

Gender Distinction within Japanese Suicides

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日本の自殺にみるジェンダーの問題

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I. Introduction

There has been a constant increase in the number of suicides in Japan in the last ten years. It culminated in 2003, with 23,000 recorded suicides. Among those, about 16,000 were of men. The most common cause for men's deaths in their twenties and thirties is still suicide (Asahi Shinbun July 9, 2005). Although seniors' suicides still show the highest number, there is an extremely rapid growth in middle aged men's suicides, clearly the result of the economic recession that started in the mid 1990s.

Men committing suicide are twice as common as women, and the number of middle aged men's suicides are drastically increasing.

We will first examine the linguistic aspects of the term "suicide" itself, and then discuss how the suicides have been reported by media and perceived in the Japanese society. We argue that the media's reports, as well as the society's perception, have been engendered, and will be engendered. In another words, the media reports male suicides differently from female suicides. Based on my research on Internet sites or homepages related to suicides, and on my survey of Akita University students in

northeastern Japan, I will report how the perception of suicide and suicides themselves are engendered. Furthermore, I will discuss how this gender difference can be observed linguistically and anthropologically in the context of Japanese morals and ethics.

II. Historical/Cultural Background

Historically, under pseudo-*bushido* or nationalism, suicides have been rather fantasized. The conduct of *jigai*, *jiketsu*, the suicidal acts considered as taking responsibility for the defeat of country, family, or self, have been repeatedly described in stories. Furthermore, celebrities' suicides have also motivated young people to kill themselves. The folk belief that to be able to get happier in the other world or to be able to be happier in the other world have almost continuously been the themes of romantic stories. In the era of Japanese militarism, suicide as a way to 'maintain the dignity' has been most highly valued, endorsing *tokkootai* attack, i.e. 'suicide attack', known under the term *kamikaze* attack.

Similarly, *shinju*, double suicides, have been fantasized between couples who cannot be united in this world. *Shiju* stories have

been favorite Japanese tragedies and have been repeatedly performed in theatres and films. To mention a few, *kabuki/bunraku* stories such as *Sonezaki Shinju* and *Shinju Ten no Amishima* by Chikamatsu Monzaemon, and the film *Shitsurakuen*, 'The lost paradise', (1997) are some of the most popular love stories, connoting that many Japanese are fantasizing romantic suicides.

III. Terminology

There are several Japanese terms for suicide, based on its motivations and methods. At the same time, there are terms which are used gender-specifically. The general term for suicide is *jisatsu*, and there are several other terms. In contrast, the term *jigai* is used more for women's suicides and the terms *jiketsu* and *seppuku* are used exclusively for men's suicides.

Table 1. General term *jisatsu* (lit. 'self-killing')

<i>jigai</i>	<i>jiketsu</i>	<i>seppuku/harakiri</i>
<----->		
woman		man

Table 1 shows that men's suicides have been reported under the terms *jiketsu* or *seppuku/hara-kiri*, a courageous act, while women's suicides have been sometimes reported under the term *jigai*. Likewise, *seppuku* or *harakiri* (lit. cutting off the stomach) in foreign words are exclusively considered 'men's behavior.' Historical writing also describes that when a nation is defeated, its lord conducts *jiketsu/seppuku*, while women such as the lord's wives and court servants conduct *jigai*. It should also be added that in traditional or historical-literal works, *jigai*, which tends to be used contrastingly with *jiketsu*, connotes a different method of suicide, i.e. man's method is *seppuku*, cutting off the belly, while woman's method is *jigai*, cutting the throat¹ (Suicide Labo. 2005).

1. Leaving notes-*isho*.

Among *isho*, 'leaving notes' reported by media, there is a gender bias, i.e. men leave notes more often than women do. Among the notes themselves, women tend to leave personal notes with emotional terms such as *kanashii* 'sad', *sabishii* 'lonely', and terms of apology such as *Gomennasai*. On the other hand, men leave notes of political or social messages, or terms of apology such as *Goshinpai okakeshite sumimasen*, 'Sorry for causing a trouble,' or terms of fatigue such as '*Tsukaremashita*.'

Table 2-Gender distinction in 'leaving notes'

	Man	Woman
Apology	<i>Sumimasen</i>	<i>Gomennasai</i>
	Fatigue	Emotion
	<i>Tsukaremashita</i>	<i>Kanashii, Samishii</i>
	Political message	

Among youths killing themselves because of being bullied, boys tend to leave notes saying 'I will let them know how I suffer from their bullying. (That is, By committing suicide, I will get revenge on them.).

IV. Survey Results on Suicide

Following is a survey result. A hundred undergraduate students at Akita University responded to a one-page survey regarding suicide.

1. Perception of suicide:

Question: 'What do you think of suicide?'

Answer:Suicide is-	Men(%)	Women(%)	Average(%)
Bad	35	23	29
We cannot judge	65	77	71
Good	0	0	0

2. Question: Have you ever thought about the topic of suicide?

Answer	Men(%)	Women(%)	Average(%)
Yes	65	92	79
No	35	8	21

According to this data, more than one third of the students think that suicide is an unavoidable act if there is no other choice. On the other hand, more female students have thought about suicide. When asked what has motivated them to think about suicide, many of the women responded with the suicide of their kin members, suicides of their classmates, and suicides of their neighbors. It may be considered that, in comparison with men, female students take suicides that have occurred around themselves more personally and seriously.

3. Question: 'Have you thought of committing suicide?'

More than half of the female students responded 'Yes.'

Answer	Men(%)	Women(%)	Average(%)
Yes	45	63	54
No	55	37	46

Among young people, more women have thought about killing themselves when they were younger, such as in the ages 5 to 20. The reasons for thinking of killing themselves are problems of interpersonal relationship: 1. When they felt isolated. 2. When their parents treated them harshly 3. When they felt that they were ugly.

Contrary to our expectation, fewer men had thought of killing themselves. However, among those men who had thought of killing themselves, many were students of the faculty of Education and Human Studies; although a further study is needed before concluding that

students of humanities think more about suicide.

4. Question: 'Why do you think more men than women commit suicide in Japan?'

The majority of our survey's respondents attempted to explain why men's suicides occur much more often than women's. According to their explanations, there are two main reasons, as follow:

1. Men have got empty pride, and are unable to talk about their problems to other people.
2. Men have to take socio-economical responsibility for their families, so at this period of recession, when men get fired, they tend to kill themselves. On the other hand, women do not have to assume such responsibility.

In greater detail, it was explained that men commit suicide more often because they:

- Are sensitive
- Cannot stand loneliness
- Cannot express their problems to other people
- Have more stress because of their work
- (Because women need not to be in the situation of lots of stress).
- Tend to have a 'philosophical' thinking of life and death
- Have to take socio-economic responsibilities, and when they fail at those, they have no choice but to kill themselves

We find cynical responses from male students of the School of Engineering. They were, for example, *Harakiri wa otoko no bunka da*, 'Harakiri is the culture of men'. *Otoko wa nayami goto ga ippai aru monda!* 'Men have so many worries!' There was also one opposing comment on male suicides, that '[they occur because men] are irresponsible.'

V. Historical Records on a Number of Suicides

From quantitative data (1930s to present) on suicides, I have rearranged a number of people who committed suicide based on occupation and gender.

Table 3-Suicide by occupation and gender

Occupation	Men	Women	Total
1. Scholars and researchers	18	0	18
2. Students (elementary to university students)	22	23	45
3. Students being bullied	23	7	30
4. Celebrities (popular musicians, actors/actresses, TV talents, etc.)	44	20	64
5. Politicians and bureaucracy	23	0	23
6. Local politicians	25	0	25
7. Company executives	25	1 (participant of a double suicide)	26
8. Writer/poets	40	12	52
9. Painters/comic writers	10	5	15
10. Sports celebrities	16	2	18

All of these data show that at childhood and low teen ages, children in general do not show so much of a gender difference, in terms of the number of children killing themselves. However, it is important to note that many more boys kill themselves than girls for the reason of being bullied. Again, from this result we can assume that boys have difficulties in talking about their problems to other people, especially to adults such as parents or schoolteachers.

VI. Gender Distinctions in Internet Access

Women's access to suicide-related websites is higher than that of men. They tend to write messages in order to exchange their feelings of loneliness. Some women post photographs of their cut wrists. On the other hand, men post messages to solicit participants for mass-suicides².

In this sense, women use Internet in order to communicate with other people. They put, for example, photographs of their cut wrists, probably in order to cry out. More women use the *Inochi no denwa* hotline as well as Internet chatting compared with men, connoting that women can at least cry out their feelings as long as anonymity is kept.

VII. Addressing People Who May Commit Suicide

Still, Internet is well criticized for increasing the suicide rate; especially, sites in which people solicit other people to kill themselves together have been considered dangerous. As a result, a number of suicide-related sites have been shut down. However, there are people who rethink suicide by viewing websites in which counselors or psychologists address them and encourage them to keep living. The function of these sites, including the *Inochi no denwa*, 'calling for life' site, should not be ignored. This section tries to conduct a linguistic analysis of counselors' address.

(1) *Inochi no denwa*, 'Calling for life':

1. *Jisatsu o kangaete iru anata e*. To you, who are thinking of suicide,
2. *shi o kangae, netto o samayotteiru anata e*. To you, who are thinking of death and surf Internet sites
3. *Doozo, yoi peeji o mitsukete kudasai*. Please find out a good homepage

4. *Soshite anata no kimochi o katatte kudasai.*
And state your feeling.
5. *Doose kataru nara, motto, motto, katatte kudasai.*
If you tell (us), tell us more and more.

The second person pronoun *anata* for intimacy, and the request form-*kudasai*, and emphatic terms *doozo* "please", and *motto motto* 'more and more' are repeated here, suggesting that the writers of the site are trying to establish a rapport with the viewers of the sites in a more personal way.

- (2) On the other hand, in a site where the writers deal with suicides motivated by being bullied, the second person *kimi* is used, connoting that the writer is addressing boys, and that the writer is also a man, trying to form a rapport like male bonding.

1. *Kimi wa hitoribocchi janai.*
You are not alone.
2. *Kimi wa hitori ja nai.*
You are not alone.
3. *Warui no wa kimi ja nai.*
It's not you that should be blamed.
4. *Warui no wa aitsura da.*
It is them that should be blamed.
5. *Kimi ga damedakara yarareteiruno dewa naku, aitsura ga dame nanda.*
You are bullied not because you are bad, but because they are bad.
6. *Mikata wa iru. Tasukete kureru hito mo kanarazu iru.*
You have somebody on your side. They will surely save you.
7. *Iitsukeru no wa, chikutta koto ni wa naranai.*
Saying (the problems) to others is not a bad thing.
8. *Kesshite hikyoo nanka ja nai.*
It's never a sneaky act.
9. *Machigatta koto to tatakau, tadashii koodoo da.*

It's a right action for fighting with wrongs.

10. *Watashi wa kimi no mikata da.*
I am on your side.
11. *Otoosan mo, okaasan mo, sensee mo, zenryoku de kimi o*
Your dad, mom, and teacher will do the best in order to protect you.
12. *Mamoru.*
We will protect you.
13. *Honki de tatakau.*
Seriously we will fight
14. *Kanarazu mamoru.*
We promise to protect you.
15. *Ijimekko nanka ni zettai ni makenai.*
We will never give away to bullies.
16. *Daijoobu. Kimi wa hitori ja nai.*
You will be OK. You are not alone.

As is evident, the message trying to save young suicide-potentials from killing themselves because they are being bullied, is addressing boys, which are rather muted. *Tsugeguchi*, or *chikuru* in slang, which is generally considered a sneaky act which girls would do to their teachers, is encouraged here. It says that *tsugeguchi/chikuru* is a right act for fighting against the wrong, that reporting to adults is a courageous act, instead of cowardly act.

VIII. Conclusion

In this paper, we tried to analyze the terms, reasons, and general perception of suicides in Japan. The paper shows that the problems of suicides and the media's reports are well engendered. However, it should also be noted that the gender distinction is not so simple because of the cultural/social perception of suicides in Japan, which seems quite different from Judeo-Christian societies.

Quantitatively, much more male suicides occur than female suicides. This increase of

men's suicides is considered more serious than women's suicides, so that the national government finally made a decision to set up a center for preventing suicides in 2005. It is considered that men's suicides are a result of Japan's socio economic problems, while women's suicides are considered a result of their personal or psychological problems. Men's suicides are thought to occur because of men's tendency to take a responsibility for their failures.

From the historical data, we find that among celebrities, the gender gap becomes even wider than in general suicides. Naturally, we do not find any females who killed themselves among politicians, bureaucracies, or company executives. Among celebrities such as singers and TV talents, the ratio of female suicides becomes relatively high, that is, 1/3 of all suicides. Among writers or poets, women's suicides also command a relatively high percentage, that is 1/3; however, when we look at more recent cases, clearly in current times we have more and more female celebrities, sports celebrities, TV talents or writers, so more female suicides occur. In this sense, the proliferation of career women may trigger the increase of female suicides, like some of our survey respondents suggested.

More importantly, as the Internet sites cited above emphasize, the issue of suicide has been deeply tied to individual talking or being muted. Boys and men are not able to talk, dragging their traditional gender biased ethics, that is, 'men should not talk'.

The result of our survey-that many of our respondents, both men and women, think that more men commit suicide because men feel obliged to take a responsibility for their families, including wives and children-reflects the patriarchal image of men. This statement could be read as: women are not considered to commit suicides because they do not have to

take responsibility.

The university where the survey was conducted was in Akita Prefecture, a northeastern part of Japan. This prefecture has the highest suicide rate in Japan, highest because of seniors' suicides in the countryside(Motohashi 2005). The Medical School of Akita University launched their research re. causes for the suicides, looking for ways to prevent the suicides. However, there has been little research on gender difference in their work, as well as on cultural aspects of the concepts of suicide. Researchers should consider the problems of being muted among seniors, especially male seniors, more seriously.

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Inochi no denwa homepage.

Endnotes

1. General Nogi's *junshi* suicide conducted on the day of the Meiji Emperor's funeral clearly shows this contrast.
2. A man who sold potassium cyanide for those who wanted to kill themselves through the Internet under a woman's name, Kiriko, got arrested and killed himself. In August 2005 there was also a man who solicited young men and women for mass-suicides and killed them.