



FEMINIST MOVEMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

Laura Dales



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Feminist Movements in Contemporary Japan

In contemporary Japan there is much ambivalence about women's roles, and the term 'feminism' is not widely recognized or considered relevant. Nonetheless, as this book shows, there is a flourishing feminist movement in contemporary Japan. The book investigates the features and effects of feminism in contemporary Japan, in non-government (NGO) women's groups, government-run women's centres and the individual activities of feminists Haruka Yōko and Kitahara Minori. Based on two years of fieldwork conducted in Japan and drawing on extensive interviews and ethnographic data, it argues that the work of individual activists and women's organisations in Japan promotes real and potential change to gender roles and expectations among Japanese women. It explores the ways that feminism is created, promoted and limited among Japanese women, and it advocates a broader construction of what the feminist movement is understood to be and a rethinking of the boundaries of feminist identification. It also addresses the impact of legislation, government bureaucracy, literature and the internet as avenues of feminist development, and it details the ways that these promote agency – the ability to act – among Japanese women.

Laura Dales is a Lecturer in Japanese and International Studies at the University of South Australia.

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For my family

Series Editor's Foreword

The contributions of women to the social, political and economic transformations occurring in the Asian region are legion. Women have served as leaders of nations, communities, workplaces, activist groups and families. Asian women have joined with others to participate in fomenting change at micro and macro levels. They have been both agents and targets of national and international interventions in social policy. In the performance of these myriad roles, women have forged new and modern gendered identities that are recognizably global and local. Their experiences are rich, diverse and instructive. The books in this series testify to the central role women play in creating the new Asia and re-creating Asian womanhood. Moreover, these books reveal the resilience and inventiveness of women around the Asian region in the face of entrenched and evolving patriarchal social norms.

Scholars publishing in this series demonstrate a commitment to promoting the productive conversation between women's studies and Asian studies. The need to understand the diversity of experiences of femininity and womanhood around the world increases inexorably as globalization proceeds apace. Lessons from the experiences of Asian women present us with fresh opportunities for building new possibilities for women's progress the world over.

The Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA) sponsors this publication series as part of its ongoing commitment to promoting knowledge about women in Asia. In particular, the ASAA Women's Forum provides the intellectual vigour and enthusiasm that maintains the Women in Asia Series (WIAS). The aim of the series, since its inception in 1990, is to promote knowledge about women in Asia to both academic and general audiences. To this end, WIAS books draw on a wide range of disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, political science, cultural studies and history.

The series could not function without the generous professional advice provided by many anonymous readers. Moreover, the wise counsel provided by Peter Sowden and Tom Bates at Routledge is invaluable. WIAS, its authors and the ASAA are very grateful to these people for their expert work.

Louise Edwards (University of Technology, Sydney),
Series Editor

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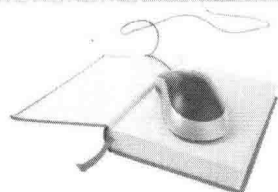
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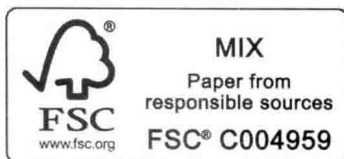
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Introduction

On 2 January 2002, the Osaka Prefectural Women's Center (affectionately known as Dawn) hosted a lecture called 'Gender-free will not stop! Overcoming the feminist backlash', featuring leading Japanese feminist Ueno Chizuko and Korean-Japanese feminist Shin Sugo. Ueno spoke engagingly to the audience of mostly women about why feminism is disliked and about the need to confront the forces that oppose women's equality and equal participation in Japanese society. She referred to the popular misconception that a feminist was a woman who had thrown off her femininity to become like a man, but she noted that 'we feminists have never once thought that we want to become like men' (Ueno 2002: 32). Ueno argued that backlash is a 'barometer of feminist power' that indicates the increasing strength and breadth of the discourse on gender equality and related reforms (2002: 35). For Ueno, feminism in Japan is finally a force to be reckoned with and needs backlash the way a yacht needs wind: to move forward.

Ueno's observation was a rallying call and a reminder of the currency and vitality of feminist engagement in contemporary Japan. The movement of feminism beyond misinterpretation is inextricably tied to changes in how Japanese women live their lives and to the ways that these changes are understood as both a result and product of social change. In this sense, feminism refers to practice as much as to ideology. To investigate the strategies of Japanese women who engage in feminism is to explore the everyday and routine, the familiar and frequented sites in which women interact socially in all the roles open to them. This book examines some of these spaces in its exploration of feminist movements in contemporary Japan.

The term 'movement' has multiple meanings, making it useful for studies of people and society. Movement can refer to tangible shifts: contractions and expansions that effect a change of orientation or location in space. Thus an individual's body moves when performing domestic labour or when migrating across national borders. Movement can be intangible, evident only through its results. For example, we can be moved emotionally and our beliefs and practices can be altered accordingly, temporarily or more permanently. In a more concrete, socio-political usage, a movement is an organized or semi-organized collection of groups or individuals attempting to bring about change in the policy and practices of a society. Social movements are 'conscious, concerted, and sustained efforts by ordinary people to change some aspect of their society by using extra-institutional means' (Goodwin

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and Jasper 2003: 3). Typically these movements comprise activists who, harnessed together in organizations, networks and communities, are driven to effect positive change through action. Activists may not always identify their movement contemporarily; some movements are visible only after the fact, through the lens of time or physical distance.

In this book I draw on all of these meanings to focus on feminist movements that can be understood most simply as shifts that happen within, and as a result of, feminist organizing and discourse. First, this includes the legal and socio-political changes that have been wrought by Japanese feminist activists in the last century, including legislative reforms, changes to women's family roles and related shifts in marriage and childbearing patterns. These movements are connected to socio-political movements of organized activism, such as the *Seitō* (Bluestocking) movement of the early twentieth century, the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s and the second-wave feminist movement. They are also connected to broader shifts resulting from domestic and international events, such as the end of the Second World War, economic growth and recession in Japan, and the international promulgation of women's rights through United Nations conventions and conferences.

Looking beyond the circumscribed borders of socio-political movements, I address the ways that individuals and groups can effect feminist change. I examine the ordinary – as well as extraordinary – practices of individual feminists, groups and bureaucracies in order to explore what such change might look like and how it might be understood as feminist if it occurs outside a movement. The concepts of feminist agency and praxis offer a useful starting point for discussion, because in these concepts we see some of the cornerstones of feminist organizing and discourse – empowerment, awareness raising and self-determination – as well as the crystallized tensions between ideals and lived reality.

This book looks at questions of feminism and its scope in contemporary Japan – how feminism itself has changed and how it has changed society over the last few decades. Using several sites and individuals as case studies, I explore the ways that feminist agency and praxis are created, promoted and limited among Japanese women.

In addressing agency as both a function and gauge of feminism, I highlight the connection between feminist praxis and the potential for inclusiveness in feminist theory. Agency and praxis can be identified at both ends of the feminist movement process as cause and effect of women's empowerment, and they can be manifest in the work of individual women and groups. By examining legislation and policy as well as case studies, this book draws attention to the diversity of feminist expression in contemporary Japan and highlights the subtle, subversive, everyday and extraordinary feminist movements through which women shape their lives and societies.

Agency and feminism

The concept of agency has been used widely by anthropologists and social scientists (Giddens 1984; Strathern 1987a; Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; Jeffery 1998; Ahearn 2001; Ortner 2001; Dales 2005a; Parker 2005a). Like its conceptual

relative, resistance, it has featured in critical analyses of power relations and been used to deconstruct the production and reproduction of such relations (Foucault 1978; Scott 1985, 1990; Kandiyoti 1988; Parker 2005a). Agency has often been used to describe 'the unconventional, independent, or emancipatory actions or practices of individuals who are oppressed or severely constrained' (Parker 2005a: 3). However, this definition glosses over a number of questions salient to the project of determining agency, most notably: what do 'unconventional', 'independent' or 'emancipatory' mean? And in what way are individuals 'severely constrained'? Most simply, agency can be defined as 'the socioculturally mediated capacity to act' (Ahearn 2001: 112). In this book I aim to tease out several strands from this definition in order to address the diverse ways in which action is mediated for and among Japanese women in a range of contexts.

It is an interesting coincidence that the concept of agency, which may imply movement or freedom, can be conflated with the concept of agency as a structural or institutional body. The overlap of these two meanings is neatly encapsulated by the work of agencies such as government women's centres that, I argue, aim to bridge non-government and bureaucratic programmes for women's empowerment. While an agent may be either an actor or a representative, the potential capacity of women's centres rests on the fulfilment of both roles, acting for material change while also representing women to, and through, government bureaucracy. It is in the latter capacity that gender-reform legislation, such as the 1999 Basic Law for a Gender Equal Society, becomes a significant tool for increased gender awareness, and its implementation becomes a means by which, to some extent at least, women are empowered to act and to resist certain gendered expectations.

To take advantage of feminine faults and strengths can be seen as subverting the role expectations and inequalities that underpin them – an example of the 'everyday resistances' by which women negotiate multiple systems of power (Scott 1985; Kandiyoti 1988; Abu-Lughod 1990: 53). Accordingly, agency itself is manifest in diverse ways, depending on circumstances. I argue that to address agency in its multiplicity requires that the definition of agency encompass pragmatic acts of unintentional resistance. This means discarding the view of agency as 'a synonym for resistance to relations of domination' (Mahmood 2001: 206).

The terms of agency do not transcend the historical and cultural specifics of the act and the actor. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the evaluation of agency in any social act speaks not only of the actor and the structure within which she acts but also of the evaluator's criteria. My perception of the actor's action reveals influences that guide me, insofar as these affect the way I see and understand the act. The conceptualization of agency in terms of independence, of self-containment and of choice reflects a particularly informed understanding in which the individual (with agency) is a free actor. Such a conceptualization overlooks the complexity and diversity of lived experiences and socio-cultural practices and therefore limits the definitive scope of agency.

As Abu-Lughod observed, 'If the systems of power are multiple, then resisting at one level may catch people up at other levels' (1990: 53). It is important to note that multiple systems of power need not be all-encompassing or grand to be