secretaries, typists were occupations that had never before existed, but which, like elsewhere, rapidly became feminised.

Since the social construction of work can be considered one aspect of 'culture', we might expect a greater difference between countries in the gendering of work and economic activity than this historical record appears to suggest. There are, of course, many differences, but most of them are differences of scale or manifestation rather than of fundamental character. If we think of the gender-segmentation of the labour market, for example, we find that such a gender segmentation was confirmed in many countries by the process of industrialisation in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The extent of this segmentation in twentieth century Japan was particularly conspicuous. By the 1930s the range of occupations and tasks open to women in Japan was very narrow compared to the number of those open to men. This situation has had an enduring legacy through to the present, with a persistent high degree of gender segmentation. Notwithstanding cultural differences, this is a Japanese reflection of what became a 'global' phenomenon in industrialising economies.

The gendering of new jobs was rarely publicly debated, but it was closely associated with the mechanisation and the development of new technologies that characterised industrialisation, whether in the factory, the farm or the office. New technologies could lead to a process of 'deskilling' as technology made some tasks redundant or less demanding. Production line technology increasingly substituted for the work of skilled operatives. However, although activities such as Luddism demonstrated that male workers were perceived to be at the receiving end of this deskilling, we find that in general a more subtle process was at work, which casts doubt on any simple process of skill devaluation. In many industrial economies men's work came to be identified as 'skilled', and

women's work as 'unskilled'. The possession of skill became a male attribute. The distinction between skilled and unskilled jobs became a social categorisation rather than a genuine description of human capital requirements. If women started to move into a job the image of that job often became devalued, while the gender division of labour became subject to ex post facto rationalisation.

The process of technological change was never, therefore, gender neutral. It could provide opportunities for change in the gender division of labour, but could also act to confirm and consolidate traditional assumptions and activities. In parts of the Japanese weaving industry, for example, the position of women weavers was strengthened as new technologies meant that they required less strength and could operate without assistants. By the 1930s weavers in large factories did little more than keep a watchful eye over a number of automated looms. Both men and women might lose out, but not necessarily to the same extent. To explore these issues further requires comparative empirical study that acknowledges the existence of a dynamic interaction between technology change and its social context. Take the introduction of the sewing machine, for example. Would we expect the introduction of this new technology to undermine or enhance the position of skilled seamstresses or tailors in what in most countries has tended to be a predominantly female occupation?<sup>11</sup>

A second area that must be premised on an understanding of gender issues is the significance of the family. I realise that there will a strong focus on the family in GEHN discussions on another occasion, but family role and structure is such a 'global' theme, and of such importance in any culture, that I do not believe that we can ignore it here. Pre-industrial economies, of course, were founded on family economies, and

---

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Gordon at Harvard is currently writing a history of the sewing machine in Japan, and may be able to answer this question.

the family was the locus of productive activity. This significance has declined as industrialisation has progressed, but has persisted through to the present even in the most industrialised economies. In general we find that during industrialisation families have tended to shift from being cooperative, flexible units of production to units characterised by the possession of more rigid and hierarchical individual functions. The pre-existing nature of the division of labour in the family helped to determine the ease or difficulty of labour supply to new economic activities.

The nature of the family was important for the economic activities of both men and women, but with the growth of industrialisation its impact on the pattern of economic activities of women almost everywhere became arguably greater. Cultures of domesticity generated debates on the relationship between women's paid work, their domestic responsibilities, and their 'ideal' social role. Particularly in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century the process of capitalist development was accompanied by an idealisation of the family, in which femininity was associated with love and emotional ties, and masculinity with earning, and economic and power relationships. The concept of 'separate spheres' emphasized female dependence, institutionally reinforced by legislation relating to inheritance and property rights. Wage disparities were justified not just by productivity differentials but also by arguments such as women not having to support a family and having a different, inferior, sense of responsibility. Ideas of 'supplementary earnings' and a 'family wage' combined to weaken women's position in the labour market.

In the Japanese case, as noted earlier, the family became a critical concept in both national policy and social values and interaction. The articulation and reality of the family in Japan was in many respects distinct. The undermining of the family as the site of productive activity took place later than in many parts of the United States or Western Europe, and that activity therefore remained for longer constrained by

prevailing social norms and attitudes to gender. However, while the timing of the industrialisation process was responsible for disparities between Japan and elsewhere, the disparities were again in timing and extent rather than in fundamental nature. In Japan, too, women's earnings were viewed as 'supplementary', employment was seen as undermining domestic roles, and the family unit was the defining institution for women's productive activity and the social construction of that activity – to a far greater extent than was the case with men. Constructs of gender associated with the family remain of critical importance to our understanding of economic activity, and in the global context any analysis that abstracts individual workers completely from their family context is likely to limit our understanding of the motivations of workers and the structures of work.

## **In Conclusion**

Culture becomes important when we accept that economic institutions are also social institutions, hence not subject purely to the dictates of the market. Gendering is just one attribute of those social institutions, and it may be argued that breaking down 'culture' into its constituent parts facilitates comparison and the highlighting of common trends across very different cultures. The historian needs to recognise, however, that there exists a two way dynamic between culture (including gender) and the operation of the economy. While scholars have argued that culture both supports and restricts the dynamism of an economy, we need to look more specifically at how that dynamic shifts over a given period of time with respect to a defined focus. It may be that the tension between economic imperatives and value systems that appears in times of very rapid economic change can be particularly instructive. A fundamental question for global historians, however, would appear to be

why, across so many diverse cultures, similar trends can also be perceived, including in the gendering and gendered construction of economic activity. Are we to be persuaded after all of the validity of theories of convergence or technological determinism that threaten to make culture redundant in any explanatory role?