

Herbivorous Men

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Japan might be having a bit of a gender identity crisis, and I'm not just saying that because I saw a bloke in a dress the other day. I mean, let's face it, go to Fremantle and you see that kind of thing everyday. No, this is more serious, and more complicated, but I'll try to clear things up for you by the end of the page.

I'm referring to the recent phenomenon known as *Soushoku Danshi* or, 'herbivorous men'. Herbivores, named for their perceived passivity (consider the image of a cow versus, say, a lion) are men, usually in their twenties and thirties, who are generally considered to lack ambition in the work sphere, lack interest in sex, are interested in women primarily as friends, and are disinclined to fortify the economy with the kind of consumption typical of their parents' generation.

While this may seem a mere curiosity, the figures indicate a trend that some find alarming. Research by Media Shakers, a subsidiary of Japan's largest advertising company, indicates that more than 50 percent of single men in their twenties and thirties consider themselves to be herbivores.

Although it seems possible that these changes are physiological in nature - a study conducted by the University of Rochester in New York State indicates that hormone-disrupting chemicals used in household items cause feminisation in the brains of boys - herbivorous men are generally considered to be a product of Japanese society. While, in other countries, changing gender roles might be seen to precipitate a change in men's behaviour, in the case of Japan, stagnating roles might account for the change. Japan has seen an increase in women in the workforce and the subsequent rise of the outspoken woman, but roles for men remain generally rigid and prohibitive. Despite changes in Japanese law to allow for paternity leave and a reduction of overtime working hours, society lags behind, with a tacit understanding that nothing has changed. Paternity leave and shorter working hours are as inaccessible as they were twenty years ago, and many men have little opportunity to spend time with their families and enjoy leisure activities.

With worsening economic conditions, and lifetime employment guarantees a thing of the past, many young men are reluctant to embark down the path of long working hours, hard drinking and major-league consumption of status items - such as cars and houses - which typified men of previous generations. But while this might explain a lack of career ambition, where does the herbivore's passive behavior around women fit in? Some believe that the rise of instant



communication - via SMS or sites like Facebook - has led to a consensus-based style of communication that is ultimately more beneficial in today's networking society. Perhaps it's also accurate to say that this really isn't such a big turnaround. Compared to Australian men, Japanese men are less likely to be aggressive when it comes to making the first move, and the indirectness of everyday Japanese interactions can sometimes leave relationships feeling ambiguous.

I should clarify that herbivorous men are not gay. They're simply disinclined to be the aggressor in a relationship. That's not always a negative; for a modern woman who appreciates caring, communicative men, passivity isn't always an impediment to a meaningful relationship. What is an impediment, however, is the object of your affection having an unstable or dead-end career, especially as these men reach their late twenties. With the high cost of living in Japan, the lower wages and status generally accorded women, and the probability of a woman being at least temporarily out of work raising children, a man who can support his family gets a big 'thumbs up' from a woman looking for a husband. Which, ultimately, is why Japan cares.

Japan's birthrate has been low for the past twenty years, and despite government incentives to induce women to have more children, it has remained low - latest reports indicate a birthrate of 1.37 in 2008. This phenomenon, combined with the economic concerns facing Japan, makes the recent herbivore trend somewhat concerning. While advertisers have started addressing the issue by targeting *Soushoku Danshi* in their campaigns, herbivores often have neither the funds nor the inclination to cough up serious money.

While the media has enjoyed bemoaning the lack of manly young things charging about the place, TV dramas have been celebrating the *Soushoku Danshi*. Good-looking, young ne'er-do-well is pursued by lonely, career-driven heroine - you get the picture. And really, what's not to celebrate? Unless the government gets cracking on a new immigration policy, no amount of knitting one's brows over complacent young men is going to solve Japan's economic woes and imminent population decline. Herbivores should be left to their peaceful lives. In the new Japan, perhaps they represent a change for the better.