“E very corner of my house is me. It is an extension of myself.” Baba-san, a freelance interpreter of forty-five, waved me into her Tokyo apartment in 2004. Only fifteen minutes from a main Tokyo station, it could not have been cheap. The apartment smelled like *oden*, a Japanese stew. “I got so much interpreting work when I came home from London that I really hit the money and paid this off! Now I am trying to have a normal life. I knew money wouldn’t make me happy. I’m not trying to be a winner or loser.”

A single woman friend was there to share the meal made mostly by Baba-san’s mother, who lived nearby. Baba-san was an only child and had returned to Japan in 1998 after five years in London both to reconnect with “being Japanese” and to care for her parents. “There is no place to escape personal responsibilities if you live in this society,” she had said, and she felt she had to come to terms with that. Her apartment had a double bed for her and a tatami mat room for her mother in the future if her father were to die first.

Both Baba-san and her friend felt pressure to be successful. “We find dissatisfaction with ourselves. We have to do everything fast. It takes energy.” Referring to the book *Makeinu no Toboe* (The howl of the losing dog; Sakai 2004), which they felt criticized single women, Baba-san quipped, “But we attack ourselves like defeated dogs!”

The conversation revolved around “independence”—a media word that women tried to actualize in their lives and that was central to the contradictions and debates among which they lived. Baba-san felt that the apartment
was a central expression of successful independence. “I want to say that I am completely independent now. This is advanced independence. Women friends who have bought or built houses agree with me.” Because she had just been interviewed for an article in a women’s magazine on single career women, Baba-san’s statement fit and was shaped by the current media view, but taking the risk of buying an apartment set her apart from the risk-averse parasite singles (Borovoy 2010).

This sense of independence rooted in her apartment extended into her view of relationships. “I can have the ideal relationship with anyone now. There is not a strange desire to depend on another. It is an even playing ground.” In 1998, she had felt confusion, wanting to marry after a failed love affair in England and yet feeling that her mother—unlike most mothers—thought marriage represented a loss of independence. As our dinner in 2004 wore on, her ambivalence emerged. “I go through waves of wanting and not wanting to marry. Recently I had an introduction and felt, ‘Do I have to marry? I don’t really need it. He would be invading my field.’ But I also fear being alone. I am still hurt by the question: ‘Do you have children?’ So marriage may still be an issue.”

Singles

In this chapter, I trace the interviewees who have remained single through 2004—about one-third of my sample. They are at the crux of contradictions in Japan and this social movement that is stretching the limits of compatibility with the societal rules. Experiencing both the chaos and the flexibility of late modernity, theirs is not an easy path, because they feel pressure to appear successful: “As long as I appear happy and successful people will be jealous of my situation,” said a piano teacher, the one single woman from the village. “Otherwise, people will say that I wasn’t able to marry because something is wrong with me.” Even in Tokyo women sometimes confront this stereotype.

Two general groups have emerged from the data and shape this chapter: the successful singles, who are financially and emotionally stable and not suffering from huge frustrations, and the struggling singles, who vary from those who are financially independent but caught in high tension to those whose tensions have caused them to crash. The case studies in the first group are valuable for investigating the ways in which singles deal with the debate between independence and dependence, sometimes in relation to
international experiences, in their evolving search for selves. The second group shows strong contradictions between singles and postwar institutions, with those who crash revealing alternative means of escape inside Japan. The regional-urban contrast, with its class and value differences, emerges in that, although all groups contain women from Tokyo and the northeast, the majority of the successful women are from Tokyo, the struggling singles are mixed, and all of the struggling and crashing singles are from the northeast.

In this sample, the singles group is the most highly educated, including three MAs, ten university graduates, six junior college or vocational graduates, and one high school graduate. Education is a valuable resource if there is any chance of becoming a successful single accepted as a full adult in society.

Successful singles

Successful singles can be seen as making “new forms of middle-class identity” as they attain financial stability outside of marriage (Muraki 2007), but what does success feel like among single women? From my observations, when it is working it feels like being the biggest winners in contemporary Japan but like running on a moving sidewalk that never slows down, always looking around for information and making comparisons with others. The way is tiring, and if the successful singles fall off, it is difficult to clamber back on. They cannot help but recognize the contradictions they face, but these women have the economic and psychological means to live in creative tension with them.

I classify eight of the nineteen single women in this study as successful, including the two women in Chapter 2 and Baba-san (Rosenberger 2001, 206, 217). I introduce one more, Sato-san, whose words contribute to the negotiation of independence brought up by Baba-san. The case studies cast light on the following question: How have these women negotiated their workshops of experience in Japan as they attempt to live the idea of independence heralded in global discourses of this era, cope with the cultural and personal meanings of dependence in their lives, have lovers, take responsibility for parents, and avoid loneliness?

These women join an ongoing debate in Japan over independence and dependence, one area of the cultural code that women push against but about which they carry some ambivalence. Dependent relations have been central to the close relationships, communication, and dedication that have
underwritten Japan’s economic growth in companies, schools, and homes. They depend on successful socialization in an emotionally dependent relationship between mother and child, a “maternal frame” that developed through the twentieth century (Yoda 2000). Doi (1971) brought attention to *amae* as a positive emotional security that he argued Japanese have and Americans do not, but also as something that keeps Japanese from individuating. His work was taken up as a justification for Japanese cooperation in groups and their economic success. In the 1980s Asada attacked such emotional relations of dependence as being wielded as a tool of capitalism that infantilizes Japanese and advised escape, as many of the young did, becoming irregular workers or unemployed and remaining single (Yoda 2000). Indeed, Japanese-style capitalism smacked of crony capitalism in the recession of the 1990s, and the debate has gone on in educational reform, stumbling over the problems of how to create independent children while still creating a morality of interdependence and cooperation.

Independence can easily be seen as reeking of selfishness in Japanese morality (Nakano and Wagatsuma 2004), and the emotion-laden relations of indulgence or dependence (*amae*) have multiple meanings. On the positive side, dependency is part of warm intimacy between people in close relationships—parents and children, lovers, husbands and wives who allow interdependence as an expression of fondness. Even at work, dependency can be the soft mortar in between the bricks of hierarchy through which bosses and employees care for each other over the years. The tendency is that women indulge the dependency of men and elders (*amayakasu*) so that it eases their lives and can give a certain kind of emotion-based power to women as housewives and mothers (Rosenberger 2001; Borovoy 2005). On the negative side lies the emotional power that people have over others to ask or demand that they do things for them or act in certain ways that cannot be refused. It is an extremely effective way of binding someone to one’s will and echoes the painfully vulnerable yet pleasurable subordination discussed in Chapter 2 (Butler 1997). Contradictions are inherent in this era because women, in order to gain intimacy and love, can end up allowing lovers or husbands to be dependent on them to take care of the details of life (Alexy 2011). Single women trying to build their own will to power have to deal with their emotional subordination to intimate others such as parents, lovers, and even bosses. Although women criticize dependence as part of long-term resistance, for many of them it is difficult to give up, because people want to be loved as well as to be successful.
A dissatisfied “nomad” looking for a home after living on several continents, Baba-san indicated that her apartment was a symbolic bootstrap into independence in Japan because it showed high-level financial independence. Her independence focused on relationships—emotional independence from her mother and economic independence from boyfriends or future husbands. Within this expression of her “will to power,” however, lurked a space of tension and ambivalence encapsulated in the fear of being alone and the hurt of having no children. Moreover, she realized that in Japan a network of relationships is expected, indeed necessary, in work, family, and friends.

Baba-san’s independence thus lived with compromise: her parental responsibilities and a realization that, even in the Japanese work world, “People don’t look at independence. They look at who you know and your good job.” She felt that marriage was the ultimate test of maintaining independence without the “strange desire to depend on another”—an expression of the emotion-laden indulgence (amae) that she found in Japanese lovers as compared with British lovers—although all too often both turned out to be married men. The question for Baba-san was how to be part of the interdependence of Japan without sacrificing her personal feeling of emotional independence from a man or parents. Here the traversing of different identities felt more difficult, but she tried to digest and re-create the media message of independence while still maintaining interdependence with her parents. She implicitly asked whether she could pass through the gauntlet of marriage in Japan without risking emotional dependence, and so far the answer for her seemed to be no.

In this case, Baba-san’s international experience allowed her to experience “having my own world,” living alone in her London flat, interpreting, and studying opera singing. Her bid to come home was part of her quest to work out this puzzle of independence and dependence that she felt she faced “as a Japanese.” Like Ito-san in Chapter 2, she idealized Western independence and used it as a path to practice separation but did not find it entirely satisfying and realized that she was in a state of ambivalent long-term resistance, trying to find a kind of independence that would work in Japan.

Several other women in this study worked both abroad and in Japan, one as a journalist and another as a manager in a department store. Their international experiences were ways to experiment away from the pressures of the cultural norms to which they objected. This was a path by which “Japanese women are getting power,” said the journalist. “For our generation, seeing Japan from inside and outside is vital,” said the manager, illustrating the self-reflection that life in the late-modern world required. At a personal level,
relationships with men sprang out as the most important contrast: “Japanese men’s consciousness has not changed yet, at least in our generation,” said the journalist. The manager thought that Japanese men are “narrow, not so exciting, with no big energy compared with ladies.” She preferred a man “with his own way of thinking, who doesn’t have to be like everyone else.” My sense is that they wanted a “contingent person” (Bauman 1991, 236) of the late-modern era who instead of wanting the solidarity of order would be, first and foremost, tolerant of difference and disorder in a normative sense, encouraging the development of self-actualization in both self and partner. Yet at the same time, they wanted someone who respected norms and accepted their obligations, especially toward parents.

Significantly, none of these women found completely satisfying answers in the idealized West, as, in their way, the men they dated abroad often seemed selfish (see Kelsky 2002). All of these single women except Ito-san had parents in Japan who would eventually need care, and they continued looking for partners in Japan. The journalist still hoped for a “darling to drink tea with.” The manager looked to Japanese CEOs as potential mates who were independent-minded but understood Japanese families. She turned to aspects of Japanese culture by writing haiku and doing tea ceremony, a ritual based on serving others in a compassionate way. “Tea is so logical, calm, and beautiful” in contrast to the stress of her work life, she commented. In short, these Japanese women with long-term experience with the West found tensions abroad and tempered their original fascination, bringing the historical culture of Japan into their lives in new ways. Many of them are only children, daughters who have returned to watch out or care for parents even as they maintain their separate lives of work and enjoyment. They activate the ambivalence of their long-term resistance in a very conscious way, flowing and twisting through multilayered ways of being, both orderly and chaotic, with occasional bouts of indecision on the way. In short, they have found a way to bear the rather lonely life of sustained ambivalence and illustrate more clearly than many that individual autonomy is not the only goal in choices for self (Mahmood 2001).

**Independence in Morioka**

Sato-san, who runs a company with a married woman friend in Morioka, offers a more philosophical interpretation of this navigation between independence and dependence among successful singles in Japan.
In 2004, I climbed up to Sato-san’s office off the main street running from the railroad station to the old castle park in Morioka. It was well-polished compared to the dingy office where she had showed me the advertisements she was preparing for clients in 1998. I smelled the lavender from the aroma therapy and massage that were now part of their business. Sato-san strode in and filled the room with her solid, husky voice, a red-flowered scarf around her neck (Rosenberger 2001, 196, 208).

“Your business looks great!” She and her friend had “gone independent” in 1994 when she was thirty-eight at the behest of another older woman friend who ran a consciousness-raising group. Although sick with cancer, the friend had challenged them: “Are you independent? Are you independent enough?” So they started their business, much to the displeasure of Sato-san’s mother, who thought her salaried job with a leading advertising firm was more secure. Like Baba-san, Sato-san also had her own apartment, but she had moved from an expensive one to a city-supported one to save money. In this case the business was her main symbolic road to independence, though with strong interdependence with her business partner.

“People say that the recession is irrelevant for us. We are seen as energetic women just doing what we want (katte ni). But we are experts so we are accepted. I’m selling supplements to Taiwan now!” They combined aroma therapy, massage, and supplements with Sato-san’s advertising and her friend’s dental consultation.

The message of independence was the hidden center of their company, however, because through the introduction of the leader of the consciousness-raising group, they did counseling with Teacher Yanagida from Tokyo. “Her counseling has always been the real center of our business. We still make appointments for her and she comes up from Tokyo once a month to do counseling. Our goal is to get people to receive counseling. We receive it and require it of our employees, and my friend tries to get dentists to polish (kitaeru) their characters and their businesses through counseling. Now the aroma therapy makes it easier to talk about counseling a bit. Japanese people don’t understand what counseling is. Counseling is about one’s very personality (jinkaku, hitogara), so it is painful.”

In 1998, Sato-san had given me a book by her teacher so I could understand this part of her business and life. The aim was to get away from “soft, spoiled, dependent places” (amai tokoro) and to break away from the narrow, predetermined parts of life a person clings to: family, work, hometown, sex, love, and so on. Relations out in society, and especially with friends with
whom you can “share your heart,” are important, because in this wider society you can grow into a mature human being (Yanagida 1991).

Sato-san continued: “The teacher advised me recently to do Zen Buddhist meditation and I went for about a year. You try to rise above the mud of everyday life like a lotus blooming above the water. You become clear about what is important. But lately I don’t have time to go.”

Looking back over her life, she said, “I have been given the chance to know myself. My life has been entirely different because of counseling. If I hadn’t done this, I couldn’t have understood my self’s situation by myself (jibun no koto o jibun de)—what kind of human being I am. I’ve learned to avoid selfish human relations and look at each person well.”

**Stamping out dependence**

Sato-san’s story broadens the understanding of this struggle with independence/dependence, the key to her long-term resistance. With missionary zeal, she attacks dependence—“the soft, spoiled places” (amai tokoro) and amaeru, to indulge in the goodwill of another.

Sato-san and others in this study recognize such dependence particularly in their relations with their parents. Both Baba-san and Sato-san see it as an inner contradiction they have to rise above to be successful singles, railing against it as a negative aspect of Japanese historical values because people are bound into relationships that are too close, even “sticky,” as Japanese say, with emotions so bound up that obligations are unquestionable. Reflective thinking that depends on distance is difficult and independent action impossible.

Sato-san finds an alternative via her teacher’s philosophy that combines Eastern philosophies with Western counseling techniques. The answer is not individual autonomy but relinquishment of selfishness that clings to others and expectations of them. The path is to give up emotionally laden attachments that root one in the mud of the world. One becomes independent of past attachments by scouring self of soft, comfortable relationships and demanding compassionate but adult relationships. In short, this combination of Eastern philosophies with Western counseling techniques has become Sato-san’s version of independence.

For Sato-san, her relationship with her mother has been key. She had fractured it with her words “Worry about yourself, not me” and the purchase of her own apartment separate from her mother. But she is putting the relationship back together, accepting the relationship as her counselor advises,
but doing it self-consciously. She and her mother have bought an apartment together, and her mother goes back and forth between there and her brother’s family’s house, also in Morioka. She accepts her mother’s dinners and ironing but aims for a future home with friends when she retires. She would not accept Ueno’s criticism of single women in Japan as living with their mothers and therefore becoming dependent like their fathers before them, or Dales’ idea (2005) that her independence is limited. She works her way through the double bind by contending that she provides a refuge for her mother but maintains her own independence of mind and spirit in the manner of her teacher.

Other successful singles found slightly different ways to work out the contradictions and long-term tensions they felt swirling around independence and dependence. Another successful single, a Tokyo kindergarten teacher, was less self-reflective about the need for independence, practicing it in a media-centered way as she shopped and surfed throughout the world (Rosenberger 2001, 182–183). Rooting out soft, spoiled places was not her conscious purpose, and her ongoing residence with her mother reflected her own comfort as well as her respect for her mother’s sense of what was correct. She spent some evenings with her mother, but her mother also tolerated her frequent trips. Ultimately, she nursed her mother through cancer for three years before her death, an experience that affected her sense of self, making her feel that she had not only been dependent on her mother but had given the privilege of dependency to her mother. She reflected, “My friends have had the experience of marriage and children, and they can teach me. But I have had the experience of caring for my mother until death, and I have something to teach them, too.” Her words indicate that, for this generation, not only independence but giving of yourself to another with emotional generosity enhances one’s maturity as an adult.

Another nuance of independence for these successful singles in their long-term resistance is finding a way to contribute to the world from an inner perspective; doing something that gives their lives the feeling of worth (yari-gai or ikigai). Sato-san did so by imbuing her business with her message of counseling and independent maturity to others. Another somewhat reluctant successful single in Tokyo did so in an after-school educational company that she worked her way up in, never seeking too much responsibility and always a bit sad that she had not married and had children. Although she became a supervisor of other teachers, she insisted on keeping her own class of children in order to contribute more directly to education and satisfy her desire to be in touch with children. Moving away from family in her thirties, she kept
in close touch with her parents, divorced sister, and sister’s child, who lived together. She used the discourse of her generation to come to terms with her situation: “My generation had to be hungry because the ones above us opened the way. . . . I have been given the chance to grow. Now I am myself.”

In sum, these successful singles negotiated paths of economic independence in tandem with compassionate and reciprocal relationships with significant others, keeping their balance on the moving sidewalk as they emerged as respected adult women. They do not speak of nimbly traversing multiple identities as Ueno suggested, but rather seem to struggle to hone their independence so that it bleeds over into other identities and relationships—with mothers, friends, and bosses or employees. Over the long term, their success as singles stretches beyond independence symbolized in apartments, jobs, and international experiences, and reaches beyond the language and feelings of obligation toward mature give-and-take in a variety of relationships. As singles, they are able assess relationships, creating new ones and reinterpreting their positions within older ones in a way that fits their changing dispositions (Budgeon 2008). Thus, both within themselves and in relation to their world, they live in a creative tension that pushes away sticky, emotion-laden dependency that—ironically—society accuses them of if they live with parents but that they find so uncomfortable, and experiment with developing a version of independence that is not anomalous in Japan.

This exploration among Japanese singles rests on uncertainty as to how to live on this human continuum of independence and dependence; it is a confusing journey between global calls to emancipation and local history. One of the possible results of this is the high number of singles in this study, and in statistics, who exist without boyfriends or girlfriends or claim never to have had sex (Birmingham 2012, Buerk 2012). While some may be gay, this tendency indicates a questioning of heterosexual love that in the postwar idiom was intertwined with dependency (Ryang 2006).

**Struggling singles**

Struggling singles are women who experience a noticeably higher pitch of anxious tension and conflicted ambivalence than successful singles, even though most are economically independent. Including both those who struggle and those who struggle and crash, eleven singles are in this group; some have collapsed and revived, but four have crashed long-term. Like a symphony
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in a bright major key that gradually saddens with increasing minor chords and atonal notes that hint at chaos, these women look and act like successful singles for a long while, but slowly their intonation darkens. Having wrestled with the dilemma of choice about marriage and still doing so in some cases, as well as always feeling observed in their anomalous singlehood in the northeast, they find it harder and harder to stay in tune with the operatic demands of the successful single role. By studying the tensions of the double binds and contradictions they experience over the long run, we learn much about the nuances of long-term resistance.

Although these women also have aspired to “advanced independence,” societal contradictions have combined with psychosocial ambivalence to produce storms of tension that rise and fall. Their main problem is that they are enmeshed in workplaces and families that still work in the postwar manner of dependent relationships and that expect a high level of devotion and perseverance that admits little of the separation described above. These institutions and their relationships catch single women in “sticky” webs of obligation and emotion, and make the independent self of successful singlehood almost impossible to maintain internally. Enmeshed in these institutions, with only partial recognition of the overall contradictions because of their feelings of responsibility, these women experience festering irritation and contest the power of the system that permeates their lives with relative silence, tacit accommodation, and a bit of sullenness (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991).

Eight of these eleven women struggled in the regions where mutually dependent relationships in family and work, as well as opinions about the lesser place of women, continued more strongly than in Tokyo. However, living in Tokyo did not make women immune from the dangers of working in old-style institutions. These women usually worked in helping professions such as education or medicine where they could expect security and receive promotions, but nonetheless long hours and obligations backed by emotional dependence were the norm. The two singles featured here are both teachers and were both age forty-two in 2004.

**Struggling teacher in Morioka**

In 1993 and 1998, I interviewed Nishikawa-san in her parents’ house in Morioka. We sat on zabuton pillows and tatami mats, her long black hair sweeping over the low table as she talked. She lived separately and taught inside the city after stints of teaching at rural schools. In the 1980s I had...
interviewed her mother, a housewife caring for her own father and her husband who had married into her family, rather than the reverse. As she brought us tea and cakes, I remembered watching her mother stroke Nishikawa-san’s hair when she was a junior high student, saying it was important for girls to acquire a skill. Nishikawa-san got along with her mother, who often gave her food, but not well with her father: “We can’t even watch TV together. We always argue. He’s stubborn.”

Blaming both her type of work and her location in the region, Nishikawa-san conveyed frustration over being single but not being able to live the life of singlehood that she and her generation had imagined. It was as if she felt she was enduring the double binds of singlehood without the payoff of imagined freedom. In 1993, she said: “I don’t want a common life like my mother. Since I am single I want to value the life of self. But I am too busy, with no time for self. I’m jealous of my friends in Tokyo who work in travel agencies.”

In 1998, she started out with words as brave as her bright-red lipstick: “I don’t want to change my life like I did before. I am a public servant and I have to work with devotion.” Yet later her disappointment surfaced again, “I am not using the single life positively. It is hard to use the freedom that I have here. You would think I can do as I want, but I can’t. I have no latitude. I only have fatigue of the heart.”

The orchestration of voices in Nishikawa-san’s head pointed out the ambivalence she lived with. Voices of her single women schoolteacher-friends emerged from her narrative, encouraging her to get her own home as they ate French food together. However, they all had to wrestle with the school situation and discrimination against women. “The students don’t give respect like they used to. . . . People don’t see women teachers as mature. Boys act out with us. Parents say I don’t understand their feelings for their kids because I’ve never had any children.” On reflection, Nishikawa-san blamed herself for the problem. “Part of me is spoiled (amaï). Inside myself I feel like I’ve not advanced.”

In 2004, Nishikawa-san announced happily on the phone: “I have my own apartment now. When you come, climb up the hill behind my parents’ house. I’m on the fifth floor.” From her window we saw the heated parking lot and snow-covered Mount Iwate. At one end her kitchen sported red appliances and at the other a white sofa curled around the TV.

At first Nishikawa-san sounded much like Baba-san, the successful single in Tokyo: “I thought I would marry and quit my work, but I feel I can do my career with my home. I can live as I want, according to my whims (kimama). I
want to go on living independently through my own power. A husband would be a bother now. I have my own space and rhythm. I will go to a care home when I am old.” Although she seemed to have moved beyond the dilemma of choice in regard to marriage, the high tension and old feelings that she could not have a self legitimate to her generation soon reemerged. “I also feel insecure (fuan). I got a promotion to a model school, but I have to work hard, with little support from colleagues. It’s all competition. I stay up until two a.m. making model lessons for other teachers to see. The students and parents want high test scores, but the students are tricky, and the parents ask, ‘Is it okay to have women teachers? If women become the main teachers, what will we do?’ It is the picture of success without real success.”

So, despite her apartment and her sense that “I am living in touch with society,” Nishikawa-san felt tension rather than success. “Sometimes I get so stressed, I can’t eat or sleep. I don’t have anyone to let my stress out with in the evenings and it goes round and round in my head.” Her dream was to travel again to England, to a “different world” where she could “experience that which will widen my scope as a self.”

Independence within dependence

As a schoolteacher in the regions, Nishikawa-san’s story communicates the near impossibility of developing self with independence and freedom beyond consumer items like an apartment in the regions, and especially as a schoolteacher. Long-term resistance was reduced to a simmering long-term disgruntlement because the school’s requirements enveloped her private individual needs and desires. Her school is what Touraine (1995) calls a rational, modern institution that aims towards reason but denies the promise of individuation, giving job security to employees, but requiring sacrifice of self to the goals of the institution in the fashion of the post-war high economic growth period. Ironically Japanese schools have reformed curriculum to produce more individualistic graduates, but superiors do not spare the teachers in creating new curriculum. Teachers must work incredibly hard for superiors to fulfill the new institutional vision, yet teachers also experience the late-modern free expression of opinion from increasingly individualistic parents and students.

In the regions, women teachers receive greater gender discrimination the higher up they go in the organization. As Nishikawa-san climbs the ranks, because her abilities are suspect as a woman, she feels added pressure to fulfill her responsibility for the institution, but she rarely has the escape hatch of
drinking with superiors and coworkers, more common in the past and less accepted for women than men in the regions. Successful women in Tokyo have the chance to do more of this with other successful women.

Like the successful singles, Nishikawa-san worries about independence and dependence. But her concern about “soft, spoiled” places of dependence in herself does not lead to more transparent relationships built on compassion. Rather she worries about them because they infer to her that she is not strong enough to live up to institutional requirements. In this case, scouring out places of emotional dependence leads not to a “will to power” to develop a new way of being, but to deeper entrenchment in subservience to superiors and old ways of being. She would like to develop the new dispositions that she emerged into as she came of age, but her way is thwarted by old hierarchies and habits she was raised with both at work and in her family. Although her younger single brother lives on ancestral lands in the country, it is she who will take on responsibility for her parents in the future.

Struggling teacher in Tokyo

In the next example we see that even in Tokyo, families and educational institutions that struggle between postwar ways and the demands of survival in globalizing, neoliberal Japan can almost stymie the long-term resistance of single women. Shimizu-san, a teacher and daughter, aches with tension in her daily performance as a late-modern career woman who goes home to an environment that expects the preconscious submission and domination written of by Butler (1997). Aided by her generation’s nod to maturity gained by caring for others one cares about, she reflects on her family’s emotionally demanding and largely unexamined relationships, and manages, incredibly, to hang onto the discourse of choice (Rosenberger 2001, 224–225).

I met Shimizu-san at her private high school in 1993. Her words echoed the late-modern situation: “It used to be that 90 percent of the students heard the directions the first time; now 90 percent don’t hear.” But she had no latitude to unwind by living the imagined single life. “I’m resigned to going straight home. I’d like some free time to go to the movies or shop—just so I could free up my feelings a bit (kimochi o kaihō dekiru), but my mother had a stroke several years ago and, along with my father, I care for her.” Marriage seemed difficult as “the conditions” to care for her parents piled up.

In 1998, Shimizu-san wanted to meet at Starbucks at Shinjuku station, emblematic of the enjoyable single’s life. Perhaps symbolically, rain pelted
down as we sipped our drinks. The voices in her head bespoke her partial consciousness of the contradictions in her life. She emphasized her travel to France—with her father. “It became a way to show my respect for him (oyakōkō, literally, filial piety). He was so happy.” The story she told was heavy with implications. “Once we were sitting at a table with another man in France. My father asked him, ‘Do you have children?’ He answered, ‘No.’ ‘Are you lonely?’ my father asked. ‘No,’ he said. ‘I am divorced now and have a woman I love. I divorced because there was no love anymore.’ We were so amazed at this. It showed us how different the French are from the Japanese.”

Later Shimizu-san painted a picture of her family mired in emotional dependencies that blocked any objective discussion of their situation. “Japanese like to stick close (bettari) to their families. They think of depending on their children, especially their son. I understand this feeling of wanting to depend on another. But it is difficult. . . . If you don’t talk, you can’t solve anything. But we don’t talk. If Japanese don’t agree, they don’t talk. If they agree, they don’t talk. They just live parallel lives, unhappy with each other.”

Even her siblings’ actions doomed Shimizu-san (the single woman and middle child) to this morass of dependency. She described her brother as spoiled. “He quit high school and is enjoying himself. . . . He doesn’t eat with us.” Her older sister is married with children in Tokyo but visits seldom. “My father thinks surely his grandchildren will come on the last weekend of summer vacation, but there is no contact.”

With only her father and a once-weekly home helper from the government, Shimizu-san carried the burden. As she watched the raindrops sliding down Starbucks’ big windows she said: “My life is important, too. I need to do something for my ‘self’ to have a life, to push my will through. Sundays pass and there is nothing for me.” Thinking about her relationship with her parents, she wasn’t sure she ever wanted to have a child, but she did want a husband with whom to be happy.

Our 2004 meeting was a late dinner at a Cambodian restaurant after Shimizu-san had fed her parents. Her father, now retired, had heart problems, and she herself suffered from a thyroid condition. “My favorite thing to do is eat, but the doctor says I have to lose weight!” she laughed. She had travelled to Europe with her school, but she had spent the week there sick in bed. Furthermore, schoolteaching now required her working Saturdays to recruit new students. “I’m going to retire in six years!” she said with glee.

Most significant was Shimizu-san’s reflection on her life. On the one hand, she saw her life as being randomly determined: “Taking care of my
parents is my fate.” Yet she also credited a gain in terms of the historical values that still live in Japan: “Now I am living with my parents and I am happy that I have had a long time to be in contact with them. I am not like my older sister who has little involvement with them.” But her main message in the midst of her tension was that this accommodation was a performance of choice: “If I had pushed things for my ‘self’ things might have changed, but I decided everything freely. I am not 100 percent satisfied, but neither am I completely dissatisfied. I have been able to do freely what I like to do even if I haven’t married and had kids. I wasn’t blessed with meeting a good person, but I didn’t meet and marry some strange person either. This is a blessing. I am forty-two. So I think after I reach fifty, I will do something else. It is strange to say, but if my parents die, I would be free and I would like to live somewhere else. I would like to see the ways of another country.”

Her dream was to go to Denmark, where “men help you with your suitcases and the beer and ice cream are delicious.”

Hanging on to choice in the in-between

Shimizu-san’s position exemplifies the contradictions and tensions of long-term resistance as a single woman in late-modern life in Japan. These days many married women escape the obligatory care of mothers-in-law, but single daughters often care for their mothers. Here Shimizu-san is twice trapped: first by emotions woven since childhood, and second by the more recent idea that the emotional relationship of daughters to parents is more acceptable than the obligatory in-law relationship, drawing on the notion that emotions represent individuality in late-modern logic.

Shimizu-san squarely occupies and seems aware of occupying the ambivalent space between independence and dependence, of being unable to shift the terms of her life despite her singlehood, and even being trapped because of her female singlehood. She is exceptionally clear in her depiction of the dependent relationships in opposition to which successful singles build their lives, critiquing the sticky relationships and tense silences without conscious choice. Her desire for self as imagined and witnessed in Europe and the United States when visiting a friend in Seattle haunts her, but she also attacks her siblings’ lack of loyalty, praises her own, and values her relationships with her parents, hoping to give them devotion while alive and the satisfaction of good deaths at home (Long 2005). Enjoying trips with her father, she attempts to reinterpret parental relationships to the extent she
can. Ultimately, she dons the central philosophy of her generation, crediting herself with free choice.

Shimizu-san’s move makes sense within the ambiguous resistance of this generation (Melucci 1989). In the midst of acting in accord with the cultural code she was born into, she maintains self-reflection, filled with information and imagination of the wider world. Her period of time outside of the movement has been long but never entirely subsumed; she hopes someday to rejoin her generation’s realignment of the cultural code. Like Nishikawa-san, she can only imagine it as a Western mirage, far away from Japan’s postwar institutions.

Struggling and crashing singles

The two women just discussed have managed to tread water, maintaining the double consciousness of ambivalence while bearing up under internal tensions and external contradictions. Nine other singles in the study have had near-death drownings in both physical and mental ways, some reviving and some not. Most of these tragedies are attributable to overwork in institutions that expect too much. They co-opt single women’s ambitious dreams of success, desire to contribute to society, and willingness to labor at lower levels under supervision in the job world. One, like Shimizu-san, crashed not because of work but because of family demands, which appropriate single women’s freedom, twisting their generational version of “freedom to” pursue new endeavors into “freedom from” responsibilities, and thus availability to undertake elders’ care to the grave.

The women who collapsed from overwork all ended up in the hospital with serious physical and mental symptoms of fatigue, stress, and depression. One in the regions worked into the wee hours over a period of several years writing curricula for university reforms and fell into a state of physical and mental breakdown, quitting and retreating to her sister’s home. An advertising specialist in a Tokyo company with performance-based policies ended up in the hospital with exhaustion because she served an old-fashioned boss who worked her until two a.m. because “she didn’t have a family to go home to.” She returned to work, and later tried valiantly but unsuccessfully to pass the bar exams to become a scribe in the law system. Later, she managed to leverage a temporary job in another advertising firm, as well as time she had spent in the United States, into a full-time job in advertising and reentered the
successful single classification. An only child, she lived near to but separately from her parents, who were there to catch her financially and psychologically, but for whom she would be responsible.

The woman who drowned in family demands actually withdrew from the study, evidently feeling she had failed to qualify as a single of her generation. A past insurance saleswoman in Morioka in 1993, she was proud because other singles were jealous of her—“a self who knew another world.” However, she was sick in 1998, and in 2004 wrote me a letter: “I recovered my health, but my grandfather died and my grandmother slipped into complete dementia. My mother, tired out from caring for her, also got dementia. My eighty-five-year-old father has sickened and I am in the situation of caring for all three of them. I hardly have time to do the shopping, let alone meet with anyone. With about three hours of sleep per night, I myself have gotten a bit of depression. I am in no condition to talk with you. Please don’t contact me.”

In sum, tension in the long-term workshop of resistance for Japanese single women has the potential to be exciting, tumultuous, and in this case debilitating, as contradictions hook into vulnerabilities and block a person’s will to power.

Escaping to irrational spheres of life

The other six women in this category of struggling singles bring to light a turn toward marginal or irrational spheres of life in Japan as a place to revive after double binds have fragmented into mental and physical debilitation. Rather than being areas of capitalistic efficiency or institutional bureaucracy essential to growth in postwar Japan, these are the superfluous or “enchanted” areas of life that have been discarded as a result of the “disenchantment” of modernity—namely, art and religion (Weber 1946). They present alternative possibilities for the practice of long-term resistance in late-modern Japan.

Art and religion have existed as channels for nonconformity and training grounds for spiritual strength (seishin) throughout the postwar period. They are not considered central parts of the rational institutional structure of schools, companies, and middle-class (urban) households that catapulted Japan into being the second largest economy in the world by the 1980s, yet they are not irrelevant, as girls and middle-class wives gain status through their accomplishment in the so-called traditional arts of tea ceremony or flower arranging (Kato 2004), and middle-class men gain maturity by participating
in Zen training at the behest of their companies (Kondo 1990). Each can contribute to the building of strong Japanese spirit.

If art or religion is practiced outside of the hierarchies of accepted sects and schools, it counts against one’s accomplishments in the rational institutions that spell individual and familial success. If one is participant in so-called new religions that have arisen in the last century (as the women here are), they demand active zeal and devotion, unlike older religions; often appealing to the poor and marginalized, membership in them may block entry to the highest schools and companies (Reader 1991).

Artistic endeavors are not so maligned, but it depends on the art. Among my interviewees, women who are tea ceremony practitioners earn instant status because it has the reputation for self-cultivation. Two village dwellers in this study who do countless drawings—one detailed pen drawings of bugs, flowers, and landscapes, and another of wizards—earn few social points for doing so. The nature artist said that her art and her care of the same bugs and flowers were a sublimation of her sexual tension, particularly of her love for a married man in the village where she had chosen to live. She also rides her motorcycle to the nearby city to take ballet lessons—secretly, she hopes. The wizard artist continues to hold a job and just hopes she can avoid marriage in her farm family that has no heirs to take over the land. Inside, these women feel conjunction with wider worlds of being through their art, transcending the everyday world that judges them; their art adds to their feelings of growth, and at moments to their uniqueness as interesting people. But they are seen as marginal, odd singles, outside the scope of rational life, participating in a long-term resistance that gets them nowhere.

It is telling that all six of these women grew up in the regions and all live in the northeast, although one spent much of her single life in Tokyo. Regional single women appear more liable to crash on their bumpy rides across their mountainous terrain because work, family, and community are less tolerant of them; they are seen as anomalies or misfits rather than as representatives of diverse lifestyles. Yet a narrow path is available for single women in this study through art and religion—areas that people in the regions leave open to the marginalized, perhaps because they have been left out of the profits of high economic growth, and perhaps because they feel that anomalous single women fit into these anomalous areas of life. Indeed, the northeast is known historically for shamanistic, mystical practice of religion; I have met several active practitioners in my experiences there.
Art: theater

Theater as an alternative lifestyle emerged in the lives of two women who used it as a way to experiment with new and different selves in their long-term resistance. The first, Nakajima-san, was a Morioka woman working as a medical technician throughout her life as a single. However, slowly a sense of despair set in as she broke up with her boyfriend and moved to increasingly less prestigious jobs in lower institutions as gradually her age blocked her from the best jobs. As the last straw, a colleague stole a scientific discovery she made as a technician and gave her no credit for it. Meanwhile, her mother, with whom she lived, was becoming demented, telling her not to meet with this Nanshi-san (me) whom she thought was a man. In 1998 her business card pictured her in a prison uniform behind bars. She said, “You’ll find me in the bars with the actors.” Over drinks, I heard about her adventures in playing an ugly old woman and her ability to coach young and old newcomers to theater in the skills of acting. In 2004 at forty-two, she was also investigating the history of public baths in the area and visiting them whenever possible.

These corners of life, irrelevant to the surface appearance of success in singles, gave her the feel of single life that she craved. She still wished for a husband, but introductions through a company resulted in only “divorced men and cowards” with whom she could not create the “meeting of equals” that she craved. She preferred men in the theater and spent time with them, but they were not interested in dating toward marriage. Theater remained an ongoing arena where she could be the self she wanted to become while maintaining her work and family responsibilities that seemed mired in old-fashioned dependency.

In the second case, Negishi-san chose theater as a way to escape kindergarten teaching and life with her parents in the regions (Rosenberger 2001, 214). In Tokyo, she sparkled as Maria in West Side Story, had a long affair with the man who played Tony, and dipped into poverty and uncertain, irregular work. Ultimately, her former teacher found her a job in the rational world of education. She brought her acting energy to teaching children and moved back to a teacher-training job in the regions (perilously near the Fukushima nuclear power plant). Theater was a way for her to escape the contradictions of her early life and cultivate her “self,” yet it also became a pitfall of marginality from which she again had to escape to regain her sense of being a successful single. Nonetheless, she refused her “last good marriage proposal” from an
arranged meeting, because, in her words, she wanted to hang on to her “self” and her vision of love. In my words, she opted for the clearer perception and less ambivalent will-to-power of single life, but in it she experienced rather keen loneliness.

Religion

Both of the single women who turned to religion had fallen victim to untenable double binds but found paths to an alternative form of long-term resistance in religious philosophies that transcended the contradictions of everyday life. Religion opened to these single women a path to understanding their relations with parents and rebirth for self in a wider cosmos of meaning that lay beyond the media-birthed self of independence to which their generation first aspired. From the village and Morioka, one was a piano teacher who had had a series of brain tumors, and the other was a nurse whose nighttime job caring for cancer patients became unbearable for her. They both followed unorthodox religious leaders popularized by the media, older women who had shaped concepts from historical religions of Shintoism and Buddhism into new forms, and who offered healing along with alternative views of power and success.

In the first case, Hasegawa-san, a village piano teacher fighting recurring tumors, went on a pilgrimage to a woman north of Morioka whom she first saw on TV. “She makes rice balls (o-musubi). She has a certain power. We receive the o-musubi and she talks and I just cry. She says to treasure every moment. I can feel that it is okay if I don’t try hard [to succeed]. She thinks that God is inside you. I make o-musubi with her and she says, ‘Don’t push too hard so each grain can breathe.’ I am just okay as I am.” In religion Hasegawa-san found an ultimate acceptance and a reprieve from her ambition to be a successful single by which she could hold up her head in the village (Rosenberger 2001, 217, 222). At the age of forty-three, she had to accept a lesser social identity and appealed to a higher and honorable loss of identity in a universal space.

In the second case, Horikawa-san, a well-starved and chirpy nurse in 1993 and 1998, seemed like a preeminent successful single, singing French chansons and buying antiques for her apartment (Rosenberger 2001, 191). By 1998 she complained of fatigue, but streaked her graying hair purple to distract the cancer patients she served. She rarely visited her parents in the countryside, avoiding her father in particular, but she spoke with pleasure of
an older married woman friend, an ally in her adventures outside of work. I finally met this woman in 2004 when forty-four-year-old Horikawa-san said, “I quit work and I want you to meet my teacher.”

In the pink plastic seats of Dunkin’ Donuts, I sat beside Horikawa-san, finding it difficult not to stare at how different she looked, her back curved like a shrimp, dressed in black with the gray roots of her hair showing. The teacher, gaudily dressed and speaking in a loud voice, lectured us on her powers as Horikawa-san served the tea. “I do research like you on Reiki—on the ether that wraps around the body. It is our real self. I am just finding my powers.”

Horikawa-san listened. (The teacher referred to her by first name, Yumi, plus “chan,” used with a very close friend or child. For adult acquaintances it is common to use the last name, as I do throughout this book, so I will continue to refer to her as Horikawa-san.)

“I speak the words of God automatically. Yumi-chan writes them down. The other day, Yumi-chan was touching me and she was thrown back from me again and again.”

Horikawa-san’s body seemed to wake up and she spoke. “I went close to touch the teacher and I was thrown back about four times.” She arched her body and sprang back to show the physical power of her teacher’s force.

“Were you healing her?” I asked.

“If I am healing, she is the healer,” Horikawa-san said softly, looking at her hands in her lap.

The teacher broke in. “Yesterday I was healing a pregnant lady and she told me, ‘You look two meters high!’ Yumi-chan couldn’t even see me!”

“The light was blinding.”

“It was like gold,” the teacher reminded her.

“It was like gold sand all around her top half! I couldn’t see her face!”

Horikawa-san waved her hands and wonder filled her face.

Only when the teacher went to the restroom did I hear about why Horikawa-san had quit her job. Quietly, she said, “It was just a half a year ago. The human relations were bad and my spirit and body were just beat, so I just decided and quit. I am without work now. I am learning from the teacher. She can teach me about the big world. This is the real thing. Now I want to give healing to other people.”

“What do you mean?” I had to lean close to hear her voice.

“I was a nurse, but I didn’t share my spirit with patients. It was on the surface. I want to learn Reiki and put my whole spirit into my work. I can
deal with the pain of people’s hearts. When I look back, I was just doing as I pleased (kimama). I thought I had my life together, but I was mistaken. I want to change. All has changed.”

The teacher returned and chimed in. “As a nurse, she was doing hard work, all night till morning. It was terrible. The nurses all have neuroses and are taking medicine. Nursing is not a work for humans. Every day four or five people were dying of cancer. She had to clean their bodies. She would come to my house and I would say, ‘Don’t touch my cups because you touched dead bodies.’ Terrible, dirty things happened at the hospital. She did it for twenty-three years. She took sleeping pills. Everyone did. Some wanted to commit suicide. I told her, ‘Stop!’ Now it’s Yumi-chan’s second life.”

Horikawa-san spoke spontaneously, “Yes, yes. I am getting back my humanity. May I tell her about my father?”

“Of course,” the teacher answered.

“He died. He was a haiku poet all his life. He won an important award, and his haiku are on the gate of the hot-springs town where I grew up.”

“An American Reiki master in Tokyo got Yumi-chan in touch with her father,” added the teacher. Tears welled up in Horikawa-san’s eyes.

“My father said that he is writing and his haiku are important. Now I want to honor him and be devoted (oyakōkō) to my mother.”

The teacher’s cell phone rang; it was her son there to pick them up. They gave me one of the teacher’s books and then sailed out the door, with the teacher in the lead. I went out into the night to wait for the bus that would take me back home, struggling inside to understand the new Horikawa-san, or as her teacher called her, Yumi-chan.

Religion as solution

Drawing on concepts common to many Japanese religions and psychological treatments, Reiki literally means “divine spirit” and uses the energy of the life force to heal by laying on hands and increasing the life-force energy in the client. Although it started in Japan, it has spread throughout the world. Believers give up self to this cosmic energy, communicate with ancestors, and heal relationships, finding gratefulness particularly toward parents. In some ways it echoes the counseling philosophy of Sato-san, the successful single already discussed, but for Horikawa-san it is not integrated with generational ideas of independence; it invites her to complete dependency, although in a unique and new way that would lead to cosmic integration. Horikawa-san’s
teacher turned to Reiki after several out-of-body experiences, and Horikawa-san felt its force was starting to heal her.

Horikawa-san was a successful single who crashed because of the conditions of her work in her large regional hospital, a postwar institution that was hierarchical and expected devotion from their staff. For many years, it worked for her as a financial springboard for her life as a consuming, independent self. Finally, the contradictions between her work and her spirit/body came to a head, and she was no longer able to “traverse” the various identities and ways of belonging of her life (Ueno 2005; Gundewardena 2007). Overcome by tension, she was only able to choose by whom she would be controlled (Wolf 1987).

This case and others I have examined here evoke the terrible strains of tension that can almost literally pull single women apart. In this study, more than half of the single women fall into this category of struggling singles, with more than half of those having collapsed at some point. Although a few lived in Tokyo, most were living in the regions. In the long run, the workshop of resistance, so full of festering irritation over the years, was overwhelming. Even in this study, which started with well-educated single women who held decent jobs, individual single women fell over time, losing their nimbleness and succumbing to their fractured lives.

These upstart religions make sense as one lifeline, for they forgive individual failure and redefine success in cosmic terms beyond the small world of self. It offers “nomads” a version of home that is new for them yet makes complete subservience to the universe acceptable as a kind of self-realization that is not linked with individual autonomy (Mahmood 2001, 207). In a sense, religion is a sublime subversion that puts these women beyond the reach of others’ demands or judgments. A quotation from Horikawa-san’s teacher’s book says it best: “If God were to give you one wish, what would you wish for? I would answer: Go ahead. Make my life over” (Takahashi 2003, 62).

Conclusion

The singles interviewed here are all seeking an extended or reinterpreted version of self as the vocabulary of their quiet long-term resistance to the rules of society. Many are not opposed to enduring the complexities of marriage were the perfect man to make a connection, for the future harbors the fear of loneliness for most; but they see that, like their married friends who made
the choice to marry, they themselves, often without meaning to and especially as their reproductive years wane, have already run the gauntlet of choice into singlehood. The long-term resistance that sometimes emerged in the forms of anger or panic has eased over the years as others’ acceptance or resignation to the singles’ often-silent contestation has increased. Their trajectory is set, but within the framework of singlehood, they continue to wrestle with the ambiguities of independence and success and, in the northeast, to fragment their anomalous identities into art and religion.

The version of self claimed by these women seeks to shift emotional dependence, not to give up relationships of the past, but to interact with them without getting bound to them or in them, and to nurture more tolerant ones with chosen allies. The successful singles, rich in confidence, material goods, and often in freelance or independent work environments, are particularly skillful at garnering such allies. Living in cities with many other singles and blessed with healthy parents, they have fate on their sides in coping with the double binds they meet.

The struggling singles in postwar institutions of schools and families must cope with others who take advantage of their singleness, trying to endure (gaman) and put forth effort (gambaru) as they are expected to by the cultural code. The modern order of these institutions is stifling, as they still experience discrimination of various sorts as single women. Yet still bearing the marks made by their points of resistance, they stay aware of the situation and evaluate its causes and effects, dreaming of a life in Europe, outside of Japan’s normative requirements.

Those who struggle and crash in the workshop of long-term resistance give themselves to the ambiguities, mystery, and adventure of art and religion, opened by the dissonance of the contradictions they have experienced into a world outside of rational institutions. They attempt to create an extended version of self through still-enchanted areas of modern life, seeking, at one level, union with an alternative social and cultural milieu that gives their selves free play in this world, and at another level, union with a universe that completely reinterprets the idea of self. The latter is more common in the northeast, where pressures are harshest for long-term resistance in the guise of singlehood.

The successful singles attract praise, while the crashing singles are relegated to marginalized silence. Those struggling in less flexible institutions in the center may be the worst off; imprisoned in partial recognition, festering irritation, and tacit accommodation with smiling faces, they are the least
able to hone a new version of self. In sum, all of these women wrestle with attaining their vague vision of the single life as opening new possibilities for self-actualization in an era in which the roles and norms of postwar modernity are loosening, yet in the eyes of older authority figures still seem the best bet for getting Japan back on track.