

# The Accidental Office Lady

By Laura Kriska

RUTLAND, VERMONT AND TOKYO, JAPAN  
CHARLES E. TUTTLE COMPANY, 1997

303 PAGES

Much recent scholarship about the lives of Japanese women has focused on their working conditions, with particular concern paid to their rights in the corporate world. As almost one-third of young Japanese women take clerical positions of some sort, much of this attention has concentrated upon the “Office Lady” or OL. *The Accidental Office Lady* provides yet another view of a working woman’s life inside the Japanese corporation, this time in the form of a first-person account written by a young American. Although this book offers no new information about either OLs or Japanese corporations, it does dramatize thorny questions in contemporary feminism and in U.S.-Japan relations. How should women, who are differently privileged by race, nationality, and education, work together for women’s rights in international corporations? How can corporations themselves foster diversity without resorting to tokenism or essentializing cultural differences?

No doubt author and former office lady Laura Kriska means well in tackling these issues. Her book details her struggles for success and respect in a Japanese company, and is not without criticism of her own naiveté, occasional pettiness, and lack of knowledge of Japanese customs, language, and corporate ways. All in all, the book tells the triumphant story of the hometown girl who makes good in a foreign country despite the hurdles before her, and the doubts within. What Kriska does not realize, however, is that her being hired for this position and accorded certain privileges at Honda is no accident at all. Rather, her position speaks to an international dynamic that is deeply gendered and racialized, and has a long history of which she is not aware. Unfortunately, Kriska’s book bolsters some of the worst aspects of this dynamic, relying heavily on the familiar stereotypes of oppressive Japanese men, subservient Japanese women, and progressive American youth.

Kriska’s adventure of self-discovery goes like this. An exceptionally determined person, Kriska was an exchange student for a year at Waseda University, where she met the challenge of participating in the Judo Club. Though the experience often bruised her ego as well as her body, Kriska writes about the character and confidence she developed through sticking with the Judo Club. After graduating from Denison University, Kriska returned to Tokyo to become the first American woman to work in Japan for Honda Motor Company. Since she had been touring and working in Honda subsidiaries in the U.S. as prelude to her Japan experience and had enjoyed



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the support of Mr. Yoshida, the vice president of Honda in Ohio who served as her mentor, Kriska had nurtured starry-eyed dreams of executive success in Japan.

Kriska’s first day on the job brought these dreams crashing to earth when she realized her duties would be largely secretarial. Wearing the OL’s polyester blue uniform became the symbol of her frustration with Honda, and the gender discrimination that she found rife throughout the organization. As her two years at Honda progressed, however, Kriska found herself transferred to various departments as part of her training, met the celebrated founder, Mr. Honda, and finally felt most satisfied working in the company’s Sayama factory where she helped Americans from the Ohio plant adjust to life in Japan. The crowning glory of Kriska’s tale comes when her efforts on behalf of Honda women bear fruit: the company announces that the woman’s uniform is optional, and that all women, like the men in the corporation, may elect to wear their own clothes.

In this tale of self and other, Kriska paints Japanese society in broad strokes, damning the educational system, the conformity of the group and so on. All her information seems to stem from her own observations rather than to any perusing of Japanese history, literature or sociology texts. None of the research about OLs, the merits and demerits of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law of 1986, or the history of feminist resistance in Japan earns even honorable mention here, though such references would have given even this autobiographical work much-needed scope. Although Kriska peppers her narrative with quick sketches of individuals—the mean-spirited Ms. Mori, the welcoming Ms. Ogi, the energetic Mr. Honda—no one emerges as a fully developed character with a story of her or his own to tell. This is Kriska’s story and hers alone.

As a result, the Japan that recedes into the background takes on an ominous cast, relieved by the occasional gesture of good will or flash of communication, while the implied America embodies gender equality, honesty, and freedom. Almost all the Japanese men who meet with Kriska’s approval—her boss Mr. Chino, her mentor Yoshida, and the affable Tak—have lived in

## BOOK REVIEWS

the U.S., and have, she implies, been humanized by the experience. In contrast, the other men and the OLs who have lived only in Japan are stuck in the prison of their native, feudalistic ways. The OLs suffer the worst for this. Despite dedicating this book “To Office Ladies,” Kriska most often describes them in demeaning, one-size-fits-all ways. At one point, she faults them for acting like “high-strung nervous nellies” and “yippy Chihauhaus” in their eagerness to please senior men. She approves of them, however, at the end of her stay when she can survey so many women wearing their own clothes, the unwitting recipients of her liberating efforts: “As I rode the elevator floor to floor, I couldn’t help feeling pleased when I saw that most of the women were not wearing uniforms. They wore suits, skirts, and slacks. They looked adult and competent, and they were. . . . It was so satisfying to walk around each department and see the permanent effects of my being there.” Notably, Japanese women emerge as adults here only through Kriska’s skillful intervention.

Nevertheless, Kriska stands on firm ground, I believe, in arguing for removing the requirement that women, and only women, wear uniforms at corporate headquarters. As an employee of Honda Motor Company, she is entitled to make demands for equality as she sees it. Her use of the Quality Control Circle in which employees were to identify problems in their area, create a group to study them, and suggest solutions proved a creative way to deal with her own frustration about the women’s uniforms. What Kriska needs to understand is the power that her transience as a temporary employee in Tokyo and the aura attached to the image of the “big, pushy American career woman” give her in making any demand. While some employees frankly express their relief that Kriska does not match this image, there remains the expectation and the evidence to prove that as an American woman at Honda, she is differently privileged.

Yet Kriska takes credit for instigating the anti-uniform movement without any sense of the script that makes this so possible, thereby endorsing the narrative of the “progressive American woman” saving her “oppressed Japanese sisters.” Her own belief in this narrative colors all Kriska’s readings of the other OLs. For example, when questionnaires Kriska distributes show that OLs’ dislike of uniforms has almost nothing to do with gender equity issues, Kriska registers her disappointment: “I was shocked to read that some women wanted to keep the uniform. Several wrote lengthy responses saying they were worried about getting their own clothes dirty at work and about cost.” Here, Kriska misses an opportunity to reflect upon the varied meanings the uniform might have for other Honda employees; her interpretation is the only one worthy of consideration.

The politics at work here are further obscured by the book jacket which champions Kriska’s “greatest triumph” as “the initiation of a successful campaign that makes uniforms optional for female employees.” Kriska never finds out the entire story of how the uniform problem came to its successful resolution, for the proposal went through many channels and took over a year to realize. Which Japanese men and/or women may have lobbied equally

hard for this, or against it, remains a mystery. Nothing of the history of how frequently Japanese feminists have strategically manipulated “foreign pressure” for their own gains, as during the U.N. Decade of the Woman, for example, interrupts this story of American rescue. Nor is any attention given to the ways in which American women have had to fight, and still need to strive for equality in U.S. corporations.

Some of the most problematic scenes in the book occur near the end when Kriska helps American factory workers adapt to life in Japan. Her experience does seem to have made her aware of simple things Honda can do to make the Americans happier, such as providing certain foods in the cafeteria or training them to navigate the train system on their own. Yet here, too, international understanding can descend into a facile list of do’s and don’ts, such as when Japanese factory workers about to leave for the U.S. are given a list that includes admonitions not to pick their noses, not to apologize for “no particular reason” and to treat women and men equally. This list implies that American factories are models of civility and gender equality that Japanese men need to emulate. While Kriska pleads with management that Ohio employees in Japan be treated like adults, she paints the Japanese factory men as children who must grow up and adapt to an idealized American culture—for their own good.

For texts to use in teaching about Japanese women in corporations, I prefer two well-researched, eminently accessible texts: *Office Ladies and Salaried Men: Power, Gender, and Work in Japanese Companies* by Yuko Ogasawara (University of California Press, 1998) and *Staying on the Line: Blue-Collar Women in Contemporary Japan* by Glenda Roberts (University of Hawaii Press, 1994). Although neither book ignores gender discrimination in the Japanese workplace, both offer a more sophisticated view of why and how this occurs, and document forms of women’s complicity and resistance. They do not render sexism a uniquely Japanese problem. *The Accidental Office Lady* could make a provocative text for discussion among students preparing to study abroad or those exploring the cultural history of U.S.-Japan relations, provided they take a critical view of its naïve characterizations of self and other, and the influence Kriska’s narrowly autobiographical focus has in structuring her narrative. ■

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**JAN BARDSLEY** is Associate Professor of Japanese Language and Literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She twice taught a course in “Women and Work in Japan” for the Japan Center for Michigan Universities in Hikone, Japan, and regularly offers the class at UNC-Chapel Hill. She worked as an OL for a Japanese bank in Los Angeles in the 1970s.