Women’s Bodies, Women’s Minds: One Way of Rethinking Japanese Women’s History

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Abstract
We live in a world permeated with violence, yet until recently the field of Japanese studies has not focused on the connection between violence, gender, and modernity. The goal of this article is to suggest ways in which violence and gender figure in conspicuous consumption and the construction of the modern state.

“When men and women make love, they battle for superiority by rubbing their genitals together,” according to Tadano Makuzu (1763–1825) in her remarkable essay “Solitary Thoughts” (Hitori kangae). Born in Edo (present-day Tokyo) as the daughter of a samurai doctor, Makuzu both highlighted the status antagonisms of her day and presented a highly idiosyncratic critique of the political and economic problems that bedeviled the ruling class. By focusing on violence as an essential component in human relations, her juxtaposition of the body, the self, and the social points the way toward combining categories of analysis too often left separate. As an early nineteenth-century writer, she also serves as a bridge between premodern and modern discourses on sexuality, gender, and the state.

The study of women in Japanese history teeters between remembering and forgetting the connections between past and modern practices, the constraints placed on private and public acts, and the shifting boundaries between inner and outer spaces. How often is it said that women had no public life in premodern Japan, that they remained within the confines of the private patriarchy? The expansion of the modern state after 1868, especially in its creation of new legal codes, both brought women within its purview and silenced them in politics. Yet, in criminalizing adultery along with rape (the one implying consensual sex, the other not), the government simply formalized regulations in existence since the thirteenth century. That these regulations applied chiefly to the ruling class was less true in modern times, but the assumption was the same: what happened on the surface of women’s bodies took precedence over what went on in their minds. (The reverse was true for men. Insofar as rape functioned as a metaphor for a declaration of love, the sincerity of male
motives has mitigated their crime, at least in literary texts and popular culture down to the present.)

States are built on and through violence – the eradicating of enemies, the suppression of dissent, the conquest of territories – yet the context in which women can be incorporated into the study and analysis of violence is often left unstated. During the sixteenth-century civil wars, women served as hostages, which demonstrated the coercive power of kinship. In the twentieth century, the Japanese state tried to camouflage its acquisition of Korea and Manchuria by intermarrying the Korean and Qing with the Japanese royal families in an age-old variation on the hostage theme. Women served as a crucial foil in the state’s attempts to suppress dissent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Along with specific categories of men, all women were excluded from political participation by the Peace Preservation Laws. During the Asia/Pacific War, Japanese soldiers visited a particular form of violence on the “comfort women,” most of them Korean, but many from Southeast Asia as well. Regularly omitted from this litany of political, social, and imperialist violence in modern times is the domestic violence often seen as pertaining specifically to women. A number of recent texts focus on Takahashi Oden, the famous female poisoner of the nineteenth century; but what about Abe Sada, who strangled her lover at his request and cut off his penis? How do we historicize domestic violence? What was the connection with modernity that brought battered and mutilated men to the fore in Japan’s pre-war decades? The need is not just to gender violence, but to analyze how gender and violence construct each other.

Perhaps it is stretching too far to focus on violence in discussing the medicalization of women’s bodies by individual doctors before 1868 and under the aegis of the state thereafter. But when a major medical advance in the late eighteenth century involved the development of a hook for extracting fetuses piece by piece from the mother’s womb when all other measures had failed, I think it provides an excellent illustration of how violence has to be seen as a necessary component of progress. In addition to mobilizing women in public hygiene campaigns, the modern state also took new steps to regulate prostitution. No longer content to confine women behind the walls and moats of red-light districts, the state mandated compulsory gynecological examinations to curb sexually transmitted disease. The development of sexology as a new field of knowledge taught doctors and educators to interrogate men’s and women’s minds as well as their bodies.

That gender inequality existed and exists in Japan as in other societies is hardly news, but it might be worth revisiting the fundamental structures that underlie it and how they are transformed in modern times. From the family to the state, the privileging of men over women has led to an imbalance of social, economic, cultural, and political resources between the sexes that can be historicized. For example, even though Heian period
(794–1180) aristocratic women are nowadays praised for having played a major role in the construction of the national literary canon, their ability to do so came about only because they were officially deemed incapable of writing in Chinese, the purview of men. The education and literary skills they acquired furthered the careers of the men on whom they were dependent.8 That no one knows when they died suggests a deadly lack of interest in their fate. In more modern times, female writers have all too often found that men have the last word in their books that critique and limit their meaning, just as men have the last word on who becomes a popular singer.

In her essay, Makuzu lamented that in the fight for superiority, commoner women too often triumphed over daimyo men and threatened noble houses with destruction. Her complaint points to the unsettling changes wrought by a commercial revolution that put women at the forefront of conspicuous consumption, a position they achieved again in the early twentieth century and more recently at the turn of this century. Is it possible to posit a connection between women, consumption, and violence at these particular points in time that pays each period its historical due? Twenty years ago this would have been unthinkable in the context of Japan’s modern history. Instead, a focus on modernity meant searching for the roots of Japan’s success in building a modern state, in economic, political, and institutional terms. Nowadays, we are more willing to consider the possibility that violence is inherent in the process of becoming modern, that the transformation from what went before to modern structures must inevitably violate accepted patterns of practice, and that this violation inevitably gets inscribed on the bodies of men and women. Can it be that this violation, or better, this series of violations, lies at the root of the violence that we experience in modern times?

Notes

Anne Walthall began her career with work on peasant uprisings in late eighteenth-century Japan. She then explored the world of peasant women, most notably in The Weak Body of a Useless Woman: Matsuo Taseko and the Meiji Restoration (1998). Her current research is on the shogun’s women in comparative perspective.


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**Bibliography**


