



# GOODBYE MADAME BUTTERFLY

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Sex, Marriage and the Modern Japanese Woman

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This book is dedicated to all the women who  
shared their stories of life, sex and love with me.

**PREFACE:**

The women portrayed in *Goodbye Madame Butterfly* are real. I interviewed all of them between 2005 and 2007. I didn't put out any ads to find them; instead I tracked them down via word of mouth, one person leading me to another and then another until I found the stories contained in this book.

Many of the women I interviewed asked me variations of this question: "My life isn't all that interesting or exciting. My life is so ordinary. Are you sure you want to hear my story?" I told them that the fact that they volunteered to talk about love and their sex lives (or lack thereof) was a good indicator that they had something they wanted to express. And I was right. Everyone had an interesting story to share. We couldn't include all of them in this book due to space and time constraints, but I felt that each woman I talked to had something important to say. But before going into the book in detail, allow me to offer some pertinent background information.

Japan is known as a place where sexual fantasies come true. At least, that's the reputation. The sex industry is so prevalent in Japanese culture that it can influence even the most personal and intimate matters. Prostitution is illegal in Japan, but "entertainment and amusement" services, as they are called, continue unabated all over the country. A man can go to an establishment called *soapland*<sup>[1]</sup>, for example, and pay a "bath service fee" to have a woman wash him with soap. So-called *fashion health*<sup>[2]</sup> clubs offer genital massages, blow-jobs, hand-jobs and other sexual services. *Delivery health*<sup>[3]</sup> businesses deliver a woman — or women, if you so desire — straight to your door. And *image*

1 ソープランド (*soopurando*). Terms for most sex establishments in Japan are based on English words and rendered in the katakana syllabary used for borrowed words.

2 ファッションヘルス (*fasshyonherusu*). Sometimes referred to as just ヘルス (*herusu*).

3 デリバリーヘルス (*deribari-herusu*). Also known by the short version, デリヘル (*deri-heru*).

*clubs*<sup>[1]</sup> allow people to dabble in costume play. Men can choose women dressed as nurses, teachers, playboy bunnies or characters from popular anime films. Strip clubs often encourage audience members to participate in the shows. And at *happening bars*,<sup>[2]</sup> as the name implies, sex has a way of just happening, whether it be with an acquaintance or a slew of strangers.

You don't have to travel deep into the inner sanctum of Japan's red light districts to find these places. The sex shops are often integral parts of their communities. Schoolchildren in Japan's urban centers commute through narrow streets lined with these clubs. There is no attempt to hide these establishments from view.

Japanese men generally are not shy about using these services, either. Middle-class men in business suits openly read pornographic stories in the sports newspapers while commuting from work in the evening. Japanese women, too, seem more lenient than North American women when it comes to men using these services. While I was researching this book, I often heard wives say they would forgive their husbands for cheating on them with a "professional" because that would be just about having sex, not becoming emotionally attached.

However, a striking paradox emerged in my research of this book: while the sex industry maintains a high profile in Japan, the nation doesn't seem to be having much actual sex. A case in point is the results of the Global Sex Survey by Durex,<sup>[3]</sup> the world's largest condom maker. In its 2005 survey, the company interviewed 317,000 people from forty-one countries and found that Japan ranked forty-first in terms of sexual activity. The survey found that people had sex an average of 103 times a year, with men (104) having more sex than women (101). The

1 イメージクラブ (imeejikurabu)

2 ハプニングバー (hapuningubaa)

3 [http://www.durex.com/uk/files/2005\\_GGS%20Report\\_final.pdf](http://www.durex.com/uk/files/2005_GGS%20Report_final.pdf)

Japanese, at the very bottom, reported having sex an average of forty-five times a year.

Japan also ranked second to last, just ahead of China, in terms of sexual contentment. Globally, forty-four percent of all adults claimed to be happy with their sex lives, but only twenty-four percent of the Japanese and twenty-two percent of the Chinese said they were.

A survey conducted jointly by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare and the Japan Family Planning Association also found that the number of “sexless couples” has increased over the years, with more than one-third of all married people in Japan classed as being “sexless.” The survey, conducted in November 2006, was distributed to three thousand men and women between the ages of sixteen and forty-nine. It had a 51.9 percent response rate.

The survey uses the definition of “sexless couples” by the Japan Society of Sexual Sciences as couples who go without sexual contact for a month or longer for no specific reason. The survey found that 39.7 percent of respondents had not had sex for a month or longer. It also found that 34.6 percent of married Japanese people are sexless, about three percentage points higher than the previous survey conducted in 2004.

When asked why they are not having sex, nineteen percent said it was “tiresome.” Another fourteen percent said sex had become one-sided after they had children. Thirteen percent said they had other things to do that were more fun than sex.

I knew about the trend toward sexless marriages before I started this book. Many of my female friends are in sexless relationships. When I asked them why they stopped having sex, they would tell me it was just a bother to do so — they then have to take a shower, wash the sheets, et cetera, and it is so much easier to just pretend to be asleep when their husband comes into the room. It reminds me a bit of people who don't like to cook because they

hate cleaning up afterwards. Other women say they don't have time for sex because their husbands work late and often don't return until after midnight. Some of my friends even share rooms with their daughters and leave the main bedroom for the husband. The women say they sleep better this way.

So here is this country with a huge, thriving sex industry and an inordinate amount of sexless marriages. It would be easy to conclude that the men are leaving all their sexual energy behind in the soaplands and fashion health establishments. But that is just part of the story. What are the Japanese women doing in the meantime? Are they just waiting at home for their husbands? Are they secretly planning divorces?

It's clear that modern Japanese women are not just sitting around moping. In fact, *furin*,<sup>(1)</sup> or adultery, has been a buzzword of sorts since the late 1980s, after a popular TV drama focused on the healthier aspects of women having affairs. Adultery still is considered immoral in Japan. The very construction of the word — *fu* is a negative prefix, and *rin* means moral — makes that clear. But a double standard is at work. A common saying, said to have originated in the Edo Period, is that “affairs show a man's ability to generate money.” Even in postwar Japan, adultery between married men and single women has always been part of the picture. On the other hand, it was illegal until 1947 for a married woman to have an affair. Violators — both the women and their lovers — could face up to two years in prison if the betrayed husband requested it.

When it emerged that more married women were having affairs, Japan's sex industry, including the enormous pornography sector, got to work. It created the myth of the horny housewife. Countless Internet sites feature lists of supposed housewives

1 不倫

waiting for sex. While many of these sites are doubtless scams, is there some truth to the stereotype of married women looking for sex? Do they enjoy cheating on their husbands? Does it give them a sexual thrill?

These are the questions I originally wanted to find answers to when I began interviewing women in 2003 for another book, in Japanese, that I co-authored with Taro Ohata. The theme of the book, entitled *Tsumanokoi: Tatoe Furin To Yobaretemo* (Wives in Love: Even If It's Called Adultery),<sup>1)</sup> was to reveal the sexuality of married women who had cheated or were cheating on their husbands.

When I started out, I was worried that finding such women would be difficult. But through word of mouth, I was able to meet a sufficient number of married women who claimed that they had cheated on their husbands at least once. Most of them were in unhappy, sexless marriages, but they were unwilling to separate from their husbands out of concerns over their ability to support themselves financially and for the sake of their children. To my surprise, these women were extremely open about their experiences during the interviews. They almost seemed happy to tell their stories, despite the seemingly unhappy situations they were in. Here is how one of the women put it:

*“I can only talk to one friend about my experience because I know that she is doing the same thing. We both feel safe talking about it. I could never discuss this with my other friends. It is not only because I am afraid of my husband finding out. I’m equally afraid that I would be severely criticized by my female friends, my sister, or especially my mother. No one would tolerate me if they found out I’m committing adultery.”*

1 妻の恋—たとえ不倫と呼ばれても, published by Astra Inc.

Like this woman, many of the women I interviewed were tired of hiding in the closet: they needed to be listened to and they wanted their stories told. Yet they lacked the will to fix their broken relationships. In many cases, both parties agreed from the beginning that they would not intervene in each other's lives. But a relationship of convenience is doomed to be short-lived. Many women found themselves in a vicious cycle of finding a lover, breaking up with him and searching for a new lover to replace him.

This went on for a while, and I was getting sick of meeting all these "cheaters," when suddenly something clicked. I was talking on the phone to a married woman who kept bragging that she had a series of lovers. To be honest, I was getting a bit annoyed by her. I asked, absent-mindedly, what she was trying to achieve by continuing to do this. She suddenly burst out at me: "You sound just like my husband. Who do you think you are, asking me what I want to achieve? If I knew I wanted to achieve anything at all, I wouldn't have been so miserable to begin with!"

Startled, I asked her what I did wrong to hurt her feelings. She said she hated me for being overbearing and that I basically knew nothing about her suffering.

"But you can leave your husband if you want to. He is not keeping you chained, is he?" I protested.

"How can a divorced woman like you have a say about marriage and family? I do all I can to keep my family together," was her answer. She refused to cooperate with me any longer, requested that her story be deleted from my draft of the book and hung up on me. I tried to contact her again, but she never took my call or replied to my email messages.

I was left clueless. She was right about my not knowing anything about her suffering. There was little I could do except move on.

On another occasion, a woman shouted at me through tears in a coffee shop where I was interviewing her: “How can you tell me that I can just get out of my marriage? You may have worked all these years, but I haven’t worked since my first child was born. How am I supposed to make a living?”

My first book came out in 2004. In it, I concluded that the image of horny wives desperate for juicy sexual encounters is a myth created by the media. The wives we interviewed had needs far beyond the physical. They wanted their lovers to fill their loneliness, emptiness and lack of self-worth. While some of these women said that through their adultery, they realized how deeply they loved their husbands, or how much their husbands loved them, most of them admitted that these affairs didn’t make them happier. Worse, many said they found themselves even unhappier once the affair ended, due to their guilt and lack of self-worth. They want their husbands to love them and show them warmth. In many cases, having affairs may put their marital problems on hold temporarily, but it did not bring them solutions.

Although the book was generally well received, deep inside I knew something had gone wrong. I felt guilty for not being honest. During the interviews, some of these women were openly jealous of my role as a seemingly independent single mother without knowing the difficulties I faced. It hurt me when I heard them say, “What do you know about my unhappiness? You are one of the lucky ones who are blessed with professional skills, while most of us don’t have that luxury.”

This may have been a legitimate claim, given Japan’s struggling economy back then. The employment situation for women is better nowadays, but women often lose a lot financially after a divorce, especially if they are not working. In 2003, single-mother households in Japan earned a little over two million yen (less

than twenty thousand dollars) annually, much less than half the average income of a typical white-collar worker.<sup>1</sup> The average income of salaried workers in Japan with more than one year of working experience in 2003 was 5.44 million yen, according to the National Tax Agency. I realized that a woman's sexual and emotional life cannot be fully explained unless we analyze her social and economic environment.

Another issue I faced was my own prejudice. My professional pride prevented me from reacting aggressively toward comments about how I had it "easy." I wanted to yell at them that being financially independent is not as easy as they think, that I give it all I've got to work and raise my daughter, while they are sitting on their asses, moping.

Often these women wanted me to give them recognition, approval or sympathy. But I wasn't ready to offer any of these things, not so much because I was trying to stay objective as a journalist, but perhaps because of my personal/emotional issues: I was secretly jealous of their status as wives, their ability to maintain that position without financial worries, their ability to go out and satisfy their sexual desires. After all, I was coming out of a nasty divorce and was struggling to re-establish myself as a single mother back then. Having been cheated on many times by my ex, I wasn't in the mood to be sympathetic to these wives who enjoyed the luxury of not having to work, spending their time in nail salons, fancy shopping centers or luxurious cafés, and then going off and having sex while their husbands were at the office working hard to maintain the lifestyle they had grown accustomed to.

I covered all this up by trying to appear "objective." But I

1 Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, the national single mother household survey conducted in 2003, published in 2005: <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/houdou/2005/01/ho119-1.html>

knew that my anger revealed itself here and there. The harshest criticism came from a woman I admired. “What are you trying to achieve by writing this?” she asked. “Obviously, you are not supporting these women, yet you come short of criticizing them. Where do you stand? It looks to me that you are just making fun of them, like other male writers.”

It was painful for me to admit my own shortcomings. This was around the time when my publisher, editor and long-time friend, Bruce Rutledge, asked me to expand on my interviews to write a book about the sexuality of Japanese women in general. That conversation took place three years ago. He and his wife, business partner and translator of this book, Yuko Enomoto, convinced me that such a book would be an eye-opener to Western readers. Although I was moved by their enthusiasm, I wasn't exactly sure how I could overcome the obstacles I faced in my previous project. While Bruce and Yuko said they enjoyed my interviews in my first book, our biggest challenge in *Goodbye Madame Butterfly* was providing some social, economic and historical background to these stories without interfering too much with my rather subjective writing style. Through trial and error, we gradually moved away from the idea of including statistics and lengthy explanations of Japanese society and the economy, and focusing more on the stories of these women. We believe that they speak for themselves. The more academic analysis must be tackled in another book.

Secondly, we agreed that rather than focusing on married women, the book would pull back and take in the lives of single and divorced women as well.

Thirdly, I decided that I would only write stories about women I like, respect and admire. I know this doesn't sound scientific at all, but through my bitter experience with my first book, I knew that I wasn't going to do a good job if I could not relate

to my subjects. Surprisingly, by admitting my shortcomings, I also began to listen more carefully to the women I interviewed. I started to understand their stories in a deeper way. I won't pretend that I know how they feel, but I do believe that this collection shows both the weaknesses and strengths of modern Japanese women.

Fourthly, I decided not to try to wrap up each story and make conclusions about the lives of these women. Instead of looking for generalizations, I worked to get the details right. I tried to reconstruct their stories as faithfully as I could. Readers will find the women's version of the truth in these pages and can draw their own conclusions. In order to facilitate that process, we have created a companion website<sup>(1)</sup> with a forum for people who would like to discuss the issues raised in this book.

I fictionalized some parts of these stories to protect the identities of these women as well as their family members, friends and lovers. Some women told me that fictionalization was not necessary, but I still insisted that I make some alterations just to protect others who may be involved, since I had not spoken to any of those people and therefore had no permission to write about them.

Some of these women shared email messages or letters from their husbands or lovers without permission. Other than that, these stories are solely based on the women's versions of events. They are not substantiated. This was partly because interviewing their partners, lovers and others who may be involved in their stories was difficult. It was also because I felt that this wasn't my purpose in this book, which is supposed to be a collection of stories told by women. What do the men have to say? You will hear from a sex volunteer and the owner of a sex clinic,

1 <http://goodbyemadamebutterfly.com>

both interviewed for this book, but that is it. The men will have to wait for another book.

In order to make these stories ring true to the women I interviewed, I shared draft manuscripts with some of them when they requested it. Some of them tried to rewrite my scripts completely. In these cases, I had to negotiate with them word by word, until we came up with the words we both agreed on.

These stories were born out of collaboration between me and the women interviewed. The interviews were conducted over coffee and cake in the afternoon or over wine in the evening after work. Some of the women broke down and cried as they dug up difficult memories. Some became angry when I peppered them with questions, even to the extent of walking out on me. Still others kept sending email messages to my cell-phone, giving me updates as if I were attached to these developments for life.

I questioned them, listened to their stories, nodded in approval, consoled them, cried over their tragedies, even scolded them when I felt it was necessary. I often shared my stories of love with them. Some became my friends, others walked out of my life after just one interview. I know that I broke a lot of rules taught in journalism school, and these stories may not be purely journalistic, but I still consider them to be true. After all, every story has multiple truths — it all depends on who is telling the story and who is listening.

S. K.

*Tokyo, July 2007*



*Once upon a time, I dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering  
hither and thither, to all intents and purposes a butterfly.*

*I was conscious only of following my fancies as a butterfly,  
and was unconscious of my individuality as a man.*

*Suddenly I awoke, and there I lay, myself again.*

*Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I  
was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming  
that I am a man.*

CHUANG-TZU  
3rd century BC

