

# The Culture-bound Hierarchy of Manhood: An Overview of Hegemonic Masculinity and Subordinate Male Figures in *Shall We DANSU?*

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## Abstract

Although the concept of hegemonic masculinity was defined more than two decades ago, failure to consider the significance of cultural differences in the construction of maleness has led contemporary critics to misinterpret the Japanese vision of hegemonic masculinity. This analysis of the most significant male characters in the movie *Shall We DANSU?* highlights the cultural components that shape the represented masculinities and shows how the movie criticizes Western compulsive masculinity discourse defined by Charlebois.

**Key words:** masculinity, Japanese culture, interpretation, society, culture, movie, gender

## Resumen

A pesar de que el concepto “masculinidad hegemónica” se definió hace más de dos décadas, la crítica contemporánea ha malinterpretado la visión japonesa de éste debido a que no ha considerado las diferencias culturales en la construcción de la masculinidad. El siguiente análisis de los personajes más importantes de *Shall We DANSU?* resalta los componentes culturales que caracterizan las diversas masculinidades representadas en la película y muestra como ésta critica el discurso de masculinidad compulsiva de Occidente definido por Charlebois.

**Palabras claves:** masculinidad, cultura japonesa, interpretación, sociedad, cultura, película, género

Gender roles are not the same for different cultures. Researchers like Williams and Best discussed the cross-cultural variations of gender roles and gender stereotypes. Likewise, researchers Yoko Sugihara and Emiko Katsurada, who conducted a pilot study on femininity and masculinity

in Japan, borrow from Berry, Poortinga, Segall, and Dasen their warning against generalization in gender stereotypes across cultures. Nonetheless, most critics accept that gender division of labor in patriarchal societies has configured the different psychological characteristics of males and females and, hence, have assumed the universality of gender stereotypes beyond cultures as true. Such assumptions have led to intolerance, which, in turn, causes misinterpretations even among advocates of the same ideology. The poignant criticism upon Japanese feminists illustrates this phenomenon. Feminists in the United States often criticize Japanese feminists for being too soft on patriarchy and label Japanese feminism “conservative” or even “timid,” as the feminist critic Sarah Collins argues. This inconsistency led her to take into account cultural background when she spoke on behalf of Japanese feminism:

Japanese society fundamentally differs from American society in its socio-political background, which unites the nation as a family and honors the role of caretaker and mother, and also fosters *amae*, which leads to interdependent thinking. The fact that Japanese society largely thinks interdependently means the existentialist ideal of defining oneself as an individual is not compatible with Japanese feminism. (“Japanese Feminism”)

Along with female gender interpretations, the idea of universally-held gender roles has also affected the conceptualization of masculinity models. This generalization has prevented gender critics from understanding how different cultures envision the plurality of emerging masculinities in specific interactive and situational contexts. Hegemonic masculinity, for instance, is one of the masculinities that is often taken as a monolithic construction that remains the same regardless of cultural differences. However, this assumption leads to the concealing of significant cultural factors at play in the male gender-construction process and the analysis of male-related gender issues.

### **Hegemonic masculinity: What is it?**

Formulated more than two decades ago, hegemonic masculinity is more than a collection of patriarchal ideals to oppress women. It is a normative set of ideas, values, and actions that grants the male individual a status of preeminence among other males. However, only few men in a society can display this type of masculine behavior because this hegemonic status is extremely difficult to achieve. Thus, one could say that this expression of manhood becomes a guide, a North Star, for males to follow in their struggle to appear accountably masculine. Furthermore, other types of masculinities align below it in a hierarchical order, as researchers Connell and Messerschmidt state:

Hegemonic masculinity was understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men’s dominance over women to continue.

Hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men (832).

Michael Absatz, in addition, has identified a list of required behaviors that hegemonic masculinity holds and perpetuates:

1. Maintain a strong image
2. Prove manhood by taking risks, even if foolish
3. Sexualize affection - all touch is sexual touch
4. Have many sexual conquests
5. Don't be a virgin
6. Don't be vulnerable
7. Don't cry
8. Don't express fear
9. Don't ask for help, guidance or directions
10. Don't trust anyone
11. Be disposable - be willing to die for your country
12. Pretend to know even when you don't
13. Act tough
14. Be in control
15. Dominate others
16. Devalue what is "feminine" in yourself and others
17. Be emotionally detached
18. Tough it out
19. Don't take care of your body
20. Win at all costs
21. Abuse your body
22. More is better - money, sex, food, alcohol
23. Objectify women
24. Prove manhood
25. You are what you achieve or accomplish (1)

In the West, the masculine figure that has enacted these patterns is the macho, a consistent figure of manhood within patriarchal culture. However, the observation of Absatz might be problematic in the sense that, although it describes the Western perception of hegemonic masculinity, the macho figure is assumed as a universal pattern of masculinity that barely changes throughout time or space. In other words, the problem centers in the fact that neither is the macho the only possible embodiment of hegemonic masculinity, nor all societies necessarily accept the male Chauvinist macho as the most prominent expression of manhood, but many critics have bypassed this observation.

As a social construct, hegemonic masculinity is both historical and cultural. It is historical, for the construction depends on the values ascribed to manhood during a specific time period. It is also cultural, for those values are shaped within a given human group and, hence, can neither be universal nor unchanging. This last characteristic, however, is rarely perceived within the social group that makes those values legitimate. The reason for this numbing toward the actual shifts in masculine behavior rests upon the most effective means of production and consumption of stereotypes: the mass media. Even though male roles have changed to some extent presently, the media overlook this change and present a stereotypical construction of masculinity that depicts the macho as the representation of a universalized male hegemonic ideology:

In 1999, the research group Children Now asked boys between the ages of 10 and 17 about how their perceptions of the male characters they saw on television, in music videos and in movies had changed. From the study, the group concluded that the media do not reflect the changing work and family experiences of most men today—and that this fact is not lost on the boys, who noticed the discrepancies between the media portrayals and the reality they knew. (“Media Portrayals of Men and Masculinity” 2, 3)

Specifically, the research that Children Now conducted pointed out to a number of masculine roles that differed in reality and on TV. While those roles had changed in real life, TV programs still presented the following hegemonic aspects:

- on television, most men and boys usually keep their attention focused mostly just on women and girls
- many males on TV are violent and angry
- men are generally leaders and problem-solvers
- males are funny, confident, successful and athletic
- it's rare to see men or boys crying or otherwise showing vulnerability
- male characters on TV could not be described as “sensitive”
- male characters are mostly shown in the workplace, and only rarely at home
- more than a third of the boys had never seen a man on TV doing domestic chores (“Media Portrayals of Men and Masculinity” 3)

The question of why the “ideal” representations of men in the movie industry exhibited a range of features that was inconsistent with the masculine role in households attracted the attention of specialists, who became aware of the portrayal of males in a variety of contexts:

The concept was also employed in studying media representations of men, for instance, the interplay of sports and war imagery. Because the concept of hegemony helped to make sense of both the diversity and the selectiveness

of images in mass media, media researchers began mapping the relations between representations of different masculinities. Commercial sports are a focus of media representations of masculinity, and the developing field of sports sociology also found significant use for the concept of hegemonic masculinity. (Connell and Messerschmidt 833)

The conclusion was that the media over-represented one masculine figure, the “white” macho, while it under-represented, or excluded, other expressions of manhood. The pattern was to be followed later in Latin America, with the blooming of Mexican films that enthroned a masculine figure that embodied Mexican stereotypes. In this way, the macho became the supreme Western male figure. Hence, because the media have defended the reign of the macho and disseminated this type of manhood as the only representation of hegemonic masculinity through the years, critics have mistakenly assumed that the macho is, in the West and elsewhere, the most prominent formulation of masculine behavior.

Mexican movies, which are vastly consumed in Latin America, have contributed to the fixation of the macho as hegemonic manhood. The iconic image of Pedro Infante can illustrate how a generation of men grew aspiring to achieve macho masculinity. With the almost world-wide distribution of Hollywood films, macho figures like Clint Eastwood, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, Chuck Norris, and Steven Seagal became the male models that the next generations followed.

The role of movies in the consumption of macho hegemonic masculinity is undeniable. However, as one of the effects of a post-globalized world, the products of the motion picture industry easily cross country borders and expose audiences to unfamiliar representations of manhood, which, in turn, might reinforce social stereotypes. One can see the latter case when dealing with Japanese representations of masculinities in movies, for instance. Because theory has assumed that hegemonic masculinity remains the same in all cultures, distinct features of Japanese hegemonic manhood are usually misperceived, which renders the Asian strongest representations as “not masculine enough” in the Western eye.

Foreign movies, nevertheless, can also question stereotypical views of masculinity within a given social group. Exposure to a foreign hegemonic representation of manhood that differs from the local hegemonic masculinity might also give room to question the legitimacy of the model of manhood that one consumes within one’s culture. The Asian film *Shall We DANSU?* posits this reevaluation of the macho in the light of alternative Japanese masculinities.

## The film

*Shall We DANSU?* provides evidence on how Japanese hegemonic masculinity differs from its Western hegemonic counterpart, the macho, and, at the same time, questions the latter’s legitimacy. This award-winning Japanese movie was

produced in 1996 by Yasuyoshi Tokuma and directed by Masayuki Sou. Originally titled *Shall We ダンス?* (*DANSU* is the Japanese Anglicism of the word *odori*, to dance), the film narrates the story of Shohei Sugiyama, an apparently successful man that feels dissatisfied with his life. One night, on his way back home, he sees a melancholic young woman through the window of the train. The elegance, beauty, and glow of sadness surrounding the woman attracts Mr. Sugiyama, who cannot avoid looking for her the following night as he returns home. Once again, he spots her, as she is lost in contemplation inside a building, and Mr. Sugiyama becomes infatuated with her. The third night, when he sees the woman, the revitalized company worker impulsively gets off the train and walks to the building, which happens to be a dance school. As the plot unfolds, the audience must deal with several cultural constructs that become significant to understand the Japanese concept of hegemonic masculinity and its relationship to other subordinate types of manhood. Mr. Sugiyama exemplifies one of such Japanese representations of maleness: The company worker, or salaryman.

### The Salaryman as Achievement of Manhood

Despite this apparently romantic framework in the movie, the sentimental backdrop becomes the vehicle to introduce a more complex cultural issue: the Japanese concept of hegemonic masculinity. The current representation of Japanese hegemonic manhood is crystallized in the salaryman, or the corporate worker. However, this envisioning of male success differs from its Western representations in several points. While the latter include, to a great extent, financial independence, Sugiyama does not see himself, contrary to most representations of Western success, as an independent worker. As a salaryman, his success rests upon the corporation for which he works. In total disregard of Western Self-Made man ideology, Mr. Sugiyama states that he “has sold his life to the company” (*Shall We DANSU?*) in exchange for his current position.

What do the Japanese require of the salaryman for this figure to constitute their modern representation of the most desirable type of manhood? In general, masculinities are subjected to a complex socio-psychological framework of reference in which the first trait is notoriousness. A hegemonic man must outperform other males and his presence has to be remarkable, out of the ordinary. Therefore, to obtain this recognition, an individual has to undergo a series of social trials to prove himself as the most prominent among all competitors. In Japan, the trials to become a salaryman start with the education system and continue when a company sees a young man as a potential candidate to have a work position, as Justin Charlebois asserts:

Boys aspiring to become *salarymen* face an arduous path defined by fierce competition. Japanese society places great emphasis on academic achievement measured by standardized examinations (Allison 1991; 1994; 2000; Rohlen 1983; Sugimoto 2004; White 2002). Accordingly, a young boy must

pass a series of difficult examinations during different stages of his educational career in order to advance to the next tier of the hierarchically-organized educational system. Indeed, the accumulation of academic credentials is essential for aspiring *salarymen*.

The importance of academic credentials becomes particularly salient when university students begin job hunting. The best companies recruit from top universities and are not concerned about prospective employees' academic majors or particular skills (Sugimoto 2004). Schools are very much *disciplinary institutions* (Foucault 1977) that instill in students the values of conformity and perseverance. Those with favorable academic credentials demonstrate to prospective employers their ability to overcome adversity and cope with pressure. The ability to persevere under adverse conditions and conform to a hierarchy are necessary values in order to successfully perform the *salaryman* role (Charlebois 5).

Part of the interest of the Japanese society in persevering, hierarchy-loyal salarymen lies on the fact that Japanese key aspects for building masculine roles are different from those of the West. While the Western formulation of hegemonic masculinity stresses concepts like individualism and aggressiveness as keystones, the Japanese turn to a more collective and "softer" construct to base theirs, as Moeran argues when discussing the perception of individualism in Japan: "Ultimately, I am not convinced that *kosei* actually is equivalent to what we know as 'individualism' in the West. The Japanese are extremely suspicious of such 'individualism,' and the interesting point is that the word for 'individualism' (*kojinshugi*), is in fact viewed entirely negatively" (75). The salaryman is not a Lone Ranger, but the member of a team and this constitutes the main difference between Japanese and Western hegemonic masculinities. For the American Self-Made man and the Latin macho, individual success—monetary for the former and sexual for the latter—is precisely what makes them different from the rest. The salaryman's success, conversely, is not only his own, but also his company's. The Japanese corporate worker must be able to cope with adversity and reach his goals successfully for the sake of the company. While in the West this attitude may be considered passive and servile—the company is taking advantage of the naive individual—that is not the case in Japan. One of the keystones for understanding this cultural difference is the Japanese concept of “かっこいい” (“*kakkoi*.”)

The Japanese concept “*kakkoi*” (which means “attractive, good-looking, or stylish,”) remains a central trait of Japanese hegemonic masculinity even though the term itself is not necessarily fixed to the masculine gender. A description of a person as being *kakkoi* does not only refer to physical appearance, either. The Japanese attach the significance of “*kakkoi*” to excellence, especially at work and sports. In fact, it is common to hear Japanese people exclaim “*kakkoi!*” whenever a sports player performs exceedingly well, even at amateur levels. In this light, being *kakkoi* (i.e. excelling at one's activities,) empowers the salaryman as the Japanese representation of hegemonic masculinity. Researchers

have noticed the link between a man's ability to perform at his best, the salaryman, and sports. As they found, companies that sell energy drinks--whose target is basically salarymen--, frequently turn to the image of professional athletes in their advertisements (Roberson 365-384).

Other investigators add that "while corporate executives are not expected to attain the level of physical perfection of professional athletes or military commanders, body maintenance remains part of their daily rituals" (Charlebois). Exercise, energy, and body strength are thus values for both sports people and salarymen, and all of these values are linked to the concept "kakkoi." In addition, the Japanese salarymen also use the terms "勝ち組" (kachigumi: "winner group") and "負け犬" (makeinu: "loser dog") frequently. This recurring usage reveals the link between corporate work and the world of sports. The image of the kakkoi salaryman implies his participation with the winner group; kakkoi salarymen are never "loser dogs." Thus, salarymen engage into their corporate activities diligently, and frequently work overtime not to fall into the "makeinu" category. Failure is not "kakkoi" and implies emasculation.

A notorious cultural difference is the use of "組" (gumi: "group") for the word "kachigumi." In the West, winners are perceived as individuals, which is often over-emphasized by the media. Sports advertisings, such as Reebok's billboard "First place is the winner; second place is the first of the losers" illustrate how winning is envisioned as an individual achievement whereas losing is demonized and perceived as a group failure. In contrast, Japanese salarymen consider winning a collective experience, as the word "winner group" denotes. In Japan, the loser is perceived as an individual, for the word "loser dog" is singular. This apparently insignificant difference is actually part of the idiosyncrasy (the concept of kakkoi) that links salarymen and their success to the company. Kakkoi salarymen must be winners in the company that hires them. A kakkoi salaryman contributes to keep his company ahead of the others and derives a sense of prestige from the corporation that gives him the chance to prove his talents and nurtures him. A kakkoi salaryman will stay with the company in the good times and the stormy ones, and will never betray it or even rebel against its hierarchy. Therefore, the kakkoi factor is a key empowering trait that explains the symbiotic partnership between a salaryman and his company and the Japanese perception of success.

### Sugiyama as the hegemonic masculine figure

In *Shall We DANSU?*, the cultural aspect of "kakkoi" is evident in Sugiyama. At the beginning of the movie, he is leaving a bar with several subordinates. One of them, a woman, after listing a number of disadvantages in their company department, asks him if he indeed "likes his work so much." Without any hesitation, Sugiyama replies "it's not a matter of liking it or disliking it. It's my work." (*Shall We DANSU?*). This reveals the point to which Sugiyama values his company work over his own self. For him, working in the company means more



than his own personal priorities. Furthermore, when the female dancer Toyoko collapses later on during her dancing class and is taken to the hospital, her daughter talks to Sugiyama for a moment and tells him that Tokoyo described him as “kakkoi” (*Shall We DANSU?*).

Sugiyama enjoys the three rewards of being kakkoi, namely, work stability, increasing economic power, and the promise of a brilliant future with his company. He is a “buchou” (部長, “section chief”) and, within the Japanese corporate structure, only kakkoi workers who have invested a great deal of time and effort are promoted as section chiefs. In other words, a promotion rests both upon achievement and seniority. His position, hence, indicates that Sugiyama has the benefit of recognition among his superiors, which gives him a more solid standing in his workplace. Besides the prestige, the increasing economic compensation is also a factor that marks him as a kakkoi salaryman: now Sugiyama is able to indulge himself and pay for certain luxuries, such as his expensive top-quality dancing shoes and his lessons. Sugiyama’s salary will increase as he moves up in the corporate ladder which, in turn, adds more appeal to his kakkoi figure. In an industrialized country like Japan, where land is unthinkable expensive, certain possessions become symbolic goods, and Sugiyama has purchased one already: a house. This risky move strengthens the bond between the salaryman and his company. As he struggles to make his payments, he must invest heavily on his work, becomes more kakkoi, and continues his ascent in the company hierarchy, which completes the cycle of success for salarymen. Therefore, Sugiyama, the kakkoi salaryman, enjoys the promise of a brilliant future with the corporation for which he strives so hard.

For the Japanese, who have a strong sense of community, accomplishment must be crowned by the formation of a family of one’s own. It represents social stability, another trait associated to hegemonic masculinity in Japan. *Shall We DANSU?* highlights the value that the Japanese ascribe to a family of one’s own as a component of the idea of success of the hegemonic man. Before his identity as a seasoned dancer is revealed, Tomio Aoki, a coworker, compliments Sugiyama in the office: “You bought a house...So now you have a wife, a daughter, and a house with a garden. Great! You are successful; you are making progress.” (*Shall We DANSU?*) Thus, a hegemonic man must have a family of his own, which is perceived as a nuclear family legitimated by a patriarchal tradition. In other words, the Japanese society favors the role of the husband as the main economic support of the family and the wife as the homemaker. This conceptualization of the Japanese ideal husband implies both paternal responsibility and conjugal fidelity. Contrary to what often happens in Westerns countries, where lechers are legitimate hegemonic masculine figures, a womanizer salaryman loses his kakkoi factor. Sugiyama behaves according to the monogamous husband premise. His wife is pleased to see that he is “extremely serious” and always goes to work and then returns directly to his house, an extremely atypical behavior for a section chief in Japan. When he goes drinking with a group of colleagues and a tipsy woman who evidently feels attracted to him grabs his arm, the salaryman rejects her flirtatious advances. Although Sugiyama’s rejection can be attributed to the

embarrassment of public displays of affection, the origins of his behavior can be traced to the need to remain accountably “kakkoi.” Sugiyama started dancing due to his infatuation with Mai, the beautiful dance instructor. However, after she rejected him, he continued dancing because he wanted to remain kakkoi, as he declares to her:

I really felt like quitting. However, if I had done it, I would have been everything you accused me of. Of course, it is true that my affection for you was what brought me to the class, but it was a shock to face it. I wanted to show you that it [to continue dancing] was not because of you. I said I was here to dance. (*Shall We DANSU?*)

Toward the end of the movie, when Sugiyama’s wife realizes that her husband is completely faithful to her, she insistently tells him to go to Mai’s farewell party and dance with the attractive dancer. Sugiyama’s wife, who was formerly anxious because of her husband’s secret, allows the salaryman to go to the farewell party and dance, which proves how confident she is and how much she trusts her husband. Sugiyama initially avoids the party because he feels that he lost his kakkoi-ness, but rushes to it at last when he discovers that his true passion is ballroom dancing, not Mai, and that his wife’s trust confirms that his masculinity is untouched. Hence, Sugiyama, in the end, did not lose his kakkoi standing because he is, above all, a monogamous, responsible husband.

### **The subordinate male figures: the comic, the pathetic, and the outcast**

Tokoichi Hattori, the most friendly classmate that Sugiyama has in his dance class, and who is also married, cannot represent hegemonic masculinity, for his height and his social skills, female attributes for the Japanese, disqualify him. Hattori’s small frame, a typical biologic characteristic of Japanese men, illustrates how normative hegemonic masculinity is. Hattori is thin and his height barely reaches the average for a Japanese man. Consequently, even when he is married and presumably has a family (he has a wife and one can expect him to have children as Sugiyama does), his masculinity establishes a sharp contrast with Sugiyama’s. Furthermore, Hattori presents a major “flaw.” Although he is not loud, Hattori is extremely cheerful, which is a trait that the Japanese seem to ascribe to females (Sugihara and Katsurada).

For the Japanese, a shorter-than-average sociable man locates himself far from the hegemonic position. Consequently, Hattori falls low in the hierarchy of masculinity as a comic character. The combination of his small frame and intense personality makes him a masculine figure that can possess feminine attributes without the fear that the other masculine figures display. However, even if these traits place him far from hegemonic masculinity, they do not emasculate him. Thus, Hattori can engage in behaviors that would question the masculinity of any character in Japan and in the West and he still remains masculine.

For instance, he moves his body awkwardly to the sound of rumba when he sees Tomio Aoki dancing, who is disguised as Donnie Burns. After this public display, Hattori remains a man, a ridiculous one, but his manhood remains intact. Hattori's license to behave with a certain femininity creates a comic effect when he tries to enact more masculine patterns of behavior, as in the fight with Toyoko, the short-tempered and domineering female dancer. When both Sugiyama and Tanaka, who are far taller than Hattori, run to grab him to prevent him to reach Toyoko, and both male characters barely stop the short one, the audience can but laugh at the scene.

Although Hattori is not a representative of hegemonic Japanese masculinity, the movie does not portray him as a failed man. Indeed, his portrayal in the movie is positive because the movie highlights his honesty, enthusiasm, and leading/supporting abilities. Hattori's enthusiasm is one of the traits the movie portrays most positively. Even though he is shorter than the average and is far from the Japanese ideal of masculine attractiveness, Hattori does not think of himself as less than the other men in the movie. He is always supportive and looks satisfied as a man. After the first class, when the other characters are utterly exhausted from the hard work, he takes the time to talk to them individually to cheer them up with the Japanese expression “頑張りましょう” [gambarimashou=let's do our best] (*Shall WE DANSU?*). Apart from his enthusiasm, Hattori is also honest. After the first dance lesson, he asks the others about their reasons to take up dancing classes. While the others try to protect themselves from possible ridicule from their new classmates, Hattori is totally open with his classmates about his own motivations and his personal feelings of embarrassment when he says “Let's face it. It [taking dancing lessons] is very embarrassing. Before climbing the stairs up [to the academy], I make sure nobody's looking” (*Shall We DANSU?*). Also, he is the only one who is unafraid of Toyoko and tells her that the problem she had with Tanaka was the result of her own actions. Such a level of directness in Japanese society is indeed uncommon, especially among strangers in a culture that values silence. Finally, even though Hattori is small and certainly does not belong to the hegemonic masculinity, he becomes the leader of the group, surpassing Sugiyama, the hegemonic man. All the others, and even the instructors, accept his suggestions, as seen in the scene when Mai, the substitute teacher, asks them about any dance preferences to start the class with. He says “Since it's a rare opportunity, why not Waltz?” and even Sugiyama agrees (*Shall We DANSU?*). In this light, the movie does not portray Hattori as a failed man, but as a positive masculine model even though he is not part of the Japanese hegemonic manhood.

Masahiro Tanaka, the other classmate that Sugiyama has in the dancing school, represents the subordinate male image of the pathetic, weak, and ostracized man. The movie does not refer specifically to Tanaka's job although his dress code resembles that of the salaryman. In spite of his possible position in the corporate ladder, Tanaka does not represent a hegemonic man because he is young, physically unfit, and he is also weak, which places him in a disadvantageous social position.

Although his age is not stated in the movie, Tanaka is the youngest man in the group. When he is at a bar with Sugiyama and Hattori after the first class, the latter makes a remark about his youth (*Shall We DANSU?*) His youth works against him because the Japanese society possesses a large population of citizens aged 65 and over—which are expected to be almost 1 in every 4 people by the year 2015 according to the Japanese Statistics Bureau (Ibe 3). Japanese society is also renowned for traditionally valuing age and linking it to experience which, in turn, puts Tanaka at a disadvantage: his youth would also mean inexperience.

Along with Tanaka's age, his physical condition also excludes from hegemonic masculinity for he is obese and physically ill. When Hattori asks him for his reason to start dancing, Tanaka explains that his reason for dancing is his doctor's advice because he suffers from diabetes. He then adds that dancing is a healthy activity. Tanaka's poor physical condition is evident from the beginning of the movie. After the first class, he succumbs onto a bench panting and coughing as he tries to rest. Also, Tanaka sweats copiously when he dances, which reveals his poor physical condition.

The strongest element hindering Tanaka's inclusion into hegemonic masculinity is not his age or his health, but his weakness. Even though he is physically weak, Tanaka's weakness is mainly internal for he is extremely shy and introverted. When a woman in a dance club asks him to dance with her, she has to literally drag him to the dancing floor even though he went to that place specifically to dance. Furthermore, when Toyoko rejects him as her dancing partner, he says "Am I really that disgusting? The first girl I liked said I was disgusting, too...and I wasn't even dancing" (*Shall We DANSU?*) He also, among tears and sobs, confesses the other students that he has many troubles which dancing lets him forget. Tanaka's crying is the most evident manifestation of his vulnerability: a behavior that excludes him from hegemonic masculinity.

Tanaka's non-hegemonic masculinity—manifested through his weakness, lack of success, and "feminine" behavior—is easily labeled as the anti-masculine image of *the wimp* by Western standards:

Traditional masculinity models, opposed to the wimp image have been summarized as follows, "A man looks at the world, sees what he wants and takes it. Men who don't measure up are wimps, sissies, girls. The worst insult one man can hurl at another -- whether it's boys on the playground or CEOs in the boardroom [...]" (Jensen F-3).

The anti-masculine representation of the wimp, however, opposes diametrically the Japanese subordinate manhood model that Tanaka embodies. While Tanaka's masculinity is seriously shaken by Western standards, his masculinity—even though it is not hegemonic—remains unquestioned in the movie. In fact, when the woman at the dance club faces his shy refusal, she replies "you are a man, aren't you?" and insists on dancing with him, revealing that she does not see him as a wimp. The same happens when the group is taking their dance

classes. While Sugiyama, the hegemonic man, has serious troubles performing the dancing steps, Tanaka has mastered them to a point that causes Hattori to scold Sugiyama and use Tanaka as an example by saying “Look! The fat gentleman can do it!” (*Shall We DANSU?*) In this light, neither the hegemonic masculinity nor the other subordinate male or female figures ever question Tanaka’s masculinity or treat him as a wimp.

Hattori and Tanaka embody two different kinds of subordinate masculinities in Japan. Hierarchically speaking, they are below Sugiyama, but the movie also discloses another subordinate masculinity which is below both Tanaka and Hattori’s: that of Tomio Aoki. Despite the fact that he is the most experienced male dancer in the academy, he embodies the marginal masculinity in the movie. In terms of the hierarchy of masculinity, Aoki represents the lowest masculine figure in the movie. Although he works in the same company that Sugiyama does, Aoki certainly fails to become a hegemonic salaryman:

Tomio’s failure to embody *hegemonic salaryman masculinity* is the root of his marginalization. His *body-reflexive practices* are not in line with those of a typical salaryman. Tomio’s attire, peculiar manner of walking, and frequent mistakes at work make him diverge from typical *hegemonic salaryman* behavior (Charlebois 15).

In the company, Aoki tries his best, but he is always looked down upon by his coworkers, who are not willing to acknowledge him as a competent worker in spite of his efforts. This is revealed when a female worker criticizes him, “What a computer analyst! He doesn’t even know how to use *Windows*” (*Shall We DANSU?*). Consequently, he always ends up alone while in the office, which renders him incapable to achieve the “*kakkoi*” factor that he needs at work to become a hegemonic salaryman.

Aoki not only fails as a *kakkoi* salaryman, but also as a *kakkoi* dancer. Even when Aoki is indeed a skillful Latin rhythms dancer, no woman wants to become his partner. In spite of all his efforts to find a female partner to enter the dancing competitions, all the young women he chooses end up splitting up with him on account of diverse reasons. One of these young women tells Aoki that she cannot keep dancing with him because his dancing style is “disgusting,” which directly places Aoki as a failure to become *kakkoi* at the activity in which he excels and is rivaled by no one in the movie.

Along with his failure as a salaryman and as a *kakkoi* dancer, Aoki also fails to embody the Latin macho. When another male dancer takes his partner from him, he is unable to face him and cringes away even though he is unsatisfied with the other man’s behavior. Also, when Aoki and Toyoko are at the dancing competition, his former partner ridicules him by touching Aoki’s wig and turning it around on his scalp. This makes him lose his concentration and, as a result, his female partner starts arguing with him. When Aoki tries to defend himself saying that Toyoko is unable to understand him, she replies “How could I understand the feelings of bald old men?” (*Shall We DANSU?*). Toyoko’s

utterance reveals a total lack of respect and admiration, which are vital for a macho to build his masculinity.

Even though Aoki is marginalized because he does not represent a hegemonic salaryman or a Latin macho, he is never placed within the *wimp*, the *sissy* or *fag* discourses, which would question his masculinity by traditional Western standards. His heterosexual masculinity remains intact when Aoki's coworkers discover his participation in ballroom dancing thanks to a magazine article:

Up until this point, their colleagues were unaware of their [Sugiyama and Aoki's] involvement in dancing. A group of Tomio's colleagues gather around the article and make fun of his costume and facial expression. His [Aoki's] interest in dancing becomes a further example of his nonconformity to the *salaryman* role and subjects him to the unforgiving gaze and further ostracism from his *seken*. However, Tomio's sexuality is never called into question. (Charlebois 16)

Instead of placing Aoki in the fag category because of his involvement with dancing, his female colleagues actually call him "hentai," a word that the Japanese use to label a man who draws on male sexual drive discourse. Therefore, Aoki's heterosexuality is never challenged in the movie. Not even when Aoki coaches Sugiyama and they practice dancing together in the company's bathroom, the sexual identity (and, therefore, the masculinity) of the eccentric computer analyst is questioned.

### Compulsive masculinity discourse as a cultural turning point

What is essentially different between Japanese and Western hegemonic masculinities? Western representations of manhood include a component that the Japanese culture regards as negative: compulsive masculinity overcharged with sexual drive discourse, the constant affirmation of one's maleness by exhibiting a highly sexualized behavior that objectifies women.

Charlebois borrows his definition of compulsive masculinity discourse from Kimmel:

What I am labeling *a compulsive masculinity discourse* borrows from Kimmel (1987). Kimmel insightfully points out that masculinity must be continually expressed and proven. This insight illustrates the inherent tension between masculinity and femininity within American society. Therefore, masculinity is expressed by distancing oneself from femininity (Connell 1995; Kimmel 2006; Whitehead 2002). Put another way, one must engage in embodied masculine actions in order to remain accountably masculine. (12)

Hegemonic masculinity is compulsive because men have to reaffirm it constantly, especially in front of other men. To do so, men first need to remain within the bounds of the traditionally-accepted masculine roles, for distancing

oneself from the hegemonic masculinity mainstream would imply social embarrassment. In this sense, the idea of “normalcy” is vital for hegemonic masculinity. Kimmel states that “while men sought to define a normal masculinity, they situated themselves in a vast sprawl of ‘normalcy.’” (236). This fear of embarrassment, in turn, will cause men to reject any behavioral patterns considered “abnormal.” To illustrate, since the traditional Japanese cultural mainstream considers ballroom dancing as an “abnormal” masculine behavior, Sugiyama, Tanaka, Aoki, and Hattori, who are taking up dancing lessons, must hide their new activity from their families and workmates. Appearing “normal” is also perceived when Hattori, after the first lesson, asks Sugiyama and Tanaka about their reasons for enrolling in the dancing class. Hattori’s question transcends the mere surface level of curiosity and strikes the fibers of both men’s masculinity. If they had acknowledged the fact that they liked dancing, their masculinity could have been brought into question, which implies embarrassment as men. Thus, they provide “normal” and “acceptable” answers to protect themselves from peer ridicule. Tanaka replies that he chose dancing lessons as exercise (by medical advice) and Sugiyama, who lacks an excuse, agrees with Tanaka and ratifies that he also “heard dancing is a good exercise.” (*Shall We DANSU?*). Their answers, apart from protecting the two men from the embarrassment of revealing their true motivations, become reasons that maintain their masculinity untouched by Hattori’s questioning.

However, current Japanese and Western compulsive masculinity discourses differ in the expression of sexual drive masculine discourse. While the sexual macho remains an affirmation of masculinity in the West, the depiction of this type of manhood is explicitly questioned and criticized in *Shall We DANSU?*. To begin, none of the main male characters shows a distinct macho personality. Because of his below-average height, Hattori is socially treated as a cute child or a pet. Tanaka, who is single, does not behave as a macho, either. In fact, his thick glasses, overweight, overtly shy personality, and lack of success with women bar him from displaying a “macho” image. The scene in which he dances with Toyoko becomes the most evident example of this. Once he starts enjoying the dance with her, Tanaka’s dancing steps turn more aggressive, which represents his attempt to appear within hegemonic masculinity. In addition, Tanaka accompanies his new aggressive dancing with loud exclamations, probably more appropriate for martial arts than for ballroom dancing. Again, this reveals his “initiation” into hegemonic masculinity discourse. However, the woman stops him in disgust and judges his attitude as “気持ち悪い” [kimochi warui, i.e. “very disgusting”], which depresses him to the point of tears (*Shall We DANSU?*). Even Sugiyama, the epitome of modern Japanese hegemonic masculinity in the movie, did not resort to compulsive masculinity discourse after Mai rejected his advance. Instead of trying to reply to defend his masculinity against Mai’s painfully direct and possibly rude rejection, all he says is “あ. . . そうですか” [A...sou desuka, i.e. “Oh...I see”] (*Shall We DANSU?*) and quickly apologizes.

A macho man is actually present in the movie, but the behavior of this character, a nameless seasoned dancer whose dancing skills rival Aoki’s, is explicitly

criticized. This macho dancer is tall, handsome, muscular, and tanned. As Aoki, he is an expert in Latin rhythms but, in sharp contrast with the former, this character behaves according to compulsive masculinity discourse: he used his appearance to “steal” Aoki’s dance partner and thus be able to enter the competition. When the young woman was dancing with Aoki, each one adjusting to the other person’s dancing style, the macho rudely took her from Aoki and asked her to dance with him. This request is obviously a false display of gallantry because he was not asking for permission since he already had her in his arms. When Aoki reacts, the macho turns to him and, in a blunt and defying way, adds “If you agree”, more to challenge him than to show courtesy. Thus, the handsome rival resorts to two basic affirmations of manhood within compulsive masculinity discourse, a display of violence toward weaker men and further ridiculing inferior masculine figures. The macho dancer clearly attempts the latter during the dance competition by obstructing Aoki’s way while the couples dance and by moving his rival’s well-known wig out of place. This attempt to remove Aoki’s wig constitutes more than a practical joke; it stands as a clear act of emasculation: Aoki is thin-haired, and the public exposure of his balding head turns into a defying and humiliating action because baldness is commonly associated to loss of youth and, hence, lack of vitality. The macho dancer knows that Aoki, the older, weaker man, is outperforming him despite his age and, since dancing skills equal manly vigor on the floor, he resorts to embarrassment of the rival to assert his masculinity, which is consistent with compulsive masculine discourse of the West.

## Conclusion

The Japanese do not look at Western compulsive masculinity or Western masculine sexual drive discourses favorably, as *Shall We DANSU?* manifests. In the Japanese manhood hierarchy, the macho is not the hegemonic figure, but is cast into a peripheral, unsuccessful expression of masculinity. In the movie, the macho is a totally failed man. The dance competition provided the most conclusive evidence of this fact. The macho’s rival was Aoki, the Japanese most marginal masculine figure, not Sugiyama. In other words, the macho did not represent a worth challenge for the Japanese hegemonic masculine model. Sugiyama’s problem throughout the movie was to guard his position in the eyes of the community. To do so, he engaged into actions that affirmed his *kakkoi* factor. Male sexual drive discourse was certainly not one of those legitimating behaviors.

Aoki, on the other hand, who was not a Japanese hegemonic male figure, became the rival of the macho on the dance floor. This encounter between two lesser masculine figures, the outcast and the macho, ends with a celebrated victory for the former and a gruesome public embarrassment for the latter. Even the macho’s female partner, who verbally offended Aoki’s dance style, turns against the embarrassed macho dancer and slaps his face in front of everyone, which further emasculates him. He is, hence, the “loser dog” in the competition:



not only did he lose to Aoki on the floor, but also, under male sexual drive discourse, the macho was incapable of keeping the woman he stole from the rival that he despises so much.

*Shall We DANSU?*, therefore, posits insightful evidence on how hegemonic masculinities should be analyzed in several interactional and situational contexts, from which culture is paramount. Failure to consider cultural factors will blind one's eyes toward key interpretive resources. For today's critics, it is a must to remember that, in a post-globalized world, where cross-cultural products become readily available every day, audiences become increasingly exposed to multiple readings and interpretations of gender. Scholars must be aware of the emerging formulations or reformulations of masculinities as part of this exposure and must never overlook cultural input.

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