The Overcooked and Underdone: Masculinities in Japanese Food Programming
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Introduction

To the Western ear, the phrase “Japanese food show” will likely conjure images of teams of smocked chefs hustling through a rangy in-studio kitchen, racing the clock, concocting ingenious ways to prepare a particular ingredient, thereby pleasing a panel of judges and defeating a crafty culinary rival. In fact, though, food battles are only one genre of food show in Japan; a genre, itself, that is widely represented on television. Moreover, battles are but one way that gender – and, in this particular case, masculinities – are expressed in Japanese culinary TV. Stated another way, on Japanese television, food shows are manifest – even ubiquitous – and food is a dominant means by which identity discourse transpires (Holden 2003). And, while masculinity is but one component of identity, it is a major one. A discursive formation that
emerges at various turns in TV food shows, in multiple ways.

This paper’s purpose is to demonstrate the degree to which discourse about masculinity courses through Japanese food shows. So, too, does it seek to open for consideration the communication architecture and set of codes through which masculinities are expressed. This is important for at least two reasons. First, because it has not been done before; and second, because – not unlike the false perception that *Iron Chef* is representative of the universe of Japanese food shows – the prevailing assumption about Japanese masculinity is similarly truncated. As such, it is also mistaken. The paltry range of masculinities depicted on culinary TV must be said to play a part in that. For the most part, masculinity is a narrow, repetitive discourse. Hence, the “overcooked” in this paper’s title. What is underdone is a less discernible thread, but one that is present, nonetheless: a more protean set of representations concerning masculinity. In this paper I aim to expose both.

**Japanese Masculinity in the Academic Literature**
What are the prevailing assumptions about Japanese masculinity? Until recently, discourse was nearly univocal: confined to the social type “salaryman”. The urban, middle class, white-collar worker has remained a relatively uncontested figure in both academic literature and public consciousness. Emblematic of the “typical” Japanese male since the 1960s (e.g. Vogel 1963, Plath 1964), this caricature persisted relatively unabated into the 1990s (e.g. Rohlen 1974, Allison 1994). Now, however, that image is beginning to change. As Roberson and Suzuki (2003:8) recently observed, the salaryman is but an idealized version of Japanese masculinity. Its wide currency may be explained because it articulates with other powerful “discursive pedagogies”: capitalist employee, state taxpayer and family provider. The authors cite Ito (1996), who has argued that past conceptions of Japanese masculinity have been driven by views of hegemony and, in particular, three “inclinations” characterize the dominant discourse concerning masculinity.¹ These inclinations – identified as (inter-personal) authority, power and possession (especially in relation to women) – obviously align easily with conceptions of men as workers, members of power
structures, protectors, and “bread-winners”.

Importantly, Roberson and Suzuki assert, the salaryman is not the sole version of masculine identity in contemporary Japan. Indeed, there are numerous discourses available regarding what is “male” in contemporary Japan. Such a critique is consistent with a general, quiet revisionism that has transpired in Japanese studies over the past two decades; one that has alleged greater heterogeneity in Japanese identity.

The unitary image of masculine identity in the form of salaryman reflects an association of masculinity with particular institutional sites (for instance, inside corporation or outside home). This has been a standard, unreflecting, academic trope during the post-Pacific war era. It is also (coincidentally) consistent with the way Hall (1994) has theorized that identity ought to be decoded (i.e., within institutional contexts). For most researchers of Japanese masculine identity those institutional contexts have centered on the state, the workplace and the school (Connell
By inversion (i.e. reflecting a relative absence or exclusion), the institution of family (and its locus, the home) can also be included in gender-identity discourse.4

Perhaps in reaction to the institutional emphasis, Roberson and Suzuki’s volume is rich with alternatives: civil movements, transnational information flows, transgender practices, day-laborers. Non-institutional theorization of identity is an important maneuver, but does not minimize the importance of institutions in bounding, framing and providing meaning to contemporary identity. This is particularly true in an era of “reflexive modernization” (Robertson 1992; Beck 1994), constituted by “late modern” or “post-traditional” societies (Giddens 1994) such as Japan. In this paper, in particular, it is the media institution (generally) and television (specifically) through which masculine identity is found to flow. As shown in my previous work on “mediated identity” (2003), such formal institutional sites are heavily implicated in the gender-identity calculus.5 In a word, media (such as television) are institutions – no different than the state, corporation or family – that provide the
ideational and “physical” context within which masculinity is represented and through which it is reproduced.

In this paper I explore one genre within this institutional site of television communication in Japan: food discourse. Surveying this content, one soon learns that Japanese masculinities are both on-message and beyond-message vis-à-vis past academic framings. Consistent with what has heretofore been alleged about masculine identity in Japan, there is a widespread hegemonic masculinity on display. At the same time (and significantly), that hegemonic masculinity is not played out through the aegis of the corporate worker. In a word, despite the pervasive expression of masculine identity through food talk, and despite the fact that such identity tends to be hegemonic in nature: there is nary a salaryman to be found. Japan’s televvisual masculinity is singularly hegemonic, yet it is not confined to a particular model or “type”. It is communicated through any number of people – both male and female, conventional and otherwise.
Japanese Television and Food Discourse: a précis

All of this is important because television, itself, is the preeminent medium of communication in Japan. It has a diffusion rate of 100%, is viewed by virtually every Japanese person every day, and outpaces other popular forms of information processing: newspapers (86%), cell phones (73%), and the Internet (27%). It has been reported that, on average, at least one TV set plays 7 to 8 hours a day in each Japanese dwelling, with personal viewing rates per day approaching 225 minutes. A recent European survey ranks Japan second worldwide in terms of daily TV viewership.

While television is dominant, one might wish to argue that food is not. A conservative accounting – based on genres reported in television guides – suggests that TV food shows comprise but 5% of programming between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. The reality, though, is quite different. Begin with the fact that, unlike other countries (in which food shows are generally confined to specialty cable channels, or else a particular hour on a particular day), Japan’s food shows can be found on at least one
commercial station during “golden time”\textsuperscript{10} on multiple days of the week.

In past years, there has been either a food-themed show or a show with a regular food segment every day of the week in prime time.

The best current embodiment is “Dochi no Ryōri Syou” (Which?! Cooking Show), now in its seventh season: a highly-rated Thursday night offering from 9 to 10 p.m. In this show, seven entertainers must choose between two dishes prepared before their eyes by rival chefs from a prestigious cooking academy. The guests are allowed to sample the food and are given a chance to change “sides” if or when their preferences for the respective dishes shift. Their decisions are often influenced by two hosts – both popular male TV fixtures, one in his late 40s, the other in his early 60s – who interview chefs, cajole the guests, make impassioned appeals for their support. Dochi also serves as a window on the world, with segments on the people and places associated with one of the key ingredients in each dish: a fisherman, for instance, a dairy farmer, or cabbage grower, all toiling away in their respective remote corners of Japan.
In additional to shows that are exclusively about food, a number of golden hour variety shows feature regular segments built around food. For instance, SMAPXSMAP – now in its sixth year and hosted by Japan’s premier “boys band” (SMAP) – includes a “Bistro” segment in which an invited guest (generally a female entertainer) is welcomed into the bistro by the “owner” (generally SMAP’s lead singer Masahiro Nakai), interviewed about her life and career, then eats (and judges) rather elaborate, multi-course meals prepared by competing teams (which are comprised of SMAP pairs).¹¹

The popular, Thursday night variety show Tonnerus’ minasan no okage deshita (Tunnel’s: because of everyone’s good will) offers a weekly segment in which two guests — usually one male and one female — are invited to sit alongside one member of the (male) comedy duo, Tonnerus. Both guests are served four dishes, which they must consume while being interviewed about the food, as well as their life histories. Free discussion and casual banter co-mingle with on-camera
consumption. At the end of the show all four participants vote as to which dish the guests consumed and pretended to enjoy, but in actuality detest.

*Gotchi Battaru* is a third show in which food plays an important, entertaining role. It is actually an elaborate segment of another show, the Friday evening variety hour, *Guru Guru Ninety-Nine*. Four regulars (comedians, in the main, and all men) travel each week to a different top-rated (and pricey) restaurant and try to guess the price of a set of dishes prepared for them. Accompanying them is an invited guest from the entertainment world. After all individual estimates are summed the guest farthest from the price of the entire meal must pay for everyone. Cumulative, weekly totals are also kept and posted on the show’s web site: listing how many times each regular has lost and how far in arrears he is. Discussion during the show is balanced between good-natured ribbing of individual guestimates, information about how the food is prepared, and how each dish tastes.
These are but four examples of food discourse on Japanese TV, reflective of a larger pool of shows in which food plays either a primary or secondary role. Factor in the number of shows in which food appears in an ancillary role – for instance: during morning “wake-up” programs which discuss urban culinary trends or local village festivals, or else travel shows which present the foods of target destinations that can be consumed – and the percentage of food-related discourse on Japanese television increases exponentially. And this does not even begin to tap the great reservoir of “inadvertent food discourse” in which food serves as an incidental, but prominent background feature during dramas, quiz shows, newscasts, sporting events, and the like. Finally, one must not forget the ubiquitous presence of food advertising on TV, which has been found to account for as much as 20% of all ads broadcast in a one month period (Holden 2001).¹³

All considered it is impossible to view food discourse as a trivial or negligible element in Japanese televisual communication. Food is present on virtually every channel, every hour, every day of the week,
throughout the broadcast day.

**Characteristics of Televisual Masculinities**

What, then, of gender, in general, and masculinity, in particular, in these televisual culinary productions? First, these elements are neither invisible, nor insignificant. Furthermore, scrutiny of the content of food shows supports recent theorization about gender. To wit, rather than simple sets of stereotypical differences between classes tagged as “male” and “female”, masculinity and femininity clearly emerge as social constructions: sets of reproduced practices and performances that mimic and support a system of power. In fact, the ways in which gender-identities (in general) and masculinities (in particular) are communicated in these televisual productions faithfully reflect Ito’s (1996) trinity of authority, power and possession. Let’s consider concrete examples of each, in turn.

**Power: Masculinity as Competition**

Let’s return to *Dochi*, introduced above, in which rival dishes are
hawked by two male hosts. These front-men are combatants who do whatever they can to secure victory: interviewing the competing chefs (who are almost always men), sampling the food, cajoling the guests to join their side, making impassioned appeals for support. At the end of the contest, one exults in victory, the other despairs in loss. Their won-loss record is updated weekly on Dochi’s website. And, at the close of each show the victorious host holds court center stage, consuming the favored meal with the winning guests. He gloats and needles the losing host (as well as those unfortunate guests who voted incorrectly); these minority members are made to observe (and sometimes even serve the winners). Dochi’s discourse, in short, is one of contestation, of dominance achieved and subordination suffered; it operates in the vernacular of power. Its conflictual, competitive discourse is one normally associated with games – not unlike the Iron Chef show, with its clock, rival combatants, teams of specialists, sideline announcer, play-by-play and color commentators, and final judges. Such competitive shows adopt the rhetoric, the visual, contextual and practical tropes of sport – “an institution created by and for men,”
(Messner and Sabo, 1990); an institution whose practices service the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity.\textsuperscript{15}

Viewed in this way, shows like \textit{Dochi} and \textit{Iron Chef} support a sporting, contentious masculinity. They conjure constructions of gender in terms of combat – not coincidentally performed almost exclusively by men. And lest one wonder whether this is but an aberration, we must note that this discursive practice is not confined to one or two shows. \textit{Bistro SMAP}, after all, is a competition between teams. The results are not simply points on a weekly chart, but kisses acquired from the female guests. And even in shows where food is used to measure intellect, sophistication and judgment (e.g. \textit{Gotchi Battaru}), competition (to avoid pecuniary loss and, thus, public “face”) is the discursive frame.

Finally, in keeping with the notion that gender is not simply reducible to male/female categorizations, there are those Japanese food shows in which women battle one another for judges’ approval. When they do, these females adopt the vernacular of (hegemonic) male discourse.\textsuperscript{16}
They are operating within an authoritative structuration of power, working against rivals for a favorable personal result. In a word, women in the context of Japanese mediated identity are not immune from operating in the rhetoric, manifesting the core trait, of hegemonic masculinity.¹⁷

**Authority (I): Masculinity as Executive Function**

Among the categories that Goffman identified in his qualitative assessment of *Gender Advertisements* (1976) was “executive function”: the role (of elevated position, control and authoritative action) that men adopt when paired in ads with women. This function was patent in my own content analysis of gender in Japanese television ads (1999); it also seems widely replicated in Japanese television food shows.

Men are executives insofar as they are accorded the lead and they also direct. All activity flows through them or else beneath their commanding gaze. In food shows, masculine guidance can take the form of two guises: (1) host and (2) chef.
1. **Host.** As *Dochi*'s description suggests, men often appear in the role of host. This is not a hard and fast rule – *Emiko no o-shaberi kukingu* (Emiko’s Cooking Talk) – features a female host. Importantly, though, Emiko defers to the chef who is a man. As is true of all food shows, in the matter of food preparation, culinary direction and advice, the chef operates as chief executive. For the host, the role is clearly defined (and circumscribed): hosts greet guests, interview them about their lives, solicit their opinions (about life and food), ensure that attention is accorded to the chef’s (often backgrounded) work in the kitchen, and facilitate the flow between and balance these various elements. Important among the latter is timekeeping and scheduling; hosts determine when final judgments will be rendered, and also, as guardians of continuity, they verbally validate results tendered by chefs or guests. In a word, they exert administrative control over the communication event.

In cases where there are multiple hosts whose gender is split, executive
function adheres to a “gender order”, with males invariably reigning over women. Consider the show “Chūbō desu yo” (This is the kitchen). Airing at 11:30 p.m. on Saturdays, the hosts’ job is not only to welcome guests and make them feel at home, but also to prepare a meal with them in an in-studio kitchen. Like Dochi, the guest offers judgment on the food prepared; and like Dochi, that decision has the power to make the hosts exult in triumph or deflate in defeat. Unlike Dochi, however, the hosts are not rivals; and, importantly, unlike Dochi, they stand in a particular (power) relation to one another. The female host of Chūbō (Ikumi Kimura) is introduced at the outset of each show as an “announcer”; moreover, she wears the same green and yellow sticker on her apron that all newly-minted drivers in Japan affix to their car windows – signifier of a beginner. Tellingly, Ms. Kimura has worn that sticker for over three years. By contrast, the male host (formerly a popular singer, named Masaaki Sakai) introduces himself as possessor of “three stars” – the highest rating that can be awarded to a prepared dish on the show – and “Master Chef”.

Gender ranking does not end there. During the course of the half hour, Sakai provides directions to Kimura – in the kitchen, during the interview segments, and at the dinner table when it comes time to ask the guest for his or her evaluation of the completed meal. Often Sakai will interrupt his work in the kitchen to engage the guest in conversation, leaving Kimura to toil on her own, making sure that the preparation moves toward completion. In addition, during the critical moments of the show – when a segment has to be concluded or a result announced – it is Sakai who takes the lead. “This dish is finished!” he will intone after the casserole comes out of the oven. Or, as they consume the food, he will suggest: “Ms. Kimura, please ask the guest for his final evaluation.” Kimura-san will then dutifully inquire: “For this dish, how many stars will you give?” Once the guest has responded, it is left to Sakai to affirm the judgment: as the camera focuses tight on his face he shouts theatrically toward the rafters: “for this dish… one and a half stars!”

2. Chef. There are numerous shows in which the chef also adopts the executive function by instructing the host and/or guests in the ways of
food preparation. *Chūbō* is emblematic of this: introducing three chefs at the outset, who perform on their own premises. Having viewed three variations on the show’s selected meal, the three amateur cooks now follow one of the demonstrated recipes. At various stages of the preparation, the three loosely discuss the method they are following; in particular, though, once the meal has been completed and is being consumed, they discuss where they may have improved on the meal – what ingredient was in too little or too great supply, where the oven or stove was used for too long or too short a time. In short, the amateurs note their deviations from the chef’s instructions and chastise themselves for failing to conform to his direction.

In addition, *Chūbō* features a short segment introducing a resident apprentice in one of the chef’s kitchens. Almost always these chefs-in-training are young men in their early twenties. In every case to date, these young men are depicted receiving commands from elder male employers. Here again, then, Japan’s food shows cast men and masculinity in a discourse of authority.
With but two exceptions, the featured chefs in all of Japan’s food show genres are men – the exceptions being the case of desserts and katei ryōri (home cooking).\(^\text{18}\) When these dishes are featured, female chefs consistently appear. However, because neither category of food is widely represented on food shows, female presence tends to be overshadowed by that of male. As a consequence, viewers are apt to perceive “chef” as a male role and, logically (following the significatory chain), see men as culinary authorities. It is not a stretch to assert that, on the other side of the gender equation, the significations that flow out of the two areas reserved for female expertise (desserts and home cooking) communicate that women are “sweet”, soft, peripheral or de-centered (i.e. not associated with main courses), less sophisticated or elaborate, and also specialists in meals served in the private (rather than out in the public) sphere.

**Authority (II): Masculinity in Profession**

The executive function is not the only way in which status and authority
are communicated in cooking shows. Another is the provision of expert knowledge. And like the direction of stage and culinary activity, this is another function that is performed predominantly by men. The recognition of a chef as “expert” occurs in numerous ways in food shows.

First, and most obviously, is the invocation of the title “chef” to those who are called upon to perform in these TV productions. The deference hosts show to these culinary workers – soliciting their opinion about preparation, allowing them to explain the peculiarities and secrets of each ingredient – goes a long way toward elevating cooks to a position of authority. Clothes, too, serve as markers of professional association, and guest chefs never fail to appear in the starched white aprons and toques of those who cook for a living. Finally, and most importantly, is the chef’s resume. In Japan, where organizational affiliation is one of the significant markers of legitimacy, food shows take pains to introduce their kitchen authorities not simply by name or age, but by pedigree: in which schools they have trained, in which countries have they apprenticed, and under which banner do they now wield a spatula. In a word, this discursive formation
is framed institutionally, in terms of economy and social sanction.

_Dochi_ serves as exemplar of this intellectual construction, drawing its chefs exclusively from one corporate group, _Tsuji_ in Osaka – arguably Japan’s most prestigious professional cooking academy. The title “_Tsuji_” (or its offshoot “_Ecole Culinaire Nationale_”) flashed beneath the in-studio chef or else on the food show’s web page is enough to communicate “expert”; to Japanese media consumers, “_Tsuji_ connotes “rigorous training,” “knowledge”, “competence,” “professionalism,” and “quality-control”.

As mentioned earlier, _Dochi_ (not unlike most other food shows) calls upon its professionals to provide advice in between segments of host/guest repartee. Culinary experts explain the “dos and don’ts” associated with particular foods, as well as tricks in preparing a meal to perfection. Hosts are careful to respond with affirmative noises: “oh, I see” or “that makes sense,” or even “incredible!” – clearly stressing the presence of a knowledge hierarchy. In this way, the message is
communicated that chefs are “professionals”, not merely because they have a title and an impressive uniform, but because they are experts and leaders in their field.

**Status in a binary universe: the comparison with women.**

One of the major areas of contestation in gender studies – appropriated from structuralism and ushered in, in large part, by Butler (1990) – is the issue of language as totality: a closed system in which signs give rise, by inference, to (often invisible) paired opposites. On these terms “man” begets “woman” as “feminine” conjures “masculine”. Or as Hughes (2002:15) has observed, “In the male-female binary, to be a woman requires us to have a corresponding concept of man. Without this relation the terms alone would have no reference point from which to derive their meaning.”

Butler’s influence – along with Foucault’s (1980) and some others19 -- was to move us beyond simplistic binaries. And yet, the structure of meaning in Japanese televisual productions is predominantly dualistic:
creating sign-pairs of male/chef and female/not chef. In this way, what is present – what is communicated, what “exists” – is an absence of females in the role of “chief cook”, the banishment of women from public kitchens – either as professional or apprentice. All of this can produce the view that women are not cooking authorities; that “chef” is a male identification, rather than a female one.

Let’s probe this possibility further. Women who appear as cooks in Japanese cooking shows are often featured in one of two ways: in the primary guise as “talento” (entertainer), or else in the capacity as “housewife”. In the case of former, women seldom, if ever, offer culinary advice, and their cooking duties are mere props to their true identity: as star, singer, sex symbol, or actress. In the case of the latter, women prepare foods and engage in activities associated with the private domain of the household.

An example of the former is found in the Sunday afternoon show, “Iron Shufu”. A take-off on Iron Chef, this variety show features female
guests, all former entertainers, now married. The show has a number of components: two rounds of quizzes (one centering on food customs, another concerning ingredients, nutrition and calories), then a round in which kitchen skills are on display. For instance, housewives might have to run an obstacle course while flipping stir-fry in a wok, or else grasping slippery *konyaku* with chopsticks. One week, a task involved whipping cream, after which sticky hands and quivering fingers were made to thread three needles, in succession. Following this ordeal, contestants were asked a battery of personal questions regarding life with their husbands (e.g. where was their first date, what was the first present they received from their husband, when is their wedding anniversary).

Once all of these tasks are completed, the two highest scoring guests (measured in terms of fastest time through the obstacle course and most correct quiz answers) are pitted against one another in a cook-off. They are given thirty minutes to prepare a meal in the *katei* (or “home-cooking”) style. Like its namesake, *Iron Chef*, one featured ingredient must be integrated into the menu. An addition stipulation
(since it is *katei* style) is that one of the courses must be served with rice. A panel of celebrity judges – along with the president of a cooking school (i.e. a professional/expert) – offers evaluative comments and scores the two contestants. In numerous ways, then, *Iron Shifu* embodies elements of the masculine hegemonic discourse: competition, expert evaluation, and female cooks associated with private (home-made) food. It also casts women in overtly-domesticated roles that differ in multiple, stereotypical ways from those accorded to men. In this way, patriarchal gendered discourse is reproduced.21

**Markers of Masculine Identity**

It should be observed that there are a few food shows in which female chefs prepare foods other than desserts or home cooking. In these cases, however, an interesting designation is attached to the cooks; an appellation that appears to undercut their status as authority. Their title is “*riyōri kenkyu ka*” – literally “food researchers”. One tangible effect of this title is that it tends to soften the impression left when a woman is offering advice to a male announcer or host.
Not so in reverse, of course. Where women are being instructed and a man is in the tutelary role, there is no shying away from affixing the title “chef” or “sensei” (teacher), providing his professional affiliation, and clothing him in the garb of the professional cook. A prime example is the after-hours entertainment (Saturday 12:30 a.m.), *Ai no ēpuron 3* (the love of three aprons) in which three young (generally sexy) *talento* are assigned the task of preparing a particular dish (for instance, apple pie) without benefit of a recipe. The final product is then presented to a panel of (generally) male entertainers. The program’s website explains that the “women must make the dishes for these men with love”.

The bulk of the show involves the heaping of (generally critical) judgments by the male hosts upon each of the women’s food productions. Thereafter, the dishes are assessed by a professional (male) chef. His comments, though generally respectful, aim at improving the women’s effort next time out (with the implicit assumption that there will be a next time). Due to the deference paid to him by the guests and hosts, as well
as his uniform and title, he comes across as an authority possessing special knowledge; his words are treated as insights beyond reproach.

**Possession: Masculinity as Ownership**

Punctuating (and possibly stoking) the go-go era of Japanese socio-economic development were distinct epochs in which particular trinities of goods were sought. Thus, there were the three Ss of the late 1950s and early 1960s: *senpūki*, *sentakuki*, and *suihanki* (fan, washing machine, and electric rice cooker); the three Cs of the late 1960s: *kā*, *kūrā*, and *karā terebi* (car, air conditioner, and color TV); and the three Js of the late 1970s: *jūeru*, *jetto*, and *jūtaku* (jewels, jetting, and house). Aside from travel by jet, all of these items were goods to be owned. They were statuses secured through acquisition, and communicated via conspicuous display.

Of course, these trinities center on consumption; however, they also reflect a discourse of possession. It is this rhetoric that can also be spied in Japanese food productions, particularly in relation to the chefs who
appear. In numerous shows, the chefs are introduced on the premises of restaurants they have founded, manage and maintain. Cameras capture them either outside the door of their business or else inside, in the dining area. Invariably, they proudly bow in greeting and offer some remarks of invitation. Viewers are treated not only to tours of their kitchens, but are shown menus, sample the décor, drink in the ambiance, and even watch the chef as he prepares, then consumes his product.

Chūbō, mentioned above, is noted for such excursions to the owner-chef’s domain. So, too, though, are the numerous shows in which hosts travel to a particular locale (perhaps in a village off the beaten path) or else seek out a particularly special dish. In such cases, the chef becomes something more than a food preparer; he becomes host in his own right, commander of a world of his own invention, and interviewee. His status as owner lends an additional power to his countenance. He is not only executive, not only employer, not only expert; he is also landholder, proprietor, and business owner. In Japan, for historical (social class-based) reasons, these are quite powerful statuses to hold. And, of
course, it goes without saying: these are roles that are almost exclusively held by men – at least in the Japanese televisual universe.

**Alternative Conceptions of Televisual Masculinity**

Thus far we have explored how masculinity in TV food programming is consistent with past conceptions of Japanese masculinity; in a word, it embodies a hegemonic discourse of authority, power and possession. Here I wish to briefly identify two elements that suggest alternative, though not necessarily inconsistent, conceptions of gender identity.

**Creation: Masculinity as Production**

When Sherry Ortner offered the now-famous assertion (1974) that women are nature and men are culture, she was referring to the notion that the male world is “made”: it is a world invented, produced, rendered and controlled. Certainly, this is the message from Japan’s food shows – where the key producers are generally all male. Production transpires within an institutional context (media), and, within that context, a (generally) organizational structure. Such a structure is “man”-made; it
is a humanly constructed, artificial environment, configured to confer status and facilitate the expression of power. The tools wielded and the products crafted on these shows, may or may not belong to the cooks, but the fact that they are produced in audio-visual spaces generally presided over by men, and filtered through rhetorical strategies that are often regarded as “hegemonic masculinity” – all of this suggests that these productions are, in fact, male; they are possessions of the male-producer world and, hence, can be associated with masculine identity.

By contrast, for women – who are so often associated with the “natural realm” – their televisual role is generally one of nurturer or consumer. As such, their job is to facilitate food production (as hosts) or else serve as end-users (as guests). Certainly, exceptions can be located – as in the case of the “three aprons” or the Iron Shifu shows, described above. In each case, however, production is for purposes supportive of a patriarchal frame: namely, satisfying the dictates of male hosts or else proving one’s wherewithal in providing an amenable home for a
husband.

**Freedom: Masculinity as Agency**

If the message of (some) TV food shows is that women exist within a clearly delineated, bounded structure, the same could obviously be said of men. As mentioned above, chefs are often depicted as members of organizations (as in the case of the *Tsujii* performers) or else (as in the case of the *Chūbō* chefs and a wealth of other shop proprietors) as proud possessors (creators, owners, executives) of structures – which, incidentally, are “man-made”.

At the same time, this image of attachment must be counterbalanced with the impressions of independence often communicated by Japanese media productions. As Gill (2003:145) has written, “Japanese male fantasies frequently stress the mobile: the sportsman, the traveler, the man of action, the magically endowed superhero.” For men (and here, television viewers), the majority are tied to structures of “permanence and stasis” (ibid:146) and, so, pine for an alternative
model of existence – a model offered by the television shows. Here, this is not so much embodied by the chefs who have hung out their shingle and run their own businesses; rather it is in the aegis of the entertainers and guests who saunter onto the food show stage, seemingly unencumbered; free of institutional affiliation or organizational layering.

This is a version of Japanese masculinity that is less well known – one that has few exemplars out in the free world; one that is often relegated to the realm of wish-fulfillment (for instance movies centering on the vagabond peddler “Tora-san”, leaderless samurai like the “47 Ronin”, or meandering monks like “Zatoichi”; or, more recently, daily news about highly-publicized “free agents” who have migrated to play baseball in America). It is a version of masculinity that, far from the quintessential salaryman, views male identity in terms of autonomy and individually-oriented existence. It is a disparate image of masculinity, one which may have little referent in reality, but is, nonetheless, persistently cropping up in televisual productions.
Alternative Masculinities

While the general argument on these pages has been that, with regard to Japan’s televisual food shows, little alternative discourse circulates concerning masculinity, this is not completely the case. As we saw in the previous passage, discrepant masculinities do exist. And, in fact, these discrepant versions are greater – more extensive and farther reaching – than simply that of the autonomous agent just described. Here I’d like to consider a few of these deviations and also what that may tell us about contemporary Japanese society.

TV’s Widest Angle: Masculinity’s “Multiplicity”

It is not infrequently that alternative genders – transgendered men\textsuperscript{24} and female masculinities\textsuperscript{25} -- surface on Japanese TV. Food shows and food advertising, in particular, often feature performances of multiple genders. Consider, for example, \textit{Dochi}. Generally, six of the seven invitees rotate weekly,\textsuperscript{26} often striking a numerical balance between men and women. Among the former, past episodes have included a transvestite, numerous \textit{rikishi} (sumo wrestlers), retired baseball and
tennis players, actors, singers, comedians, writers and producers.

The transvestite, in particular, warrants mention here. His name is Akihiro Miwa and is a cultural icon. A former cabaret singer, Miwa is as famous for his elegant gowns as his silky singing voice… if not his romantic involvement with famous deceased novelist Yukio Mishima. A writer and TV personality, as well as a regular on variety shows, Miwa is accorded respect with little hint of derision or disdain. The same can also be said for the homosexual twins “Pīco” and “Osugi”, the “new half”, “Pītā”, and the ubiquitous (and enormously popular) transvestite, Ken’ichi Mikawa. While one would be hard-pressed to claim that transgendered men are widely represented on Japanese television, it would also be impossible to deny their presence. Rarely does a day pass without the appearance of a person embodying an alternative conception of gender on mass-distributed, mass-consumed Japanese television.

Alongside these versions of masculinity are also other “models”. On
Dochi, alone, one encounters an obese wrestler from Hawaii; a waif-like singer from Japan’s longest-running boy’s band, SMAP; a forty-something producer in scruffy beard, blue jeans, signature cowboy boots and ten-gallon hat; a Japan-raised, blond-haired, grungy, earring-studded Canadian; and an elderly actor with assiduously trimmed goatee, adorned in yukata (traditional male kimono). In short, one can hardly claim that what is broadcast is the narrow, repetitive discourse of masculinity embodied by salarymen in gray suits and conservative ties. So, too, could one hardly assert that this motley mélange of free agents fits the profile of power wielding, authoritative, possessive hegemonists – at least on the surface.

The Illusion of Freedom

It must be recognized, however, that while such “models” of masculinity may materialize on-screen good reasons exist to view their social impact with skepticism. For one, as guests, these men stand in an asymmetric relationship to those who manage the show – specifically, the hosts and chefs in front of the cameras. For these latter groups,
invariably, action is wrapped in the vernacular of masculine hegemony. Significantly, no matter what model of masculinity hosts and chefs may appear to communicate via their appearance, they uniformly manage to channel food talk into discourse concerning authority, power, and possession.

It also must be noted that a disjuncture exists between the televisual and the real worlds. For instance, food shows place an ubiquity of free agents on display and communicate alternative masculinities (and femininities) in far greater measure than the stereotypical types comprising the world beyond the screen. To wit, in Japan today, organizational work still accounts for upwards of 70% of those employed;^27 and day laborers and casual or part-time workers also comprise a significant sector of workers. Nonetheless, in show after show – from the food-centered *Dochi, Chubo Desu Yo* and *Kakurea Gohan* to the weekly cooking segments on SMAPXSMAP, *Tonnerus’ (minasan no okage deshita)* and *Gotchi Battaru*, workers – both within and on the margins of “organizational society” – are never invited to sit
at the TV table.

What’s more, while the actors and actresses, athletes, singers, comedians, and the like, appear to be “free agents” it must be declared that this is mere illusion; they are far from free. Almost all of the food consuming-performers on screen belong to invisible corporate structures which book them onto these shows, not only to reap money, but more importantly, to gain further exposure for them, their popular cultural product. As such, the consumer-performers on food shows offer the illusion of independence, reproducing a myth of masculine (and feminine) freedom that in actually doesn’t exist. In its stead stands the more hegemonic, structurated model of masculinity that pervades almost all of Japanese society today.

The Absence of Vision

In the same way, although transgendered and alternative masculinities are represented on these shows, it is generally only through the aegis of a handful of prominent entertainers – the few, established well-known,
accepted “others” who make the perpetual rounds in what is a finite, hermetic, televisual universe. These performers (who began as public curiosities) today rotate from show to show, appearing in a variety of genres, equally distributed across the four major channels, spread throughout the seven day viewing week. The consequence is that the message that they might embody – of alternative versions of masculinity – stands a very real likelihood of being absorbed into, even overshadowed by, the intimacy cultivated through repetitive exposures of star and host and encounters between viewer and performer. It is this affective bond, I would aver, that may easily lead to the emotional embrace of the one or three or five alternatively masculine “regulars”, without having to inculcate the ontological potentials they actually embody. The result may be that viewers become desensitized to or even come to ignore the performativities that these personalities signify; the various transgender potentials of “transvestite”, “drag queen”, “new half”, or “homosexual”.
Conclusion: The Tight Focus of Televisual Masculine Identity

There is no end to food shows on Japanese television. No two are exactly identical, but all are broadcast for a purpose. To be sure, they exist to educate and entertain. Occasionally they may carry some deep unspoken or less motivated purpose – as for instance, the mediation of identity. When this occurs it might be identity defined in terms of the nation, interest group, or individual (Holden 2001, 2003). Or, as shown here, it may be identity cast in terms of gender.

Televisual food shows clearly play a powerful role in communicating masculine identity in contemporary Japan. Clearly, too, such shows are not amenable to the representation of all aspects of masculinity. Beyond the gender performativities mentioned above, a number of contexts are absent from the screen in which masculinities are generally re/produced. For instance, save for the simulated kitchens in which chefs toil, workplaces are almost entirely absent. Missing, as well, are homes – where parenting occurs. Class also is invisible – as are men who are unemployed or else under-employed. Not surprisingly, the
homeless are non-existent. In short, there is so much that bears on masculinity that televisual productions ignore, deny, or banish from public view.

The discourse that does appear in these productions serves to present, interpret, translate and/or modify masculinities. Interestingly, as pervasive as gendered identifications are, the emblematic masculinity for Japan – the salaryman – is entirely pulled from the frame. In his place are other figures – numerous tropes, codes, characters, social processes, institutions, organizational structures, and human agents – both visible and invisible, which are employed to communicate masculine identity. It is a certain kind of identity; a singular kind of identity which is consistently organized and communicated in terms of authority, power, possession, production, and – only-seemingly – autonomy.

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1 Ito's concept was developed in association with his introduction to men's studies – written in Japanese. Clearly, however, the concept is not culturally bound and can be applied to other contexts.

2 Presaging this work, perhaps, was McLelland’s (2000), which argues that homosexuality in Japan does not reduce to a neat, unitary discourse.

3 Among a chorus of writers Lebra and Lebra (1986), Moeur and Sugimoto (1986), Harootunian (1989), and Befu (2000) have observed that there is no homogenous Japan, comprised of a single class, gender, geography, ethnicity, occupation, or generation.

4 Iwao (1993: 271), while arguing that Japan has witnessed a dramatic opening up of the public sphere (and, attendant institutional sites) for women, discusses how family has remained one institution which an earlier generation of women use to define their identity.

5 In my conceptualization “mediated identity” is interactive and institutional, involving: (1) significations, (2) conveyed through representations of sameness and difference, (3) by media, and (4) brought into relief by: (a) references to (socially constructed) group-based traits, and (b) the depiction of relationships between: (i) individuals and/or (ii) groups. Even more recent work on cell phone users (Holden 2004) suggests that the above definition requires modification to allow for the power of users to communicate representations of themselves and actively construct identities by consciously utilizing media.


7 95% of the population according to Shuichi Kamimura and Mieko Ida. See:
“Will the Internet Take the Place of Television?: From a Public Opinion Survey on ‘The Media in Daily Life’,” NHK Culture Broadcasting Institute, No.19 (New Year, 2002); url: http://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/bcri-news/bnl-s-feature.html.

8 NHK’s Research Institute reported a figure of 3 hours and 44 minutes in a 2001 survey. This statistic has consistently topped three hours since 1960. Kato (1998:176), reports that viewer rates averaged three hours and eleven minutes in 1960 and three hours and twenty-six minutes in 1975.

9 Bosnia is the only country to rank ahead of Japan in terms of daily average viewing. See: “‘2002': Une Année de Télévision dans Le Monde: analyse les paysages télévisuels et les programmes préférés de 1.4 milliard de téléspectateurs dans 72 territoires audiovisuels,” Mediametrie, URL: http://www.mediametrie.fr/show.php?rubrique=communiques&type=2&id=746.

10 The Japanese equivalent of “prime time”, running from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m., Monday through Sunday.

11 The Bistro SMAP website can be accessed at the following url: http://www.fujitv.co.jp/b_hp/smapsmap/bistro.html. Pages such as the following (http://www.eonet.ne.jp/~smapy/SMAP-DATA.htm) feature cumulative data on guests, meals prepared, team combinations, winning teams, and number of victories amassed by each SMAP member. Awards are given to the chef (among the 5 SMAP members) who has recorded the most victories in a season.

12 Generally Japanese, although in the first season Chris Carter and Jackie Chan were invited. Carter won and Chan finished last of the four contestants.

13 The actual numbers were 681 out of 3,656 ads. Food was the second most advertised product category – behind “events” and about equal to “cars” and “sundries”. This is significant insofar as Japan boasts the world’s second largest advertising market, amounting to $223,250,000 just for television. This translates into 957,447 ads, consuming 6,016 broadcasting hours per year. (Source: Dentsu Koukoku Nenkan, ‘02 – ‘03 [Dentsu Advertising Yearbook, 2002 – 2003], Tokyo: Dentsu, 2002; pp.57,90,89 [respectively]).

As many have argued before, advertising serves not only a major motor for consumption-based capitalist societies; it also works as one of the major means by which cultural communication occurs. Through ads, television exerts both a socializing and ideological power, narrowly and repetitiously re/producing images of gender, cultural values, history, nationalism, and political, social and personal identity (among others). I have explored these manifestations in, among other works, studies of gender advertisements (1999) and “adentity” (2000a) in Japan.

14 See, for instance, Hearn and Morgan (1990) and Brod and Kaufman (1994).

15 Indeed, Messner (1992) has argued that sport is one of the primary areas in which hegemonic masculinity is learned and perpetuated. To the degree that food shows adopt sporting rhetoric, then, they serve as such communication
vehicles, as well.

16 To underscore this point, consider the case of the female chef who finally prevailed on *Dochi*. Having appeared — and lost — a number of times, when her dessert finally won she gushed: “That’s the first time I won!” Reflecting on past efforts — which resulted in her having to sit for the cameras, in a room off center stage, eating the food (by herself) that she had prepared — she explained: “When I lost, that (i.e. sitting alone eating my food) was the hardest thing...”

17 Importantly, it is not “female masculinity” (Halberstam 1998) that they manifest, rather a male model of masculinity.

18 Home cooked meals are those served everyday, featuring a soy sauce base and/or rice.


20 “Shufu” is the word for “housewife” in Japanese.

21 An example of what Sugimoto (1997) decries as the overarching ideology of the male-centered family in Japan: one that, in his opinion, is deeply sexist and patriarchal.

22 These triplets have, over the years, held currency in the popular culture — from marketers to journalists to everyday citizens — and, hence were widely discussed. The recitation here, however, is from Kelly (1992). In the early 1990s, just prior to the bursting of the “economic bubble”, young women talked about searching for mates who possessed the “three *kō* (highs):” physical height, job status, and salary. In the late 1990s, after half a decade of economic downturn, these same women complained that their salarymen husbands embodied the “three Ks”; *kitanai, kusai, kirai* (dirty, smelly, hateful). Mathews (2003:116), more optimistically, speaks of a new set of three Cs for men: bringing home a comfortable income, being communicative, and cooperating with childcare and housework.

23 In Tobin’s (1992:10) words: “consumption is associated with the sphere of women.” At the same time, Tobin is careful to observe that, while such associations may exist, they amount to critically under-assessed stereotypes. In fact, in Japan today, women also produce and men consume. Too much emphasis has been accorded to this artificial (and inaccurate) dichotomy — a point to bear in mind when applying Ortner to contemporary Japan.

24 Here I invoke Lunsing (2003:20) who employs “‘transgender’ in the broadest sense possible”. In his words: “the majority of people have at least some attributes ascribed to the opposite gender and thereby can be seen to engage in transgender activity.”

25 Here I refer the women of *Takarazuka* theatre in which an all-female cast plays roles both male and female. These stars have, on occasion, crossed over into TV.
According to Nakamura and Matsuo (2003:59), Takarazuka is a “special type of asexual, agendered space,” one allowing “both female and male fans, regardless of their sexual orientations, (to) temporarily transcend their everyday gender expectations and roles.” A recent, quite different, example of female masculinity was the 2003 - 04 Georgia (canned coffee) TV ad campaign in which women, dressed Takarazuka-style, as salarymen, wreak havoc in their office space, tormenting their (male) boss, while dancing, rapping, taunting, and laughing with delight.

26 One guest holds near-permanent status: Tsuyoshi Kusanagi, singer for the J-pop mega-group, SMAP. Kusanagi’s appeal may lay in his asexual, if not effeminate, countenance. As a character with a blurry gender identity, he appears to comfortably rest between the weekly groups of three males and three females. It is not uncommon to see Kusanagi among the winning side in a 4 to 3 split, often in cases when the food choice cleaves panelists along traditional gender lines.

27 Precise statistical confirmation can be illusory. One such study – from a Marxist/worker’s perspective (Voice of Electricity Workers) can be found at the following url: http://www.eefi.org/0702/070215.htm. Its data is culled from numerous official and unofficial studies in the mid-1990s which, combined, work the figure toward the 70% threshold. More recent reports from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (1999) speak to dramatic decline in the number of employees in blue collar jobs (due to economic downturn), as well as a glut of professional and technical workers.

28 English-language studies of Japanese television are rather sparse. One of the best, by Painter (1996), argues that TV productions seek to produce “quasi-intimacy” by “emphasiz(ing) themes related to unity (national, local, cultural, or racial) and unanimity (consensus, common sense, identity)...” (198). I would go further. Theorization I am currently completing suggests that affective bonds are formed among a national community via the hermetic circulatory process I described earlier. The result, in the first instance, is a fusing of affective ties between viewer, performer, host, production team, and TV station. In the second instance, it is the dislodging and transfer of such bonds (as the performers and viewers jump from program to program and station to station, day after day). In the final instance, it is the creation of a sort of seamless, floating family locked in an on-going communal conversation. Although Painter doesn’t suggest as much, it would seem that the intimacy he first described today serves increasingly as a stepping stone in the forging of solidarity among TV’s national viewers; a solidarity that in contemporary Japan, exerts greater unifying power than that of corporate, legal, religious or ritualistic activities and formations.

29 On these categories – “the various tropes constructing transgender” in contemporary Japan – see Lunsing (2003).

30 Female identity, to be sure, is just as rich an area of inquiry. Femininities are more variegated than masculinities – there are so many “types” of women on-screen: at the same time, ultimately, the range of female motion is less
extensive. For, as we have seen in this research (at least when it comes to food shows) so much of feminine discourse is subrogated to expressions of masculine hegemony. Women, in a word, end up operating within those terms – either employing such tools of power, themselves, or deferring to them.

And, in fact, men are rarely – if ever – depicted cooking in homes. Male culinary acts are: always for show (i.e. in the studio); associated with work (i.e. in the role of chef); or else at play (i.e. during seasonal picnics, generally in commercials).