

婦人日本魂論
岸田寛子



A Place *in* Public

Women's Rights in Meiji Japan



Marnie S. Anderson

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Published by the Harvard University Asia Center
and distributed by Harvard University Press
Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London, 2010

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Printed in the United States of America

The Harvard University Asia Center publishes a monograph series and, in coordination with the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, the Korea Institute, the Reischauer Institute of Japanese Studies, and other faculties and institutes, administers research projects designed to further scholarly understanding of China, Japan, Vietnam, Korea, and other Asian countries. The Center also sponsors projects addressing multidisciplinary and regional issues in Asia.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Anderson, Marnie S., 1975–

A place in public : women's rights in Meiji Japan / Marnie S. Anderson.

p. cm. -- (Harvard East Asian monographs ; 332)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-674-05605-3 (hbk. : alk. paper)

1. Women's rights--Japan--History--19th century. 2. Women--Japan--Social conditions--19th century. 3. Japan--Social conditions--1868--1912. I. Title.

HQ1236.5.J3A53 2010

305.420952'09034--dc22

2010029308

Index by Mary Mortensen

♻️ Printed on acid-free paper

Last figure below indicates year of this printing

20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10

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For my parents,

Julie Svendsen Anderson and J. Douglas Anderson

Acknowledgments

My most profound intellectual debts are to Leslie Pincus and Hitomi Tonomura, my teachers and mentors at the University of Michigan. At Michigan, the History Department, the Center for Japanese Studies, and the Institute for Research on Women and Gender provided an ideal environment for me during my years as a graduate student. Ernest Young and Laura Lee Downs were inspirational teachers at the beginning of my graduate career. At the end, Ken K. Ito and Kathleen Canning graciously agreed to serve on my dissertation committee and provided invaluable feedback.

Dennis Yasutomo, Maki Hubbard, and Jonathan Lipman inspired my interest in Japan while I was still an undergraduate. Tateoka Yōko and Ōtake Hiroko were outstanding teachers at the Inter-University Center for Japanese Language Studies in Yokohama. They helped me wade through Meiji-era prose for the first time. I thank Sugimoto Fumiko for hosting me at the Historiographical Institute at the University of Tokyo during my year of research in Japan. I also received advice, help, and encouragement from Inada Masahiro, Nishizawa Naoko, Mieda Akiko, and Ōki Motoko. Ōki-sensei's death in 2006 was a great loss.

I am grateful to the following people for reading and commenting on portions of the manuscript at different stages: Sally Hastings, Jan Bardsley, Susan Burns, Barbara Brooks, Hikari Hori, Joan Judge, Kimberly Kono, Robin LeBlanc, Jonathan Lipman, Holly Sanders, and Alan Tansman. Timothy Van Compernelle deserves special mention here for

reading and commenting on the entire manuscript at a critical stage. I also wish to thank William M. Hammell at the Harvard University Asia Center and two anonymous reviewers whose reports helped me clarify a number of points. All mistakes are my own.

My colleagues at Smith College in the History Department and the Program in East Asian Studies have been very supportive. I would especially like to thank Ernest Benz, Suzanne Gottschang, and Daniel Gardner.

Over the course of my graduate career and in the process of writing this book, I have received invaluable assistance from the Fulbright Program, the University of Michigan, the Blakemore Foundation, the Northeast Asia Council of the Association for Asian Studies, and Smith College. Parts of Chapter 3 were originally published as "Kishida Toshiko and the Rise of the Female Speaker in Meiji Japan," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*, nos. 30-31 (December 2006): 36-59. I thank the journal for permission to reprint the material. I am also grateful to the National Diet Library for permission to reproduce the illustration of Kishida Toshiko that appears on the cover.

Friends and family have sustained me. Hisa Shibata has sent me articles for years to keep me abreast of the latest developments in women's studies in Japan, and Sachio and Yuzi Tamaki provided a home away from home. Thanks to Muriel, Jenny, Julia, Sheryl, and Claudia for providing friendship and sanity. My sisters, Krista Anderson Lee and Jennifer Anderson Begun, have been great friends. My brother-in-law, David Begun, is always thinking of ways to expand my audience. Macy made me laugh. Michael Bishop has made the journey more joyful than I could have imagined. My father, Doug, and stepmother, Bev, have provided unconditional support when I needed it most. My mother, Julie, has been my greatest cheerleader from the beginning.

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INTRODUCTION

Gendering Meiji Japan

In 1889, a young journalist named Kawata Rin'ya published a book entitled *Nihon joshi shinkaron* (On the evolution of Japanese women) in which he argued that social reform and equal rights for men and women were necessary if Japan was to enhance its authority, build a strong economy, and establish itself on equal footing with Western nations.¹ Kawata's strong support for women's political and economic rights was unusual, but the fact that he wrote about the subject was not. In fact, Kawata's book was part of a wide-ranging debate swirling through Japanese society on the proper relationship between women and the state. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, a period known as the Meiji era (1868–1912), a number of individuals, ranging from ordinary people to government officials, addressed the topic of women's status, roles, and rights in a variety of forums, including newspapers, journals, pamphlets, and public debates. Participants wrestled with questions concerning women's roles inside the home, what kinds of rights women should have, and the content of female education. They shared a belief that “the reform of the female sex” (*fujin kairyō*) was an “urgent problem.”²

1. Kawata, *Nihon joshi shinkaron*.

2. Tokutomi, “Nihon fujinron.”

This book foregrounds these multifaceted conversations about women's roles in order to examine the centrality of gender in the making of modern Japan.³ It analyzes the impact of rapid social change on gender relations, the ways that gender played a key role in refashioning the political order, and how individuals used gender, specifically debates about women's roles, to talk about their experiences of larger social transformation. One of the results of these conversations was the rise of "women" as a defining political and social category, a historically unprecedented phenomenon in Japan. This is not to say that gender did not matter before, but rather that it came to outweigh other markers, most notably status and class.

The double impact of the Meiji Revolution of 1868 (usually referred to in English-language historiography as the "Meiji Restoration"), and the revolutionary social and political ferment that preceded it, destroyed the decentralized military regime that had ruled Japan for over 260 years and replaced it with a new nation-state geared to meet the challenges of living in a competitive nineteenth-century world dominated by the West. Dramatic changes were everywhere in evidence. The shogun retired, and the emperor, who had lived in relative obscurity in Kyoto, moved to Tokyo to take up residence in the shogun's former castle.

The revolution propelled major social transformations. To those who lived through it, it must have seemed as though the world had turned upside down. By the early 1870s, the formal status system was dismantled, and the samurai, who had heretofore occupied the top of the social hierarchy, lost their swords and many of their privileges. New ideas and technologies flooded Japanese society and generated tremendous excitement and occasional dismay. The introduction of mechanized travel in the form of the train and new methods of keeping time reshaped sensibilities. Translations of Western thought containing the novel concepts of natural rights and representative government flooded Japan, inspiring individuals to engage in political activism. In his autobiography, the activist and later politician Kōno Hironaka recalled the

3. Canning defines "gender" as "the symbolic system or signifier of relations of power in which men and women are positioned differently" (*Gender History in Practice*, 4). On gender history and its focus on women, see *ibid.*, 11.

life-changing impact of reading John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* while traveling on horseback in the 1870s.⁴

The structure of the modern nation-state made it possible for the government to mobilize the populace to an unprecedented degree, nurturing loyalty to "Japan" in ways that would have been unimaginable in the past. Those who had just come to power began setting up the infrastructure of a modern centralized state and a system of local government. The state instituted primary education for all children, regardless of their status background. New ideas prompted changes in notions of taxation as well as military service; taxes began to be levied on the individual rather than the village, and all men were expected to serve in the new conscript army. Commentators deplored the past and looked to the future. Slogans such as "civilization and enlightenment" (*bunmei kaika*) and "rich country, strong military" (*fukoku kyōhei*) reverberated throughout society.⁵ Encounters with the nation-states of western Europe and the United States served to convince the Japanese that constitutional government was both desirable and inevitable if they wished to join the ranks of civilized countries and throw off the unequal treaties that Western countries had pressed upon them. Other reforms were deemed necessary as well, particularly those measures designed to make the populace more "civilized" with regard to dress, hairstyle, and customs.

The transition from Tokugawa to Meiji was neither seamless nor straightforward. Former samurai engaged in rebellions against the state through the mid-1870s, and villagers expressed resentment against the new system of education and the advent of universal military conscription. The number of peasant protests actually rose during the first few years of the Meiji era, and in the early 1880s, during a period of massive deflation, impoverished villagers engaged in uprisings. At the same time, some segments of the population harbored new political aspirations, often the result of their encounters with translations of Western texts, notably those by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Stuart Mill. They ex-

4. Vlastos, "Opposition Movements in Early Meiji, 1868–1885," 243.

5. On the nuances of both "universal civilization" and "westernization," see Howland, *Translating the West*, 33. On the translation and absorption of Western ideas about sex and gender in modern Japan, see Kaneko, *Kindai joseiron*.

pressed a powerful affinity for ideas of rights and liberty, and participated in a series of movements called the “Jiyū minken undō” or Freedom and People’s Rights Movement (for the sake of convenience, I shall refer to it as the *minken* movement). This movement, which turns out to have been a series of loosely connected movements, grew out of opposition to the fact that power in the new government was exercised primarily by leaders from two of the southwestern domains. Participants advocated the establishment of a parliamentary system as well as a wider distribution of power. The men and women who embraced people’s rights also protested the terms of the unequal treaties imposed by the Western imperialist powers and frequently linked their call for people’s rights (*minken*) to the cause of national rights (*kokken*). In 1881, their demands were partly met when the government announced that a constitution would be promulgated by the end of the decade. By 1890, the opposition movements had largely run out of steam, brought into line through a deft combination of heavy-handed suppression and conciliatory measures. The Imperial Japanese Constitution was announced with much fanfare in 1889, and the following year saw the beginning of a national Diet and party politics. After over two decades of considerable flux, this period marked a new stage as the shape of the polity came into sharper relief.⁶

One of the main legacies of the early Meiji era, and in particular the activism of the *minken* movement, was a new conception of politics and political culture, notably the conviction that individuals should participate in their government and take an active interest in national affairs.⁷ This culture was disseminated throughout Japan via newspapers and practices such as public speaking. Of course, Meiji political culture was not created whole-cloth. The late Tokugawa period saw the development of new communication networks, an unleashing of popular energies, and the politicization of many levels of society.⁸ One could argue that with the onset of Meiji, beginning with the 1868 Charter Oath and

6. Gluck, *Japan’s Modern Myths*, 17.

7. Yasumaru, “Kaisetsu,” 470–71.

8. See Wilson, *Patriots and Redeemers*; Walthall, *The Weak Body of a Useless Woman*; Miyachi, *Bakumatsu ishinki no bunka*; Harootunian, *Toward Restoration*. On the announcement of the Charter Oath to a limited audience: Breen, “The Imperial Oath.”

its promise that “matters will be decided based on public discussion,” these changes led to the creation of a new public sphere in which a number of “publics” engaged in conversations about the shape of the modern state, Japan’s place in the world, and the relationship between people and the state.

Modernity and the Woman Question

As Japan’s leaders confronted a hostile world, they encountered an idea with great currency in the West: that the social position of women reflected a country’s level of civilization. During a trip to the United States in 1867 on the eve of the Meiji Revolution, translator and later reformer and educator Fukuzawa Yukichi purchased a geography textbook that clarified Western views on the relationship between civilization and the status of women: “Half-civilized nations . . . treat their women as slaves. China, Japan, Turkey, and Persia are the principal countries of this class.”⁹ That Western women had few if any legal rights largely escaped the notice of Western and Japanese commentators; as we shall see, what they perceived as women’s high status in the West was mostly limited to the chivalry accorded to Western women. Although elites initiated dialogue about women’s roles and rights out of concern for their country’s reputation vis-à-vis the outside world, the conversation soon moved to an emerging public sphere where it sparked the wide-ranging debate that I introduced at the beginning of this chapter.

Conversations about gender and women were initiated by men in the early 1870s—they commenced at the very center of the polity, inaugurated by male government officials, intellectuals, and journalists in public debates, newspapers, and other written texts. But as this book demonstrates, over time women came to join the conversation, both as observers and participants. Politicized by the ferment surrounding the *minken* movement, these women moved from their status as objects of reform to subjects in the new public sphere. In the process, they demonstrated the ability to make political statements. They also learned to position themselves as citizens and loyal subjects of the nation. In the process, they carved out a lasting public space of their own.

9. Craig, *Civilization and Enlightenment*, 48.

But the debates about women were never just about women. One of the aims of this book is to show that such conversations were also connected to broader issues, including the shape of the new state, national rights, citizenship, the meanings of civilization, and Japan's place in the hierarchy of nations. Discussions about women allowed the Japanese to feel as though they were moving toward a level of civilization on par with the West, while at the same time preserving their unique traditions. Indeed, the particular virtues of Japanese women are a recurring theme throughout the Meiji discussions.

These debates have not been examined on their own terms in the scholarly literature, although one finds passing references to them in translations of Meiji thought and studies of women's political activism.¹⁰ Scholars have narrated the story of Meiji women in one of two ways. One approach frames the early Meiji period as a liberal time of possibility for women followed by a backlash that resulted in women's complete exclusion from political life in 1890. This story is one of failure, where women fought against the state and lost. Another view highlights the ways that women activists collaborated with the state, particularly after 1890. I wish to move beyond the binary paradigm that characterizes women activists either as fighting against the state or else adopting the state's line. Instead, I demonstrate the complexity of women's position—that at the same time women cooperated with the state in certain areas, on other issues they espoused visions and goals that were quite distinct from the state's, even when they availed themselves of similar language.

This study also provides us with the opportunity to rethink the widespread assumption that women were entirely excluded from political and public life after 1890, following a brief moment of possibility in the 1870s and 1880s spurred by contact with the West. While formal exclusion is certainly part of the story, I am uneasy with this focus since it relies on prescription rather than description and overlooks what women actually did, assuming that women were confined to the private, domestic sphere. Taking a different approach, this book argues that the

10. Kiyooka, *Fukuzawa Yukichi*; Sievers, *Flowers in Salt*; Mackie, *Feminism in Japan*; Pattessio, "Women's Participation"; Molony, "The Quest for Women's Rights"; Garon, *Molding Japanese Minds*.

gender order was remade following the moment of rupture ignited by the Meiji Restoration and that "a woman's place" in Meiji Japan was characterized by contradictions and unexpected consequences, by new opportunities and new constraints.

The book ends soon after 1890, when the advent of a parliamentary system and newly minted suffrage laws granted rights to less than 1 percent of the adult male population. The woman question subsequently receded into the background. Gender was no longer a central topic of discussion, for it had already been key in guaranteeing a new conservative political order, one where only a small number of men held political power. By the 1890s, then, the general parameters of the modern gender system, while certainly not set in stone, had taken shape.¹¹

Rethinking Women and Politics

In many areas of the world, scholars have tended to view women as entirely cut off from politics and political life prior to the granting of women's suffrage in the first half of the twentieth century. Since the 1980s, however, some scholars have begun to suggest that, with the advent of the modern era, women were actually deprived of a certain political access they had once enjoyed. Joan Landes, for example, has argued that the French Revolution in fact intensified women's exclusion from politics and the public sphere and inaugurated a new domesticity. In the old regime, Landes maintained, some women enjoyed high status in venues such as salons, whereas the revolution led to the exclusion of all women *as* women from the public sphere.¹² Political theorists such as Carole Pateman have contended that liberal and republican notions of citizenship were fundamentally hostile to women and in fact built on the deliberate exclusion of women.¹³ Although the work of these scholars was rooted in particular historical contexts, their understanding has profoundly shaped the perspective of other scholars, who have adopted similar frameworks for analyzing the often vexed

11. On the concept of a "gender system," see Ryan, "The Public and the Private Good," 16.

12. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere*.

13. Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*.

relationship between women and politics in societies other than France and Great Britain.¹⁴

More recently, however, some historians have begun to question this narrative. Scholars including Suzanne Desan have proposed that the French Revolution can be viewed from a different perspective, as a source of both new possibilities for women as well as constraints.¹⁵ At the same time that the revolution gave rise to a new emphasis on domesticity, “it also enacted laws giving women new civil rights as individuals, granted them new forms of legal and political access to the state, and generated languages and practices for criticizing gender inequities.”¹⁶ This study takes inspiration from such approaches and pursues modernity’s mixed consequences for the gender order in nineteenth-century Japan.¹⁷

Why Gender?

Gender was critical to many of the larger processes that define the nineteenth century, from the creation of modern law codes to the advent of modern public spheres. Historians have tended to underestimate its importance, especially with regard to high politics, a field that until recently has seemed impervious to gender.¹⁸ In fact, the operation of gender was everywhere: “The founding conjuncture of modern political meaning,” explains historian Geoff Eley, “was pervaded by binary orders of assumptions about woman and man, which became inscribed in the constitutions, codes of law, and political mobilizations, as well as the formal philosophical discourse around the universals of reason, law;

14. Desan explains “this set of ideas about French republicanism [as exclusionary] holds all the more power because historians working on other regions, such as England, the United States, Central Europe, and Latin America, have also argued that republican or liberal politics, depending on the geography, reinforced the domestic subordination of women” (*The Family on Trial*, 10).

15. Desan, “What’s after Political Culture?” 190.

16. Desan, *The Family on Trial*, 312–13.

17. *Ibid.*, 3–4.

18. By “high politics,” I mean the workings of the government carried out by appointed and/or elected officials.