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Emma Dalton
University of Wollongong

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The Utilization of Discourses of Femininity by Japanese Politicians: Tanaka Makiko Case Study

Emma DALTON
University of Wollongong, Australia

MANY SCHOLARS have noted that Japan is a deeply gender-segregated society, and this is clearly obvious in the political world where the number of female representatives is very low and the dominant image of a politician is a cardboard cut-out elderly or middle-aged man in a dark-coloured suit. Female politicians in Japan often appear publicly in vivid or pastel colours, as if eager to reinforce their already-apparent difference from the drab men long entrenched in the system. Apart from gendering their external image, some Japanese female politicians at both local and national levels also campaign on the perceived strength of their womanhood, sometimes by referring to their experiences as homemakers and mothers. Using Tanaka Makiko (hereinafter Tanaka) as an example, this paper considers the depth of preconceptions in Japan about gender and investigates dominant Japanese discourses of gender and femininity and the way which female politicians—in particular, Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) women—adopt and subvert femininity discourses. This paper focuses primarily on LDP women for two reasons. First, the LDP is the largest and most powerful party in Japan and also a male stronghold. Second, there is a lack of work on LDP women among the literature on women in Japanese politics.

This paper first illustrates the way politics in Japan is a gendered activity, influenced by gender ideologies prevalent in Japanese society. It examines preconceived notions of a woman’s role amongst the Japanese public, scholars and politicians and discusses expectations of female politicians in Japan as a consequence of dominant gendered discourses. This section includes discussion of the various types of women’s participation in politics and the legitimization of this type of participation. The implications of gendering their political identity for women aspiring to elite-level politics are also considered. By focusing on their gendered identity, some LDP women legitimate their activities as women in the male-dominated world of politics. Because the dominant image of a politician in Japan is male, when women enter politics and attempt to maintain their position within such an arena, some choose to become gender blind and in doing so adopt masculine political tactics, while others—who are the focus of this paper—utilize dominant discourses of femininity to justify their presence in a world that would benefit from a woman’s insight.

The second part of the paper introduces Tanaka’s political experiences. Specifically, this section will analyse print media including representations of Tanaka that reveal a woman who utilized the dominant discourses of femininity by strategically adopting the ‘housewife’ image, but was also referred to by some, including her mother, as unfeminine. This is an example of simultaneous adoption and subversion of femininity discourses. On the one hand, Tanaka adopted an overtly feminine identity—the housewife—a gendered role still exclusive to women, while on the other, resisted and subverted this identity by being rebellious and outspoken. She therefore failed to comply with stereotypical
characteristics associated with female gender roles in Japan, which, according to Azuma\(^7\) include weakness and being softly-spoken.

The final section of the paper concludes that the gendering of politics in Japan is profound. Tanaka's experiences in politics, like those of many other Japanese women, demonstrate that the identity of Japanese politics can be very gendered, particularly if women choose to capitalize on dominant discourses of femininity. The experiences of female politicians in Japan and comments by politicians, media and the general public indicate that while some stereotypical behaviour associated with femininity is appropriate in politics, others are not. Female politicians thus manipulate these social expectations by adopting certain stereotypical characteristics associated with femininity and subverting others.

**Women and Gender in Japanese Politics**

No article on female Japanese politician can omit comments on the abysmal representation of women in politics. The absence of women in politics has been well researched by both Japanese and Western scholars.\(^8\) In Japan's Upper House, women comprise 17.4% of members, while the corresponding figure for the Lower House is an even lower 9.4%, ranking them 131\(^{st}\) out of 189 nations, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) Women's Database.\(^9\) In terms of regional comparisons, according to the IPU, Vietnam, Pakistan, China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Singapore and the Philippines are examples of Asian countries that have more women in parliament compared to Japan.\(^10\) The only countries in Asia to rank below Japan are India, Mongolia and Thailand. In the same IPU database, Australia is ranked 36\(^{th}\), the United Kingdom 62\(^{rd}\), the USA 83\(^{rd}\), and South Korea 100\(^{th}\). These statistics demonstrate Japan's paucity of women in national-level politics relative to its status as a highly industrialized nation.

Women have been politically active in Japan since the early 20\(^{th}\) century.\(^11\) While women may not be present in large numbers in legislative assemblies, they have managed to have an impact on policy and legislation through other avenues such as community organizations and women's groups.\(^12\) While scholars have certainly proven that those avenues, including local-level activism, are legitimate and perhaps empowering for women, this paper is more concerned with women in national-level politics, specifically female LDP parliament (Diet) members.

The rationale behind women's active involvement in community groups can be explained by the difference in political interests along gender lines that Patterson and Nishikawa find among voters. According to them, women are more interested than men in social welfare, education and women's issues, while men show a clear preference over women for issues such as administrative reform and the budget deficit.\(^13\) Patterson and Nishikawa argue that the gender gap in voting can be attributed to the fact that women support or reject certain political parties based on issues they see as important, and vote accordingly.\(^14\)

On the other hand, some scholars have found that Japanese women claim to be uninterested in politics and that they tend to think that their activities in the 'private' sphere (such as community activities, volunteer programs, neighbourhood clean-up activities etc) are not political.\(^15\) Iwao goes so far as to say that the majority of Japanese women see politics as 'a filthy occupation that has no relation to their lives and values'.\(^16\) More recently, however, Martin argues that Japanese women are not uninterested or apathetic, but are alienated because of the disenchantment they feel towards the type of politics that the LDP and other parties have to offer.\(^17\) She claims that this alienation has led to the increase in
number of female independent voters—those who do not have voting loyalty to one particular party.

The personal web pages of several female LDP members reveal this gender gap extends from voters to include political representatives. A larger proportion of women than men have portfolios in the ‘soft’ areas of politics such as the environment and welfare, while more men concern themselves with areas such as defence, agriculture and fiscal reform. Some also firmly believe in fixed gender roles: Nishikawa Kyōko, a member of the LDP Constitution revision panel, established in June 2004, states in relation to revision of the clause protecting gender equality, article 24: ‘Complaining about fixed gender roles is nonsensical. It’s a simple fact that men and women have fixed roles based on their sex. Only women can bear a child. Criticizing sex roles is weakening women’s minds. Mothers should naturally appreciate their responsibilities toward their children’. Such a statement reveals a profoundly conservative belief in the distinctly different roles of women and men. This is supported by publications by other female LDP Diet members: LDP Lower House member, Iwaki Nobuko, writes that ‘selfish mothers are the root of all evil’. She reminds parents that mothers and fathers have distinct roles: mothers should shower their children with unconditional love, while fathers should teach children how to live and discipline them.

Yamanaka Akiko, an LDP Lower House member, writes, on advice from Margaret Guilfoyle, the first woman to become an Australian Cabinet member in 1975, that elegance and composure are important characteristics for ambitious women. Making sure one is always elegant is, apparently, one method of taking advantage of one’s femininity (josei rashisa), and composure is necessary because women are likely to be regarded as emotional. Both elegance and the expression of emotion are typically feminine characteristics. The former, however, according to Guilfoyle and Yamanaka, is an ideal that women should aspire to, while the latter is something women must resist. This is an example of the simultaneous adoption and subversion of stereotypical feminine characteristics that Yamanaka Akiko (and Margaret Guilfoyle) believes is necessary to ascend the political ladder. It is inappropriate for a politician to display emotions, but elegance is desirable, particularly for a woman.

Gender ideologies in politics

The Cabinet Office Gender Equality Bureau in Japan defines gender as being the socially constructed differences between men and women, compared with the biological differences men and women are born with. Since the Japanese women’s liberation movement (iiman ribu), which gained currency in the early 1970s, it has been claimed by feminists such as Ueno Chizuko that while sex is biological, gender is socially constructed and the idea of ‘femininity’ is a social fabrication.

The depth of gender segregation in Japan and the socialization of boys and girls have been explored by several scholars, particularly in the context of schooling. Until the 1990s, when gender equality became a major political issue, culminating in 1999 with the establishment of the Fundamental Law on Gender Equality (Danjo Kyōdō Sankaku Shakai Kihonhō) hereinafter FLGE), school textbooks were written in a ‘ryōsai kenbo tone’. This encouraged girls to adopt the ‘good-wife, wise mother’ ideology—the social ideal whereby women were valued mostly for their contribution to the family as mothers, touted by the Japanese government from the late 1800s onwards. At the same time, there has been a backlash against schools which have adopted the ‘gender free’ education policies mandated by the FLGE. This backlash has been supported, and in some cases spearheaded by LDP
Diet members.\textsuperscript{28} Much of the public also seem to believe in the traditional division of labor along gender lines. According to the Cabinet Office's Public Opinion Poll on a Gender Equal Society, taken in November 2003, 41.2\% of women and 49.7\% of men agree with the statement: 'the husband should be the breadwinner, and the wife should stay at home'.\textsuperscript{29} In comparison, the corresponding percentages in South Korea in 2003 for women and men respectively were 13.2\% and 20.2\%. Similarly, the figures for the USA in 2003 for women and men respectively were 18.1\% and 21.7\%.

Some scholars point to the different worlds women and men inhabit in Japan. Khor reveals in her study on Japanese women's organizations a high level of gender segregation in society and a persistence of culturally prescribed roles for men and women.\textsuperscript{30} Some Japanese scholars subscribe to a feminist argument that points to a 'women's culture'\textsuperscript{31} or a 'sisterhood'\textsuperscript{32} born from deep cleavages in the socialization of boys and girls in Japan. Ling and Matsuno assert the benefits and importance of the 'women's culture' which they claim is the foundation for the formation of community groups run by, and popular with, women. They claim, on the basis of personal interviews (conducted in 1990), that female politicians enter politics to 'get things done' in contrast to men who enter politics in a quest for personal power.\textsuperscript{33} While some women may describe their political ambitions as being based in a desire to get things done, their subjective assertions alone are insufficient to support an argument that women enter politicians not for power, but for pragmatic reasons. It is difficult to prove that men are only interested in power, or in fact that women are not. It is important to treat these sorts of generalized assertions with care as they rely on essentialist notions of gender and do not broaden understanding or provoke further thought.

To sum up, the division between the genders, and perceptions of distinct gender-roles is salient in Japan, especially in the male-dominated area of politics. The perception that women and men have different roles according to their gender is illustrated in opinion polls and by claims made by politicians themselves. Politicians are able to utilize these deeply-ingrained preconceived notions of the roles of women and men in their campaigns.

\textit{The legitimization of women 'doing politics'}

Many recent studies of women in Japanese politics laud the efforts of women in local community groups such as the \textit{Seikatsuwa Co-op, Seikatsu Club Consumers' Co-operative Union}, and outline the success of these women in making political inroads via non-traditional means.\textsuperscript{34} This type of politics, conducted primarily by middle-upper class middle-aged women, is referred to as 'housewife feminism'\textsuperscript{35} and its success in Japan can be seen in the increase in number of representatives elected from the political offshoot of \textit{Seikatsuwa Co-op, Nettowaku}.

Housewife feminism, however, is normally limited to local issues and does not usually translate into pathways to national level activity. LeBlanc argues in her ethnographic study of Japanese women in community organizations that a woman can take her housewife image only so far into politics because the higher she gets the less she can actually be a housewife—that is, she has little time to devote to household duties as her political life takes over.\textsuperscript{37} Mackie raises the interesting question of whether women who participate in local activism could be thought of as conservatives who maintain the status quo by 'reinforcing gendered spheres of activity' or as radicals because they are challenging the male-centric model of traditional politics by creating a new brand of politics.\textsuperscript{38} A similar ambiguity is discussed by Nolte who examines the Japanese suffrage movement in the early 1900s and notes that the profoundly conservative Japan Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was simultaneously radical in rejecting existing social moral norms by
seeking suffrage for women for the betterment of social morality. Tanaka’s political experience also embodied this collision of the progressive and the conservative in that she was able to reach an unprecedented level of political status for a woman while maintaining a feminine image consistent with the status quo. Tanaka’s campaign strategy in 1993 included identifying herself as a housewife dedicated to ‘cleaning up’ the corruption in politics. This tactic appealed to the public who held preconceived notions of femininity and assisted her to climb the political ladder.

Some self-labelled housewives do, as Tanaka eventually did, enter national level politics, and some female LDP Diet members proudly assert their roles as mothers or point to their experiences as homemakers. In her article entitled, ‘What politics needs now is the perspective of ordinary women’, Lower House LDP member Okashita Nobuko argues for the increase in female Diet members on the grounds that the experiences of ‘ordinary’ women, in particular, housewives with children, are important tools in the political arena. In contrast, some male LDP Diet members mention family members in their ‘profile’ page of their websites, but do not utilize their status as ‘father’ to argue their viewpoint. For example, former Prime Minister Koizumi is a ‘single father’ who has sole custody of two of his three children. This fact rarely causes comment. In contrast, Koizumi praises former Foreign Minister Kawaguchi Yoriko on her ‘Messages of support’ page of her website by commenting that ‘as a mother of two, Kawaguchi has done a wonderful job of combining work with motherhood’. Here we see the valorization of women, but not men, being bound to the home and family. The fact that Kawaguchi is highly educated, has worked for the World Bank as an economist, has been the Japanese ambassador to the U.S. and has held two cabinet posts is overshadowed by her gender and her ability to ‘combine work with motherhood’.

**Gendering political behaviour for female politicians**

The gendering of political behaviour and identity can have implications for female politicians, or women aspiring to become politicians. Doi Takako, who will be discussed in detail further on, is an example of a female politician who did not focus on her gendered identity. She managed to reach a very high level of the political ladder (leader of the then Japan Socialist Party, hereinafter JSP) without subscribing to preconceived notions of femininity, while at the same time giving some of her political activities a feminist agenda. She did not utilize her gender to climb the political ladder or appeal to voters. There are many more female politicians, however, including Tanaka, who have capitalized on their gendered identity. LeBlanc’s argument, mentioned previously, that housewife feminism does not often lead to political activity on a more elite level is accurate in that a female politician can not genuinely adopt a current housewife identity (because if she was truly a housewife she wouldn’t have time to be a politician!). She can, however, take advantage of her past experience as a housewife by utilising it as a campaign tool and distinguishing herself from the male politicians who cannot adopt the stereotypically feminine identity of housewife.

It is difficult to imagine that the LDP would place a lot of trust in a woman aspiring to a cabinet position if she had been campaigning on the strength of her experience as a housewife or mother. The majority of cabinet ministers have vast experience and education in the fields of business or law, and it is implicit that this is the type of experience necessary to ascend to such positions. Nevertheless the experiences of Tanaka demonstrate that she adopted the housewife image to her advantage, even in national-level politics. She, however,
was an exception largely because of her political pedigree. She also had a privileged background, an overseas school education and a degree from one of the most prestigious universities in Japan, Waseda University. In contrast, Tanaka’s replacement, Kawaguchi Yoriko had already held ministerial positions, and also had experience as an ambassador and as an economist. As Takeda argues, the gender-specific political strategies adopted by female politicians in Japan serve to both empower and constrain them. On the one hand, campaigning on the strength of her motherhood, her experience as a housewife, or in the case of current LDP Lower House member Tokashiki Naomi, her past career as an Office Lady, can legitimate a woman’s activity in the previously inaccessible public sphere of politics. On the other hand, it can also limit her political activity to ‘women’s issues’ because she sells herself as a woman rather than a politician and will thus be regarded as such. Furthermore, it not only limits her own activities, but serves to reinforce stereotypical sex roles among the general public. Whether they like it or not, female politicians are role models because of the public space they occupy, particularly if they have publications, which many of them do.

Drawing attention to one’s imagined femininity by utilizing gendered identities such as mother and housewife may also lead to certain expectations of the public or the media—particularly for elite-level politicians who have high public profiles—that female politicians fulfil an imagined ideal of the ‘woman politician’ (josei seijika). This ideal includes being less corrupt and greedy than men in politics.

The case study of Tanaka outlined below demonstrates the extent to which it is possible for a female politician to utilize dominant gendered discourses to their advantage. It also illustrates the negative implications for a female in politics when she is seen not simply as a politician, but as a ‘woman politician’.

Tanaka Makiko

Tanaka Makiko—affectionately known as simply ‘Makiko’ by the Japanese public—is the daughter of Tanaka Kakuei who was the prime minister of Japan from 1972 to 1974, and one of the most powerful post-war politicians. He enjoyed immense popularity, but was forced to resign his prime ministership amidst a bribery scandal in 1974. He was found guilty of these bribery charges in 1982, sentenced to four years imprisonment and fined for the amount he received in bribes. He appealed the sentence and refused to give up his seat in the Diet, resigning from the LDP and serving as an Independent until he suffered a stroke in 1985. Until his health made it impossible, he continued to wield significant power from behind the scenes. He passed away in 1993. Tanaka Makiko was heavily involved in supporting his political career.

Tanaka Makiko’s entrance into politics

Before considering Tanaka’s political experience, it is important to discuss the political climate around the time she entered politics, and in particular to take into account the experiences of Doi Takako, who was influential in carving the way for more women to participate in elite-level politics. Although Japanese politics is heavily populated with men, and the LDP in particular is a male bastion, Tanaka did not emerge into a political arena that was devoid of women. There had been a surge in female political participation at the national level since the mid-1980s. For example, Doi Takako became the first female head of a political party in Japan, becoming the chairperson of the JSP in 1986 (at the time the
strongest opposition party), and again in the mid-1990s. She gained popularity among a large number of women when she led the then JSP in opposing the introduction of the three percent consumption tax in 1989. This issue mobilized Japanese women because women control the household budgets. The support she received from legions of middle-aged women was based on their ability to identify with her, particularly on this issue. She was, like Tanaka, a compelling orator, upfront and unwilling to participate in the behind-the-scenes deals that characterized Japanese politics.

Doi is a scholar of constitutional law and had been active in the women’s movement, campaigning against sex tours to South East Asia and against the Japanese Imperial system for its basis in patrilineal descent. Chosen by her party as a last resort during a time of internal party crisis, Doi was able to change the party’s image and find a new direction for it including promoting the causes of women and urban citizens. She highlighted the potential advantages of harnessing the women’s vote and just as importantly, the advantages of women occupying politically powerful positions.

Johnson notes that Doi was able to appeal to women voters without subscribing to dominant gender discourses of femininity such as motherhood, or by claiming to bring a woman’s vision to politics. Rather, with her legal training, she appealed to the ideas framed within the Constitution of Japan and criticized various elements she believed stood in conflict with it such as the imperial system because of its inherently sexist basis in patrilineal descent and LDP attempts to rearm Japan which run counter to the peace clause.

It was a combination of Doi’s influence, public reaction to the introduction of the very unpopular consumption tax, accession to U.S. pressure to open agricultural commodity markets and two political scandals that saw the LDP lose its Upper House majority and a record number of women elected to the Diet in the 1989 elections. This was dubbed the ‘Madonna boom’. While most of the ‘Madonnas’ elected were political amateurs who on the whole failed to change the political system, the emergence of such a large number women into the national political arena paved the way for more women to follow.

With this as a backdrop, Tanaka was first elected in 1993, at the age of 49, to the Niigata prefecture seat. After looking after her ailing father for almost ten years, it became clear to Tanaka that the Japanese welfare system was inadequate and she ‘felt that the system had no sympathy or understanding of human pains. [She] thought [she] could become a lawmaker and change that’. Of course, Tanaka’s politician father was also an impetus to enter the political arena. The practice of dynastic succession in political candidacy is common in Japan—although it is more common to pass from father to son.

Tanaka enjoyed enormous popularity and, in the lead-up to the 2001 LDP leadership election, was Japan’s most popular politician with an approval rating of ninety percent. She backed the eventual winner, Koizumi Jun’ichirō, who appointed a record five women to his cabinet, including Tanaka to the highly coveted post of Minister of Foreign Affairs as a reward for her support.

Tanaka and Koizumi started their election campaigns in 2001 with the same priorities—to reform the LDP by creating transparency within the party and cabinet. Tanaka later criticized Koizumi for falling back in with the conservative old guard and losing sight of his reformist agenda. Koizumi, and most of the rest of the party, was critical of Tanaka for her un-diplomatic style which they perceived to be potentially harmful to Japan’s relations with foreign countries. Specifically, her overt criticism of her own party members was seen as destructive and unhelpful. However, many members of the public, particularly women, disenchanted with corrupt politicians who seemed more interested in
power than in representing their interests, were glad to see someone voicing their concerns.62

Housewife and mother identities in politics
Tanaka took up politics after raising three children and supporting her husband in elections.63 In her book, Toki no Sugiyuku Mama ni (As Time Goes By), she explains her opinion on educational issues by identifying herself as ‘a housewife and mother’.64 The experience of being a housewife is something no male politician bears claim to in Japan, so it is a heavily gendered assertion.65 Appealing to voters with her upfront and no-nonsense manner by utilising the gendered concept of ‘housewife’ and promising to clean up a government tainted by corruption helped Tanaka win her first Diet seat.66 ‘Cleaning up’ politics has been a gendered promise dating back to the 1930s when the Women’s Suffrage League, led by Ichikawa Fusae, campaigned on the grounds that women would clean up electoral corruption.67 However, cleaning up corruption is no longer a promise that only women make—Prime Minister Koizumi made a similar one before coming to power in 2001.68 It seems that the promise to ‘clean up’ corruption, however, is more likely to believed if it comes from a woman. This is illustrated by Social Democratic Party leader Fukushima Mizuho’s response to the revelation of several bribery incidents soon after Tanaka’s election to minister. Fukushima observed that in bringing LDP corruption out into the open, Tanaka had achieved something male cabinet members would never be able to.69

Japanese works published around the time Tanaka became a Diet member dedicate large sections to her position and experiences as a mother and housewife.70 For example, in the 7-chapter Zubari Makiko Bushi (Phrases from Straight-Talking Makiko) three chapters are directly related to her domestic life—Phrases from a housewife who values the home, Phrases from a mother who packs lunches lovingly, and Phrases from an up-and-coming wife who makes her husband ‘the man’. The introduction to Endō Takashi’s book, published in 1994, declares the potential benefits of Tanaka becoming prime minister by borrowing a metaphor first used by early feminist writer Hiratsuka Raichō, claiming that what Japan needs now is a ‘warm’ leader that can be conceptualized as the ‘sun’ and as a ‘mother’, making a connection between the maternal, warmth and politics.71

Itagaki notes that Tanaka’s fashion sense was even part of her tactic to capitalize on her ordinary housewife image.72 According to Itagaki, Tanaka strategically dressed down in jeans and baggy t-shirts during election campaigns so that she could emit an air of approachability and ‘ordinariness’. Itagaki compares this to the dress sense of Doi Takako, who is always professional and immaculate, and notes that while Tanaka is a mother of three, Doi is single and childless. The particular language Itagaki uses to compare the two reflects the general perception of women in politics in Japan at the time: he argues that compared to Doi, Tanaka’s fashion sense ‘smells’ of life, and that this is because Tanaka is ‘appropriately’ married, has borne and raised three children, has the experience of being a wife, housewife and mother, and has looked after an ailing father. He thus labels Tanaka a ‘housewife politician’. Doi, on the other hand, is labelled by Itagaki a ‘single upper-class politician’ who does not ‘smell’ of life. Doi was also criticized by male politicians for being blunt and ‘unfeminine’.73 These judgements of Doi and Tanaka suggest an expectation of women to be bound in some way to the home and family. Tanaka’s utilization of the housewife identity was very successful in gaining popularity amongst the public as well as validation in the eyes of writers and scholars like Itagaki. The images created by Itagaki reinforce in readers stereotypical roles for women. Moreover, these descriptions fail to
acknowledge Tanaka’s privileged upbringing. She may not have dressed like an ‘upper-class politician’, but as mentioned previously, armed with an excellent education and an elite political pedigree, she was no ordinary ‘housewife’.

Further, in describing her daughter, Tanaka’s mother said that although she had a good heart, if there was something she did not agree with she would fight against it persistently and so therefore ‘should have been a boy’.74 Tanaka’s personality trait of assertion, identified by her mother, is one way that Tanaka resisted the stereotypical feminine characteristic of passivity. Tanaka’s eldest daughter said that her mother was very cheerful and ‘tough’ so she was glad she took after her father, implying that, as a girl, she does not want to be ‘tough’.75 Here again we see in Tanaka’s ‘tough’ personality a resistance to behaving in a more stereotypically feminine manner.

On the one hand Tanaka resisted certain stereotypical character traits associated with femininity while on the other, by capitalizing on her housewife experience, she utilized to her advantage the concept of a commonality among women during her campaign for her first Diet seat in 1993. She told a press conference that she wanted to ‘make politics accessible from the vantage point of the kitchen’ and projected an image appealing to women because she realized that over half the eligible voters are women.76 Again during a Lower House committee meeting in 1993, she posed a question about agricultural administration to the then Director General of the Environment Agency, Hironaka Wakako, from the viewpoint of ‘a housewife, from the same platform as any housewife who spends time in the kitchen’.77 While she did not claim to be a representative of all Japanese women, by utilizing her status and experience as a housewife, Tanaka adopted discourses of femininity to relate to women voters.

Tanaka’s removal from the LDP

Although most of the criticism directed at Tanaka was based on her performance as foreign minister, sometimes her misconduct was referred to in light of her being a woman. Sociologist Kawanishi Yūko commented during a radio debate that she wished Tanaka would be a little more ‘ladylike’, even though she understood that was her ‘style’.78 This comment reflects an expectation of ‘women politicians’ to behave in a certain manner more in adherence with ‘ladylike’ norms which include being less opinionated and rebellious. This is an example of the negative implications of utilizing gendered discourses for public approval. Once in power, those gendered discourses may follow a politician throughout her career and if her behaviour is incompatible with dominant gendered discourses, the public or the media are likely to become disillusioned.

Further gender-based condemnation was directed at Tanaka by Koizumi when she was pushed to tears during a television interview in January, 2002. The background to this was a conflict within the ministry over whether or not two NGOs had been invited to attend a donor conference for Afghanistan—this also led to her eventual sacking. Tanaka had accused senior LDP lawmaker, Suzuki Munem, of pressuring the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) to disallow the attendance of Japanese NGOs, Peace Winds Japan and Japan Platform, but MOFA’s vice minister, Nogami Yoshiji, whom Koizumi also fired, accused her of lying. Suzuki Munem also denied her claims. It was in the face of these accusations of lying that Tanaka cried on television. Koizumi’s response was: ‘Tears are women’s greatest weapons. When women cry, men cannot compete with them’.79 This statement underscores my argument that politicians must not express emotions. There are negative consequences for women in public positions of power who cry—therefore the typically feminine trait of
emotional expression must be resisted. This was not the first time that Tanaka had been
condemned for showing emotion—the Yomiuri Shimbun criticized her for being ‘rulyed by
sentiment and emotion’. Koizumi’s comment, however, was widely condemned, as was his
eventual sacking of the minister, particularly by Japanese women.

After the sacking of Tanaka and Nogami, the approval rating of the LDP plummeted
from 72 percent on 26/27 January 2002 to 49 percent on 2/3 February 2002. It must be noted
that this feud was only one incident that occurred during Tanaka’s reign as minister which
was distinguished by the internal bickering that characterized MOFA at the time, and that
her sacking came after a culmination of incidents. Koizumi had hoped that the popularity
she held in the public would help enhance the party’s image. Unfortunately for both of them,
they clashed over several important issues relating to international relations as well as
domestic affairs, and Koizumi fired her less than a year after her appointment. She
maintained her seat in the Diet until August 2002, when she was forced to resign over
accusations of an involvement in a bribery scandal. In November of the same year she was
re-elected in the general election to the same seat as an independent which she currently
maintains. In November, 2003, she formally aligned herself with the Democratic Party of
Japan thus rejecting the un-woman-friendly government for a party that is more
supportive of women—the opposition.

This passage has demonstrated that a female politician is always in a double bind
with regards to gendered appearances. On the one hand, if she ‘acts like a man’ as Margaret
Thatcher was believed to by some, she is condemned for not acting ‘lady-like’. On the
other hand, if she expresses some emotion, she is criticised for being ‘ruled by emotion’
and therefore unfit for a position of power which is traditionally associated with men.

The implications for utilizing gendered identities for a female politician in Japan,
however, are not all bad. Despite Tanaka’s elite background, she came into politics as a self-
claimed housewife and mother. Adopting this feminine identity assisted Tanaka to gain
enormous public popularity, particularly among women. By identifying herself as one of
them, Tanaka appealed to mothers and housewives who felt they could trust her to voice
their concerns more than they could the men in power who seemed to be embroiled in
scandals and bribes. While utilising these typically feminine identities, she maintained her
outspoken personality, which in the eyes of many, including the press and her family was
unfeminine. In this way Tanaka was able to appear simultaneously feminine and
unfeminine, and this proved to be a successful tactic in gaining a coveted cabinet post. Her
outspokenness, however, also earned her a lot of criticism.

While Takeda argues that utilizing feminine identities such as Tanaka did can have
the effect of limiting the activity a woman politician can have, in Tanaka’s case it did not.
Tanaka was posted to a high level cabinet ministry, a position typically held by a man.
Nevertheless, in making this assertion, I do not dismiss the significance of her elite political
background which remains a constant despite her simultaneous adoption and subversion of
gendered discourses.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the way in which Japanese politics is heavily gendered; the
way that female politicians are viewed by the public, the media and other politicians, and
the way they portray themselves as ‘women’. As illustrated, some female politicians choose
to market themselves as women with experience as mothers or housewives. Like many other
female politicians, Tanaka utilized dominant gender discourses to her advantage. Her
strategic use of her status as a mother and housewife was typical of many women in politics. Her political pedigree was highly instrumental in advancing her political career, but strategies involving the use of dominant discourses of gender and femininity also assisted her to climb the political ranks that are so often over-populated with men, by appealing to women voters. The housewife and mother identity is one that only women can adopt and one that many female politicians do so with enthusiasm. Realising that men cannot compete with them in the motherhood and housewife stakes, some politicians choose to utilize these feminine identities of housewife or mother as selling points. As demonstrated by Koizumi’s comment on Kawaguchi’s website and assertions made by political scientists and sociologists, some members of society project upon female politicians their preconceived gender stereotypes. Female politicians are not immune to society’s preconceptions of femininity, and some of them do not necessarily want to be.

Utilising femininity discourses by women politicians can, as Takeda points out, lead to limitation of the type of activity open to women in politics. It can also engender expectations amongst the public and media that those who utilize dominant gendered discourses maintain their imagined feminine identity throughout their career.

Apart from some media reports, Tanaka’s mother and daughter also pointed out that Tanaka was not as feminine as she could have been. This resistance to stereotypical feminine behaviour combined with the adoption of a dominant femininity discourse—the housewife and mother identity—has been demonstrated in other forms in other women politicians as well. Yamanaka Akiko heeds Margaret Guilfoyle’s advice to both adopt stereotypical feminine characteristics (elegance) and subvert others (emotional expression). While it is acceptable and perhaps even desirable to adopt certain feminine characteristics such as elegance, other feminine characteristics such as emotional expression or passivity are resisted by most female politicians because they do not belong in the world of politics where composure and assertion are necessary.

The adoption of feminine identities and the subversion of certain behaviours associated with femininity is a strategy that many women adopt in Japanese politics. This strategy allows them to simultaneously be regarded as feminine women and be treated seriously in the male-dominated world of politics where some stereotypical characteristics associated with femininity are inappropriate.
NOTES

3 As of March, 2007, female representation in both houses was lowest in the LDP compared with other parties: women represented 14.1% of LDP Upper House members compared with 18.5%, 23.8%, 20% and 14.3% respectively for the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), the Komeito, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the Japan Communist Party (JCP). In the Lower House, females account for only 9.4% of total membership with female LDP representation at 8.8%, ranking them a tied bottom with the DPJ out of the five main political parties in terms of the proportion of female Lower House members.
4 Literature on women in Japanese politics tends to consider their under-representation in general, without focus on party affiliation. See, for example, T. Ogai, Jenda so Seijisanka (The Impact of Women in Politics) (Author's translation of title. All other translations are my own unless otherwise stated), Seinsihobo, Tokyo, 2003; C. & H. Bochet, 'Exploring the low levels of women's representation in Japanese local government', Japanese Journal of Political Science, vol. 6 (2005), pp.375-392; Y. Maeda, 'External constraints on female political participation', Japanese Journal of Political Science, vol. 6 (2005), pp.345-373. Moreover, scrutiny of individuals has been concentrated on the former Japan Socialist Party leader, Dō Takako.
Most of the scholarship on the under-representation of women in politics in Japan is of a feminist nature—the literature from the field of political science in Japan has largely ignored women and their absence and has instead focused on the Liberal Democratic Party and its dominance of the political landscape.
9 Women in National Parliaments - Interparliamentary Union, available at:
10 Apart from the Philippines, these Asian countries are also ranked higher than the U.S.A by the IPU.
14 ibid., pp.1-34.
18 S. Kogure, 'Turning back the clock on gender equality. Proposed Constitutional revision jeopardizes Japanese women's rights', Japan Focus, (2005), available at:
N. Iwaki, Waga Ko wo Nobasu Nanatsu no Mahō (7 Magic Tips for Bringing up our Children), A-Un, Tokyo, 2001, p.61.

ibid., p.138.

A. Yamanaka, Ujyoku Josei ni Unaretara Sekai wo Butai ni Hitoshigoto (Those Lucky Enough to be Born a Woman, Make the World Your Stage), Hokuseido Shoten, Tokyo, 2004, p.149.


A. Yamanaka, p.149.


ibid


Y. Ling and A. Matsuno, p.59.


See its website http://www.seikatsuchub.coop/english/index.html

R.M. LeBlanc, p.198.


See Kawaguchi’s official website http://www.yoriko-kawaguchi.jp/


Makiko is her given name. To call someone by their given name in Japan implies a sense of closeness and perhaps even affection.


See endnote 4


The Japan Socialist Party changed its name in 1996 to the Social Democratic Party and is currently headed by another woman—Fukushima Mizuho.
49. S. Iwao, p.225.
50. ibid., p.229.
52. S. Iwao, p.20.
53. L.L. Johnson, p.393.
54. The ‘Recruit Scandal’, a case of insider trading whereby the Recruit Cosmos company distributed its stock to Diet members including then Prime Minister Takeshita; and a sex scandal surrounding incoming Prime Minister Uno.
55. M. Iwamoto, p.225.
58. The LDP leadership election is carried out by the party. As the LDP has majority government, the winner of the LDP election inevitably becomes the Prime Minister.
63. Her husband Tanaka Naoki (née Suzuki), whom she married in 1969, is also an LDP Diet member.
65. It is interesting to consider that former Australian Labor Party leader, Mark Latham, as part of his 'retirement' became a househusband—not only is the gender reversed, so is the order of doing things.
68. H. Takayama, 'Lightning rod'.
69. ibid.
71. T. Endô, p.4.
74. M. Tanaka, p.269.
75. ibid.
77. ibid., p.167.
d%3ASR%3AResult&ao=&FreePremium=BOTH (18 June 2006).


83 J. Conachy.

84 M. Aiuchi, 'How women won or lost in the Japanese Lower House election: case studies of women candidates who ran as challengers', Political Science, vol. 34, (2001), p.222. This case study of female DPJ candidates in the 2000 Lower House elections considers the story of a candidate who switched affiliation from the LDP to the DPJ after recognising the apparent limitation and 'gynophobia of the male-dominated LDP'.

85 A. Ticker, You Just Don't Understand: Troubled Engagements Between Feminists and IR Theorists, Dept. of International Relations Australian National University, Canberra, 1996, p.12.