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Dancing Through Constraints: Japanese Culture in *Shall We Dance?*

From a Western point of view, ballroom dancing embodies elegance, grace, and status. However, when viewing the same practice through the lens of Japanese culture, ballroom dancing navigates a cultural landscape in which even an innocent touch between dance partners risks societal judgment. Masayuki Suo's *Shall We Dance?* captures the journey of a salaryman as he embarks on a secret pursuit of ballroom dancing despite the rigid structure of corporate hierarchies, overtime work culture, and strict expectations of Japanese society. In her film, Masayuki Suo shows how Japanese society and the strict hierarchy influence not just the workplace, but also personal relationships. *Shall We Dance?* exemplifies Japanese perceptions of power and authority, interpersonal dynamics within Japanese communities, and cultural constraints.

To fulfill his role as the provider of the family, protagonist Shohei Sugiyama wakes up early in the morning, commutes to his company and works until evening, occasionally participating in dinner and drinks with his fellow coworkers after the shift before returning home late. While in the workplace, Sugiyama is always shown conducting himself professionally, quietly completing his work at his desk. When interacting with his superiors, he adheres to the formalities of Japanese culture in the workplace by using honorific language, known as Keigo. The stoic Sugiyama portrays the typical Japanese salaryman— a white-collar, overworked employee with unwavering loyalty to his company. In his book titled *Contemporary Japan*,

Duncan McCargo describes modern Japanese work cultures: ". . . many executives put in very long hours, and there have been some well-publicized cases of karoshi, death from overwork. . . . Male executives often spend many of their evenings in work-related drinking and social activities." Though originating in China, Confucianism has played a significant role in shaping the collectivist culture of Japan. Confucian thought particularly emphasizes that individual desires should be put second to the group's overall success. Xuedong Xu describes the impact of Confucianism on Japanese work culture in his study: "'Loyalty,' in Japan was a concept which, . . . formed a trinity of value which regulated within society the hierarchic relationships based on authority, blood ties and age respectively." In simple terms, these Confucian values explain why Japanese employees are expected to demonstrate unwavering loyalty to their superiors. These values are the epitome of Sugiyama's life before his interest in ballroom dancing; he had no interests or personal life and spent the entirety of his days serving the needs of his company.

Sugiyama's journey into ballroom dancing is shown as a form of personal escape from the pressures of work and societal expectations. In the film, each of the male beginner-level students at the dance school has their own reasons for joining the class, but they all aim to hide it from the people closest to them. It is clear that the men have feelings of shame and guilt surrounding their hobby, which reflects the broader cultural norms that characterize Japanese society. These emotions of shame and guilt shown in the film are in line with the cultural emphasis on maintaining social harmony. This can also be traced back to Confucian values; in order to maintain social harmony, disruptive or inappropriate public displays of affection are avoided. While not explicitly romantic, ballroom dancing requires a certain level of physicality with one's dance partner. In a journal on social dance in Japan, Kristina Veemees writes, "In adult life, body contact is very restricted, and this cultural pattern leads to a feeling of shame when

performing social dances that are judged indecent and to shyness, . . ." This cultural background makes Sugiyama's participation in ballroom dancing incredibly transgressive and shows how this is a source of personal conflict for him. In one scene, Sugiyama is seen practicing dance moves alone in his office, often checking to ensure no one can see him. This moment shows his inner conflict and desire to express himself, which he is unable to do due to societal expectations. His desire to hide his dancing from his family and coworkers highlights his fear of being ostracized and his willingness to conform to social norms in Japanese culture.

The cultural norms have significant constraints on members of Japanese society. The constant pressure to conform or avoid shame leads to higher levels of stress and anxiety, negatively impacting the mental health of many people. Moreover, the cultural expectation to maintain social harmony makes it difficult for people to share their struggles with one another. This suppression of negative emotions further fosters stress, anxiety, and depression. We can see this, particularly in the suicide rates of East Asian countries compared to Western countries. Historically, Japan has had a higher suicide rate compared to many Western countries, and it has been a significant social issue in Japan for decades. Beyond mental health issues, the emphasis on conformity can stifle individual expression, and people may feel the need to stick to their predetermined roles. Especially in the case of a salaryman, these office workers often work long, arduous hours to avoid the shame of being unable to provide for their families. As for Sugiyama, his story shows how the demands of his office job and the culture's expectations leave him feeling lonely and powerless within society. After much indecisiveness, he ultimately decides to pursue ballroom dancing and is able to rediscover himself and his purpose in life through ballroom dance. However, this is not the case for many people in Japan who struggle to live a fulfilling life under these cultural constraints.

By the end of the movie, Sugiyama stands his ground for his coworker and fellow dancer, Aoki, and physically connects with his wife for the first time throughout the entire film. *Shall We Dance?* provides a nuanced portrayal of Japanese cultural norms and work culture, and how they shape individual lives like those of Aoki and Sugiyama. Masayuki Suo's film captures the compelling journey of a salaryman navigating the rigid structure of Japanese corporate hierarchies and societal expectations, illustrating Japanese perceptions of power and authority, interpersonal dynamics within communities, and cultural constraints.

Sources:

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