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## ***Hinamatsuri* and the Japanese Female: A Critical Interpretation of the Japanese Doll Festival**

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**Abstract:** *The tradition of Hinamatsuri or the Japanese Doll Festival originated during the Heian Period as a folkloric practice of scapegoating. Originally young girls would craft dolls, known as hina-ningyō, out of paper that were said to embody personal impurities, and would later cast them into rivers—metaphorically cleansing their souls. Conversely, the festival is now oriented toward conspicuous consumption. Building upon the critical approaches to material culture of Barthes (1957), this article explores how Hinamatsuri has reflected the socio-political ideals of modern Japan. I argue that these dolls are encoded with ideological expectations of Japanese womanhood, and interfaced with patriarchal notions of discipline, obedience and control.*

### **1. Introduction**

On 3 March of each year the Japanese celebration of “Girls Day” takes place, incorporating the tradition of *Hinamatsuri* or Doll Festival. Ranging from ornately detailed and decorated dolls known as *hina-ningyō*<sup>1</sup> to kitschy *Hello Kitty* figures gowned in Heian Period dress, these dolls are the material foci of a celebration said to honor girlhood. Though a seemingly innocent occasion, fostering harmless community and commerce, both the celebratory event and the material culture involved in the celebration can invoke a much more political significance.

The tradition of *Hinamatsuri* originated during the Heian Period as a folkloric practice associated with purification, celebration of seasonal transition and scapegoating (Sofue, 1965; Yen, 1975; Li-Chen, 1999). Historians agree that this practice is most likely derived from a similar practice

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<sup>1</sup> *Hina* is a contraction of “*hi*” meaning small and “*na*” meaning lovely, while *ningyō* simply means doll.

originating in China, yet the exact lineage linked to the incorporation of dolls remains obscure (Li-Chen, 1999; Yen, 1975; Morris, 1994). A popular understanding of this practice in its original form, however, depicts young girls crafting dolls out of paper that were said to somehow embody personal impurities. To complete this ritual, these dolls were then later cast into rivers and streams—metaphorically cleansing their souls through the proxy of the discarded dolls.<sup>1</sup> As Darby (1984) explains:

The special respect accorded dolls in Japan is rooted in popular religious beliefs and practices. Since ancient times, it has been believed that sins or illness could be exorcised by transferring them from a living person to a substitute, often a figure made in human likeness. Once possessed by the evil spirit the figure was discarded, usually in a river, so it would be carried downstream and eventually out to sea. (p. 24)

Today, the festival is now oriented toward the preservation, display, adoration and trade of these dolls. Rather than emphasizing the cultural, social or use values that these dolls were once assigned, emphasis is now placed upon the aesthetic qualities associated with their exchange value. Indeed, these dolls are hardly the kind durable items used in play; rather they now exist as objects of conspicuous consumption.

Despite a rich history of Japanese toy production in flux with a booming global economy of childrens' consumer culture (Cross & Smits, 2005), dolls in Japan are not always considered items of play. Instead, many Japanese dolls

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<sup>1</sup>*Hina-nagashi*, or the practice of discarding dolls into bodies of water still takes place in various parts of Japan. Kyoto, a cultural capital of Japanese historical traditions, holds the *hina-nagashi* ceremony at the *Kamo* shrine.

commonly embody a much more serious significance.<sup>1</sup> Of the *hina-ningyō*, anthropologist Fredrick Starr noted: Suffice it to say that anyone that thinks of the doll's festival as a play, or a display, for the *amusement* of little girls, is wide of the mark. It is a serious ceremonial, the significance of which deserves recognition. (Cited in Pate, 2008, p.52)

Regardless of their cultural significance and the protocols for which children engage them, the Japanese dolls are not apoliticized objects. Quite the contrary; dolls can be interpreted as mechanisms of hegemony that promulgate passive consumption.<sup>2</sup> Building upon the critical approaches to material culture of Barthes (1957), this article explores how *Hinamatsuri* has reflected the socio-political ideals of modern Japan. I argue that these dolls are encoded with ideological expectations of Japanese womanhood, and interfaced with patriarchal notions of discipline, obedience and control. In this way, the central point of inquiry for this article is what to make of fostering a practice where transferring an exclusively female-form of impurity becomes a cultural celebration.

## **2. Historical Background of *Hinamatsuri* and *Hina-ningyō***

The origins of *Hinamatsuri* are unclear. Most historians, however, would agree that traces of the event are derived from Chinese literati practices associated with the *Shang-ssu* festival, or Spring Purification celebration that began in the early Zhou Dynasty between 1122-256 BCE (Yen, 1975, pp. 52-53). As in many purification customs throughout the

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<sup>1</sup> For example, some dolls in Japan have served as posthumous substitutes for spouses that have died prematurely. See Schattsschneider (2001). In fact, in the Japanese folkloric practice of *shiryō kekkon*, or deceased-soul marriage, families will purchase a *hanayome-ningyō*, or bride-doll for the deceased in order to appease and assist the deceased in his or her journey toward rebirth and salvation.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of such an interpretation see Formanek-Brunell (1993).

world, the proximity to water, ablutions in use of it, and immersion into it were central features in the purification process. The transference of impurities to objects, such as the early *hina-ningyō* dolls of Japan, however, may be a result of blending Chinese and Japanese rituals. Indeed, one of the Shang-ssu Festival's most well-known rituals was the floating of cups of wine down river to recipients that were, in turn, required to compose poems upon the arrival of the wine (Li-Chen, 1999; Yen, 1975; Morris, 1994). Rudimentary comparisons can be drawn between this Chinese ritual and the Japanese incorporation of a river as a discarding channel. Whether or not an actual connection exists, the following description would suggest some similarities:

A doll received from an *on'yoji* one would stroke his (or her) body and thus, it is believed, the bodily uncleanness or evil attachment might pass onto the doll; then one would return the "defilement loading" doll to the *on'yoji*, who, after performing an exorcism, let it flow into the river. (Yen, 1975, p. 53)

As a ritual, the use of these dolls that are said to assume such impurities, appears to have made its way to Japan sometime during the late Heian period (794 – 1185).<sup>1</sup> During this period, the artistic and literary expression of the Imperial Court was reflected in the practice of gowning the dolls in high quality materials, effectively stemming the ritual of destroying, sacrificing or dispensing of the dolls down river (Nishizawa, 1975; Yen, 1975). The celebration gained prominence through its incorporation into educational literature, as well the formation and rise of a

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<sup>1</sup> This date may be confirmed due to a similar practice written about in the *Genji Monogatari*, or *The Tale of Genji*, where transferring impurities to doll-like figures and casting them down river was mentioned. See Nishizawa (1975) and Saito (1975).

merchant class that popularized the trade of these dolls (Yen, 1975).

During the Muromachi period of 1336 to 1573, the practice of crating *fū-fu* dolls emerged, representing husband and wife and emphasizing the union of marriage (Nishizawa, 1975; Yen, 1975). These *fū-fu* dolls were presented as gifts during *Jō-shi* day, the third day of the third month in correspondence with the *Shang-ssu* festival of China. This event gradually became Girl's Day, adopting the name *Hinamatsuri* (Nishizawa, 1975; Yen, 1975; Saito, 1975; Ikeda, 2008).

During the Edo period between 1603 and 1868, the Imperial Court had its strongest influence on the appearance of these dolls, transforming the tradition of *Hinamatsuri* into a display representative of the Emperor's throne (Yen, 1975). In fact, the *Dairibina*, or Emperor (*Odairi-sama*) and Empress (*Ohina-sama*) dolls were created during this period, establishing one of the most significant political components of these displays (Yen, 1975, p. 54). Indeed, the actual use of *hina-dan*, a seven-tier altar for the display of these dolls was introduced during this period.

This *hina-dan* provided a visual hierarchical structure for audiences, particularly girls, to view. In descending order from those to be revered, to those in service of the revered were the *Odairi-sama* and *Ohina-sama* positioned on the top tier. The second tier displays the *San-nin Kanjo*, or three female court servants bearing rice wine. The *Go-nin Bayashi*, or five male musicians are positioned on the third tier followed by two ministers, or *Daijin* on the fourth tier. The fifth tier displays three *samurai* indulging in drink, while the sixth and seventh tiers hold a variety of accessories including miniature furniture, clothing, food and carriages.

The increasing popularity of the festival and the aesthetic production of the dolls and their accessories gradually spread throughout Japan. By the late eighteenth century, the *hina-ningyō* themselves were developing beyond the size and aesthetic parameters of their original form. According to Pate (2008) "an explosion of the size and sophistication" of

these dolls led to a competition of consumption among “members of the military and imperial elite, fed by keen marketing instincts on the side of wholesalers and doll-makers” (p. 52). This “explosion,” however, was soon restricted by sumptuary laws.

The imposition of these sumptuary laws served to complement the existing class structure (Hearn, 1904; Benedict, 2005; Noma, 1986). As Ruth Benedict (2005) noted in reference to these sumptuary laws, Americans were “horrified by Tokugawa laws which stated that a farmer of one class could buy such and such a doll for his child and the farmer of another class could buy a different doll” (p. 149).

Despite foreigners’ perceptions, these sumptuary laws were so common that they went unquestioned, allowing for the doll-makers to exploit various markets. Material changes in the crafting of the dolls even gave way to new and innovative methods for the preservation of aesthetics (Sato & Okubayashi, 2010). Where elegant forms of *hina-ningyō* were confined to the elite classes, farmers and the impoverished crafted homemade dolls out of such modest materials as “paper, clay and wild flowers” (Pate, 2008, p.54). In this way, *hina-ningyō* transitioned from a commodity emphasizing a use-value, to a commodity that was almost exclusively based upon an exchange value. As Sofue (1965) noted

With the advent of better dolls sold in city stores, the dolls came to be kept as ornaments and were placed on display...this doll festival has become much more elaborate among wealthy people in urban areas who have been influenced by the commercialization of department stores, etc. (p.154)

Today, *hina-ningyō* are considered expensive items. Although there certainly is a variation in prices of dolls between different brands, two of the more famous brands,

*Yoshitoku* and *Kyugetsu* list their dolls anywhere between ¥98,000 yen and ¥1,050,000 yen.<sup>1</sup>

### 3. Gender Inequality in Japan

Studies of Japanese females, from childhood to adulthood, have often noted the disparate experiences between males and females, particularly the experience of females as life-long nurturers, caregivers and bearers of incredible responsibilities (Vogel, 1978; Condon, 1993).

It has been substantially argued that the modern roots of this inequality are associated with the Meiji Restoration that began in 1868 (Sievers, 1983; Aoki, 1997; Liddle & Nakajima, 2000). At the heart of this transition between the Tokugawa and Meiji periods was the explicit process of reformation intended, at least in part, to adapt to Western ways of life without compromising the image of Japan and its history. This transition, however, brought major changes to both the national political structure, as well as civil society. Perhaps the two most vital changes engendered by this transition were the nationalistic reformations of sovereignty, or *Kokutai*, and the establishment of the centralized powers embodied by the Emperor. These changes cultivated an institution of reeducating the citizens in an attempt to orient them toward, among other things, sacrifice for nation through emergent nationalism and impending foreign conflicts. In addition, these changes led to the development of a “family-state” through the illusory political engineering of a society unified by interrelated peoples, all somehow linked to a common ancestry (Irokawa, 1985, pp.280-286). Indeed, educational propaganda in support of this transition reinforced the notion that women were to sustain subservient roles as supporters of their husbands and children. In 1910, for example, compulsory textbooks distributed to elementary students included stories with titles like “A Sailor’s Mother,” “A Soldier off to the Front,”

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<sup>1</sup> For this price range, the current conversion from Japanese yen to the US dollar is \$1,270.00 to \$13,600.00.

“Japanese Women,” and “Duties of a Housewife”—all short stories that propagated gendered role expectations of females as passive comforters of their sons and husbands (Irokawa, 1985 p. 304-307).

The circulation of literature was only a part of the reeducation process. A second educational institution that grew out of these reforms was the informal practice *Okeiko*, or structured lessons about the “feminine arts” such as mastering a musical instrument, conducting a tea ceremony and the art of flower arrangement (Vogel, 1978, p.19). *Okeiko* became an apprenticeship-based form of schooling where girls were taught how to be women, and thus, following this logic, suitable mates in marriage.

Beyond the enterprise of reforming the image and cultural practices of women, the Meiji Restoration also encroached upon their rights as citizens. In addition to the denial of suffrage through the “Law of Election,” and the “Peace Police Law” prohibiting female participation in any political party, the “Meiji Civil Code” gave an enormous amount of power to males as heads of the household, in all matters dealing with family and property (Sievers, 1983). The Meiji Civil Code as a central feature within the underpinnings of female oppression made a rather sweeping edict that would change the face of the female status.<sup>1</sup> In Aoki’s (1993) discussion of the Meiji Civil Code’s cultural impact on vertical bloodlines, hierarchies and even inheritance, she notes that the implications reverberated all the way down to the life or death of pre-conceived females: “In an environment that required the birth of a male heir for continuation of a household, young girls were discriminated against from the moment of their birth” (p. 22). This system of positioning the male at the center of the household, then, would suggest a general marginalization of the female along the periphery.

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<sup>1</sup> Through this Meiji Civil Code, women were accorded the same legal status as minors and the mentally ill. See Aoki (1997).



*Hinmatsuri* was also incorporated into this new reeducation scheme. In conjunction with cultivating strong families, stressing an appreciation for monogamy, and teaching the youth about filial piety, national declarations were made depicting *Hinamatsuri* as an educational event (Saito, 1975, p. 44). Though the obvious implication of this would be to establish an event for the honor of girlhood, another implication may have been the use of this visual model of the social and familial hierarchy instituted in the new Meiji society.

#### **4. Meaning, Material and Monetary Value**

The work of twentieth century French cultural theorist, Roland Barthes is particularly useful for interpreting *Hinamatsuri* and the *hina-ningyō*. Known largely for his application of structural analysis to popular culture, Barthes viewed all cultural phenomena as signs embedded within a larger system of relational structures—namely structures of language. This analysis, then, was the basis for his interpretation of semiology.

Semiology – aims to take in any situation of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment; these constitute, if not languages, at least systems of signification. (Barthes, 1964, p.77)

Thus non-linguistic sign systems ranging anywhere from fashion and architecture, to food and automobiles could be interpreted through structural analysis.

In his 1957 treatise on material culture titled *Mythologies*, Barthes attempts to demythologize modern myths—or what he views as ideology—by exposing the underlying messages associated with certain dominant values, namely those of the bourgeois class. That is, on the surface, any item has a literal (denotative) meaning, yet the socially constructed (connotative) meaning is that which is less apparent, and thus what Barthes sets out reveal. For example, toys are largely seen as play things intended to occupy children's

imagination; however, this would merely be a descriptive meaning apparent to most audiences. Yet toys, through at least one other social function, serve to convey certain prescriptions within a society. In the following instance, the connotative significance of socially constructed gender roles is subtly embodied with the material culture itself.

There exist, for instance, dolls which urinate; they have an oesophagus, one gives them a bottle, they wet their nappies; soon, no doubt, milk will turn to water in their stomachs. This is meant to prepare the little girl for the causality of house-keeping, to 'condition' her to her future role as mother. (Barthes, 1957, p.53)

These items and their less apparent meaning complicate the world of material culture to the extent that all items are actually part of an intricate structure of signs and thus systems of significance.

In accordance with the nomenclature of structural analysis, Barthes interpreted these signs as having multiple meanings beginning foremost with the fundamental relationship between a "signifier" (an object, image, sound, etc.) and the "signified" (its message, concept, meaning, etc.). In other words, all signs are constructed through a relationship between their signifier and signified parts. These relationships are solidified through an exchange within a larger structure of difference where cultural codes adhere to various combinations.

Material items of play generally serve as mechanisms of entertainment (Allison, 2006), socialization, education, and function as miniature variations of the larger social world dominated by adults (Barthes, 1957; Ball, 1967). For the *hina-ningyō*, the doll may be seen as a sign composed of its signifier (the actual material object of an anthropomorphized being), and its signified (the conceptual idea of dolls as socio-cultural representations of real life used for celebratory purposes). This relationship, however, only reveals a doll's denotative meaning, or a particularly obvious meaning in relation to the intentions of both the person that creates the dolls, as well as the people that consume it. For Barthes,

however, it is the connotative meaning that engenders a much more complex significance.

As all cultural phenomena is susceptible to the influence a dominant class, the analytical model of sign, signifier and signified is open to further meanings that permeate beyond the denotative. These new signs occur when the original sign becomes yet another signifier altogether. Barthes refers to these secondary meanings in combination with each other as “sign-functions”—effectively combining the denotative and the connotative (1964, p. 106-107). For the *hina-ningyō*, new signifiers, embedded in the original sign, could be an object representing the docility of Japanese womanhood, reverence for the system of *Kokutai*, commodity fetishism, and so on and so forth. This sign-function would then be the doll as a cultural item of the Girl’s Day celebration, combined with any one of these connotative meanings.

Analysis such as this requires that one take note of what is being viewed and the meanings that they can derive from what they see. Objects in general may be viewed irrespective of their denotative meaning, yet without explicitly stating that they have been viewed as such. In one Western view from an art critic describing a traveling *hina-ningyō* display in London, the message of representation and the conventions of gendered role expectations are quite evident:

Those objects are miniature reproductions, often to scale and accurate in every essential of form and of material...peaceful occupations for the Girls’ Festival, and in matters connected with fighting, for the Boys’. (Anonymous, 1933, pp. 91-92). Dolls are rich produces of gender (Hagaman, 1990; Wagner-Ott, 2002) and should be accorded the critical analysis that reveals their gendered meaning.

In this way, one connotative signifier of *Hinamatsuri* may be an ideology imbued with gender-specific expectations. Through the annual reminder of celebration, such expectations are visually outlined for girls to know their place in Japanese society. Unlike dolls intended for play, the notion of dolls for adoration implies, in one sense, a rather stoic protocol for both the doll and the doll admirer. Also,

unlike dolls of play, the material used for its delicate presentation is not to be embraced, dropped, shaken, fed, or subject to any error at all—but rather to be gazed upon. The doll, motionless, stoic-faced, fragile and confined in many instances to a protective reliquarium, generates an impression of something that is intended to be seen, though not heard. It is present—at least once a year—yet, by virtue of size, it is inconspicuous when it does surface and entirely absent for the remainder of that year. It is thus present when needed and absent when not. It becomes a conversation piece that is symbolic of a period in Japanese cultural history that has provided a foundation for both present and future understandings of ancestral womanhood. If it were anything less, it would not have had the same type of cultural capital that it possesses today; unless of course for the exchange value that it embodies.

One way of reinforcing such an interpretation is to draw-out other meaningful signs associated with an event or object that are consistent with these connotative notions. Revisiting some the original practices associated with *Hinamatsuri* is at least one of these departures.

The common denominators of purification and commencement found among the *Shang-ssu* festival of China and the early *Hinamatsuri* celebration generated a number of similarities. The peach tree as a symbolic icon, for example, had a rather vital significance in the Chinese celebration as its “branches, fruits and blossoms” reportedly “repelled pestilence and evil spirits” (Yen, 1975, p.54). In the *Hinamatsuri* celebration, *momo no sake*, or peach wine is served, extending this Chinese tradition.

However, peach products in the Japanese celebration take on yet another meaning—in particular that of fertility through happy marriages (Saito, 1975; Ikeda, 2008). Due to the visual component of their numerous blossoms, peach trees are said to have a reproductive quality, contributing to a folkloric notion whereby the conception of a large number of children may increase the level of happiness within a marriage. Though merely folklore, such significance of the

peach tree is cast in association with the female body and her reproductive functions.

In addition to beverages, some foods displayed and served during the *Hinamatsuri* celebration also reveal symbolic associations to this notion of female happiness through her reproductive qualities. One of these food items is *hishi-mochi*, or water caltrop cake. This cake is often presented as a stack of three rhomboid-shaped layers arranged, in descending order from top to bottom, of pink, white and green. Two of these three layers—the top pink and the middle white—are particularly germane to female faculties related to fertility and purity (Nishizawa, 2007). The pink layer is representative of, once again, the peach tree and all of its purifying and fertile properties, while the white layer is said to represent purity and cleanliness.

Even the vestiges of superstition lingering from the Heian period somehow suggest that the female will encounter misfortune if the protocol surrounding these dolls is not followed. Indeed, as one superstition goes, if the altars are not removed by 4 March, the female is said to marry late (Mizue, 1999).

These connotations are not intended to be revealing of truth, but rather revealing of ideology. It is important to note that it is the ideological notion of female oppression that is being viewed here, for which such signifiers illuminate.

## **5. Conclusion**

Man The *Hinamatsuri* celebration and the *hina-ningyō* are rich in cultural capital. If they are, indeed, meant to honor girlhood then that can certainly be viewed in a positive light. Yet their original meanings appear to have a much more complex significance. For example, to begin with the premise that females, not males in the historical account, somehow possess particular impurities that must be accommodated for through ritual, is a subtle argument invested with a great deal of inequality, if not sexism. To ignore the possibility that the origins of such ritual may have been repressive is to view either of them uncritically.

In this article I attempted to reveal these items through a basic structural analysis—yielding a much more critical assessment of *Hinamatsuri* and *hina-ningyō*.

Although such signifiers discussed in my analysis may be arbitrary or at best subjective, they nonetheless contribute to social and aesthetic conventions that reaffirm roles and expectations of Japanese womanhood. A critical exploration of the development between male and female relations, particularly during the Meiji Restoration, reveals some evidence of a concerted effort to sustain such roles and expectations, and thereby engender inequality. I certainly do not mean to argue that *Hinamatsuri* or *hina-ningyō* are equivalent to Japanese patriarchy, rather I suggest that they may serve to reaffirm it by providing a model for it.

The preservation, display, and adoration of these dolls shape ideological notions of womanhood. Though, on the surface, appearing as items of aesthetics, *hina-ningyō* complement females' roles in Japanese society. Like disciplined Japanese females, these dolls exist still and somber within a hierarchical altar, surrounded by others like them and accessories that inform ideological expectations of them. Finally, like the controlled victims of Japanese patriarchy, the dolls are docile and inanimate, unable to look back at an onlooker, disagree with their display, or opt out of participation.

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