

Living as a Woman and Thinking as a Mother in Japan

A Feminine Line of Japanese Moral Philosophy

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When it comes to gender, Asian cultures in general are marked by enormous fluidity. We often find femininity widely used as a cultural category distinct from biological sexuality. When talking about gender in Japan, therefore, we need always to keep the diversity of usage in mind, lest we uniformly impose modern dualistic notions of gender on femininity where they do not really belong. As a cultural category by and large independent of the duality of the sexes, femininity has held an essential place in Japan's cultural self-understanding.

GENDER IN JAPAN

Tessa Morris-Suzuki has analyzed the perspective of “female Japan” from two sides: the viewpoint of Western Orientalists and the traditional Japanese equation of woman and nature in *mono no aware* もののあわれ (SUZUKI 1998, 110–39.). She focuses attention on the hidden but important role that gender played in Japan's process of modernization, arguing that the formation of modern Japan's identity as a nation state was conditioned throughout by a strategy of dividing Japan into female

and male domains. Femininity was associated with the home, and the home with stability and continuity, while modernity and national power were associated with masculinity. In this sense we may speak of a process of re-inventing modern Japan as a powerful form of masculinity. Suzuki's analysis shows how the strategy of gender division was put to use effectively to enable rapid modernization and Westernization, while at the same time maintaining a certain continuity with tradition. The aspect of gender reveals the paradoxical character of Japanese modernization, because it was precisely at these early stages of Japanese modernization and the rise of capitalism that women were mobilized as the vanguard of modernization by being exploited in large measure as factory workers.

As Suzuki's analysis makes clear, when viewed from the standpoint of gender, Japanese modernization was a Janus-faced process of liberation and repression. Modern women thinkers like Hiratsuka Raichō 平塚らいてう and Yosano Akiko 与謝野晶子, as representatives of prewar Japanese feminism, were greatly conscious of this dialectic of gender. They sought to recall the feminine line of Japanese cultural tradition to deconstruct modernity. In this sense, Japanese feminism may be seen as a kind of radical postmodernism, one that sought to overcome the rapid modernization and Westernization that had taken hold of the country.

Before taking up particular women thinkers, we may take a brief look at the general place of femininity in Japanese culture. This is crucial, given that the modern idea of gender with its strict and systematic dichotomy of the sexes is a modern invention were Japan is concerned. If we are to understand its place in premodern Japan, we need to disassociate the meaning of femininity from questions of biological and social dualism. As a cultural category, femininity clearly holds sway over masculinity. It is also not enough to consider femininity as a principle on an even par with masculinity, and to understand both in analogy to *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽. Ichikawa Tazumaro 市川匡麿, who was very critical of Motoori Norinaga 本居宣長 insists in his *Maganohire* 『末賀能比連』 (1772–80) that man and woman are not to be understood in terms of an interdependent *yin* and *yang* relationship but as two altogether different principles.¹

1. He describes the relation between man and woman in this way: 男女は男女、月日は月日、水火は水火にて、目に見えたるままにて [Men and women are men and women, the sun

Femininity belongs first and foremost to Japanese aesthetics, as notions like *たおやめぶり* *taoyame-buri* (delicate elegance), 幽玄 *yūgen* (graceful subtlety), and *iki* (“chic”) indicate. It is hardly surprising to find a strong tradition of women’s poetry in Japanese literature. Referring to Ki no Tsurayuki’s “Kana Introduction” 仮名序 to the *Kokinwakashū* 古今和歌集, where the feminine style is compared to a woman said to be *あわれなようにて、つよからず、いはば、よき女のなやめるところある* [like something that appears as it is, without having to do with strength, as if something a noble woman might be troubled over], Baba tries to recover the lost premodern tradition of female poetry by tracing its origins to the poems of princess Sotoori in the *Kojiki* 古事記.² In doing so, she demonstrates how this tradition of female poetry was marked by a principle of polyphony, giving voice to the manifold interiority that she characterizes as *momi-momi shite* もみもみして. Women’s poetry is an expression of a complex emotional dynamic that draws on poetic tools of indirect depiction like *tsuya* 艶 (gloss). To be sure, this is an image of femininity borrowed from a traditional way of considering woman’s nature, but as a cultural category it was widely adopted without reference to women. In the Japanese context femininity needs to be seen primarily as a principle of polyphony.

The tradition of the culture of femininity is not limited to poetry or literature. Sakabe Megumi 坂部恵 points out the philosophical implications of this culture of femininity and sees in it the ground of the Japanese idea of the subject.³ In treating the meaning of femininity for Japanese culture, Sakabe emphasizes the dynamic crossover in the relation between masculinity and femininity, citing Hikaru Genji 光源氏 as “a typical example of the hero with *taoyame-buri*” *たおやめぶり*.⁴

and moon are the sun and moon, water and fire are water and fire, just as they appear to the eye.] (ICHIKAWA N.D.).

2. This tradition of feminine poetry has been differently revitalized at various times. Especially important in its modern revitalization was Origuchi Shinobu 折口信夫.

3. “Polyphonic Subject and the Transversality of Genders: Possession, Narrative and Femininity in the Japanese Cultural Tradition,” a lecture delivered at the Berlin Japanese German Center in 2006.

4. We see another example of such reversible gender relationships in the *Tori-kaebaya monogatari* 『とりかへばや物語』 (Tale of the Changelings) where an aristocratic woman was forced to play a young nobleman and in doing so became involved in very complex love relationships with women as well as with men.

The reversibility of gender is clearly one of the basic elements of Japanese culture, suggesting a use of femininity completely different from that of sexual dichotomy. This, in turn, suggests that the modern concept of the “subject,” both because of its individualistic overtones as well as because of its clear distinction between the sexes, is largely alien to traditional Japanese modes of thought. It is for this reason that Sakabe recommends approaching the Japanese “subject” as a polyphonic phenomenon.

GENDER AND JAPANESE MODERNIZATION

These reversible gender relations disappeared in the course of Japan’s modernization. Like modernization pretty much everywhere, the direction of the process in Japan was strongly dominated by masculinity. It is interesting to note how the ruling powers invented modern gender dualism by disassociating modernity from more traditional images of gender. As convenient as this was for speeding up the social adjustment to modernization, the invention was obviously an importation from Western modernization.

The modern notion of gender in general has two defining characteristics: it is naturalistic and dualistic. Since the modern notion of gender is based on the biological determination of sexuality, it is a naturalistic category. It is dualistic in the sense that it creates two completely distinct gender identities. The modern notion of gender is thus able to function as a driving force supporting dualistic thinking. This explains why modernization necessarily entailed the destruction of traditional polyphonic gender and why the introduction of modern gender was seen as an index of successful modernization.

This may also help to explain the fact that the “women’s question” was one of the most popular topics among Meiji intellectuals and the philosophers of the dubious project of “national morals (*kokumin dōtoku*) 国民道徳, a nationwide program of moral education based on the problematic text of the 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education. No doubt the project of a national morality set the ideological background to military nationalism in prewar Japan.

A number of intellectuals of the Japanese enlightenment like Fukuzawa Yukichi 福澤諭吉 (1899) and Mori Arinori 森有礼 (1874) devoted considerable attention in their writings to the “women’s question.” On the surface, their texts leave a surprisingly liberal impression. They denounce existing patents of discrimination against women in Japanese society and emphasize the equality between men and women. Fukuzawa criticizes traditional polygamy by insisting:

Men and women are alike in that both are born as human beings. And inasmuch as each has an indispensable rule to play in society, one cannot escape from being a man or a woman. Man is as much a human being as woman is.⁵

Fukuzawa saw the introduction of modern Western monogamy as one way to secure this equality.

Other liberal authors joined Fukuzawa in calling on Japanese women to liberate themselves from the restrictions of the traditional family system with its underlying Confucian ideology. It is important to note that this liberal gender discourse focused on discrimination against women within the family, and reduced the whole of the women issues to the domain of the “household.” Characteristically enough, these writers did not pay any attention to the social and political problems of women, among them the absence of political equality. Their liberal discourse served to limit women’s issues on the family and to brand women’s “liberation” as a revolt against the traditional structure and morals of the family.

A critical reading of the texts of these enlightenment intellectuals shows how, at this very early stage of modernization, an effective transformation of traditional gender into modern gender was coming about, a transformation that was greatly to influence the self-understanding of Japanese feminists as modern women. Beneath the outward trappings of liberal thinking, a political system was being set up to exclude women from political decisions and activities.

Recent gender studies have analyzed this paradoxical role of gender in the process of Japanese modernization and pointed to a strain of “Ori-

5. See MAEHARA 2005 for a good overview of Fukuzawa Yukichi’s thinking on womanhood.

entalism” in Japan as the background of the gender paradox (SEKIGUCHI 2007). The invention of the modern idea of gender understood women always in relation to Confucianism. Viewed as a backward social group, “women” were defined in terms of their ties to traditional Confucian family morals. “Woman” thus became a symbol of the backward state of Asian tradition as such, so that femininity could be called on to legitimate the creation of a “Greater East Asian Empire.”

Remarkably enough, all the major intellectual figures of the Japanese cultural awakening, as well as political activists like Ueki Emori 植木枝盛, saw the “women’s question” as a problem of Confucian family values.⁶ Equally amazing is how quickly Japanese bourgeois women at the time adopted this view as their own. It is little wonder, then, that in the very different discourse of “national morality” that flourished in the 1920s and 1930s, femininity became central once again in two ways. On the one hand, in order to legitimate the superiority of Japan, the myth of the Japan’s founding goddess Amaterasu was evoked to show the superiority of Shinto over Confucianism and Buddhism. On the other hand, Japanese women were held up as examples of a backward social group trapped in a repressive Confucian ethic (see INOUE 1925).

The transformation of traditional gender into modern gender was to a great part determined by this amalgam of Orientalism and sexism. It was a rapid and powerful process of destruction.

Yanagita Kunio 柳田國男 was one of the few modern intellectuals still able to sense the presence of a strong female power in premodern Japanese society. What he describes in his book *The Way Things Were before Cotton* (木綿以前のこと)⁷ is a valuable source of information on the female power that Japanese women gained by dropping out of the normal framework of the community, as well as on the cross-border existence that social exclusion made possible. Here again, we see femininity at

6. It is important to note that Ueki’s standpoint differed from that of other enlightenment intellectuals of the *Meiroku zasshi* 明六雑誌 in that he did not reduce the whole problem of women discrimination to Confucian family morals, but also points out the parallelism between *danson-jobi* 男尊女卑 (respect men, humble women) and the feudal system (UEKI 1889).

7. Particular attention should be drawn to his essays 遊行女婦のこと [Wandering women] of 1934 and 寡婦と農業 [Widows and agriculture] of 1929.

work as a principle of polyphony, albeit one that was to be extinguished in the process of modernization and colonization.

Jin Jungwon's impressive study on the virtue of *ryōsai-kenbo* 良妻賢母, "good wife and wise mother," has detailed the process by which "feminine virtues" (*jotoku* 女徳) were invented in 1890s in Japan, and then around 1905 in China and Korea under the influence of Japan, while traditional feminine values disappeared from the scene (JIN 2006). Feminine values had been something that reached beyond mere social norms, and indeed seemed to have had a social and cultural power that enabled them to transcend normal social differences. But these were replaced by modern "feminine virtues" like that of "good wife and wise mother," which served to tether women to the realm of home and children.⁸

This transformation of traditional gender into modern gender-dualism long kept Japanese women not only from being active in the official political domain, but also had serious consequences for the development of Japanese feminism as social movement. Japanese feminism has lost its meaningful connection to its own history of "femininity," and with it, to polyphonic modes of thought.

FEMININITY AS A PHILOSOPHICAL CATEGORY

One is surprised to discover how well Raichō and Akiko, women thinkers representing the second generation of intellectual from the late Meiji to Taishō eras, understood the dialectics of gender in modernizing Japan. If they were not able to articulate their observations with sufficient philosophical clarity, part of the reason may lie in the fact that they were trying to think and write from their own experience and reality. In later years, after World War II, Japanese feminists would talk of the "contradiction of a conceded liberation," drawing attention to the way in which their philosophical understanding had been compromised by a concept of gender freedom that had been granted them from outside.

8. The concept of "feminine virtues" itself is a remarkable modern invention, based on the idea of autonomous modern subject as well as on the vague image of traditional femininity, *onnarashisa* 女らしさ.

Postwar feminism, however, has proved incapable of conceptualizing the problem of “conceded liberation” adequately, in part because it is based on modern sexual dualism and defines its aim merely as the empowerment of women.

Contrary to the postwar feminism, the Taishō feminists were trying to find a meaningful connection to philosophy. The rhetoric of “self-awareness” was the key to opening a space for the repressed and forgotten dimension of femininity.

In Raichō’s words

Instead of simply demanding freedom and independence and rights in the outward things of life—or rather, before those demands are made—women have to return to themselves, awoken to their own dignity, seek emancipation within so as to secure freedom in their inward, spiritual parts. (HITATSUKA 1987, 151)

Prior to the emergence of feminism as a social movement, she stressed the need for a women’s philosophy of the “inner self.” By this she meant a spiritual movement aimed “first of all at securing a sense of self for Japanese women, who by and large at the time lacked one” (152).

Raichō, Akiko, and the younger Takamura Itsue all gave “women’s awakening” precedence over social reform. In this sense, women’s thought may be classified as a “philosophy of self-awareness.” Suffering from modern sexual dualism, women thinkers were struggling to reach a stage of “self” that would take them beyond social gender differences and open a space for the articulation of the fuller cultural memory of femininity as a principle of polyphony.

For Ueda Shizuteru “self-awareness,” unlike self-consciousness, means that the “self,” located in a particular place, opens out into the “non-self,” and illuminated by that expansion of its place, comes to know itself (UEDA 2000). Taken this sense, gender distinction can be seen as a fundamental difference whose structure is that of a self opening out into non-self. One’s own sex always opens out into the “other sex.” It only seems natural, then, that Japan’s women thinkers should have been drawn to a “philosophy of self-awareness.”

Femininity in modern women’s thought was also significant for the philosophy of history. A careful reading of Raichō’s famous text “In the

Beginning, Woman was the Sun,” considered a kind of manifesto of Japanese bourgeois feminism, or her essay on “The New Woman,” which was influential in the Korean women’s movement in the time, shows her aiming at a new, circular idea of history as rebirth. Although the texts are full of contradictions, they represent an attempt to create a kind of “non-place” in the history of modern Japan where even the traditional and the premodern can be recognized as essential parts of modernity.

Akiko’s frequent references to Heian literature, especially the *Tale of Genji*, suggest a philosophical meaning in the text. In order to construct the fictional time of the *Genji*, Murasaki Shikibu adopted a highly sophisticated method that recent research has shown to be a multiplication of time. Its free play with multiple time dimensions was brought about by the interplay of an ambiguous time-consciousness (*izureno ontokika* いづれの御時にか) and references to the emperor that were clearly anachronous at the time of Murasaki Shikibu (see KAWAZOE 2007). As a careful reader of the *Genji*, Akiko must have recognized these literary constructions, which would help explain her criticisms of the dominion of the “recent” in Japanese modernity.

Contrasting these women with male philosophers, we find traces of distinctively feminine modes of thought, even when no specific mention is made of the fact. In this sense, it seems to me misguided to corral women thinkers into the distinct category of “feminist philosophy,” and more profitable to pursue their close relationship to Nishida Kitarō’s “I and Thou” or Kuki Shūzō’s “Metaphysics of Literature,” not to mention Watsuji’s *Ethics* or Kuki’s essays on Japanese aesthetics.

THE MORALITY OF MOTHERHOOD

In conclusion, I would like to attempt a kind of cross-comparison between women thinkers, especially with regard to their philosophies of motherhood, and male philosophers.

Moral philosophy today is shaped by the ever greater attention being given to so-called “underdeveloped” countries in defining what counts as “moral.” Just as an ecologically sound lifestyle is more readily available to those who live in highly industrialized countries than it is to those in

developing countries, so, too, basic moral categories like freedom, justice, and human rights are more understandable to those living in societies where these moral concepts are by and large taken for granted. This hermeneutical advantage, the fact that the basic moral concepts are an essential part of self-understanding, makes people more conscious of the moral quality of their acts and lifestyle. In contrast to this “developed moral consciousness,” people without access to moral control over their own actions can easily be seen as acting “inhumanly” and their cultures and traditions as offending the norms of modern moral consciousness.

Feminist philosophers in the third world have been trying to uncover the implicit connections between the inhumane treatment of women and cultural traditions that revere ideals of masculine aggressiveness. From the standpoint of the moral consciousness of the “developed” world, there is no question of the inhuman, abusive treatment women are made to suffer. The problem does not stop with the actual abuse, but includes the fact that these women have no means to accuse the violent will that targets them. Within their worldview, their traditions, and their understanding of themselves as women, there is no possibility of making the violence appear as actually violent. It is so, to speak, a violence of nonviolence, because the suffering is hidden under layers of convention and habit, which in turn are supported by society, culture, and history, as well as by the given framework of moral thinking.

With this in mind, surely one of the most important tasks of moral philosophy today is to create a space for morality beyond morals, namely a philosophy of supra-morality.

Heidegger remarks in reference to Nietzsche that justice, if defined from the perspective of life, requires eliminating everything “given,” in order to create a new space. This definition of justice flows from his definition of *Denken* as *bauend* (HEIDEGGER 1989, 254ff). Such a radical definition of justice ties our hands when it comes to working within received concepts of justice and trying to make moral judgments on the basis of those concepts. Such justice requires a break from given moral ideals and conceives of morality in relation to the problem of human conditions. The point is that justice is not a matter of judgment but of existence. Heidegger’s understanding of justice as “ontological occurrence” seems to relate to the efforts of those feminist philosophers struggling to make

injustices against women visible. First and foremost, justice must concern itself with binding moral judgment to the facts of existence.

To Japanese women thinkers, morality was also not a matter of forming right or wrong judgements. It had to do with enabling women to live. In the debate on women's chastity, Yosano Akiko argued that the nature of human morality is fundamentally a "rule of life." As a poet, she understood "rule" to include not only regulations and mandates but also the "rhythm" of life. Accordingly, she debunked the very concept of chastity as "anti-moral." In her words:

People's morality does not lie somewhere up in the sky but in the serious, real, and spirited things of life. Morality is the rule of human life, the real marching song. It must be life's musical score and plan. (YOSANO 1985, 92)

Starting from this idea of ethics as the rhythm of life, Akiko considered the very concept of a "universal morality" to be anti-moral. In the effort to set out a common morality for everyone, it ignored the ethic of life's own rhythms. Life is about change:

Life continues to blossom and bear fruit in and out of season. Novelty is the true countenance of life..... Our ethical views must also be in habitual transition. The quest of eternal truth is as foolish as gluing down the bridges on a *koto* harp. (YOSANO 1985, 92)

Or again:

In my view there is not only no eternal truth, but not even a common truth for all people. By failing to heed the inconvenient fact that the quest of a fixed truth traversing time and space does not fit the reality of human life, was not the world of the past filled with anxiety, skepticism, and dejection? Have not philosophy and religion and morality as we have known them lost their authority for our times? (93)

She saw gender distinction as one more item in the list of regulations devised by a heteronomous morality that has forgotten "life's true countenance." It has left people stuck in the mud and unable to move, trapped in the highly dangerous position of yielding to the "extinction of the will

to life.” For Akiko, freedom needs to be accompanied by intelligent performance.

In this context it is helpful to recall the philosophical meaning of the “debate over motherhood” (1918–1919), considered to be the most famous debate in the history of modern Japanese feminism. Beginning with Hiratsuka Raichō, what opened Japanese women thinkers to the “non-self” was their own body, a body that belongs to “motherhood.” Through the accumulated experience of pregnancy, birth, and child-rearing, these thinkers discovered the philosophical meaning of motherhood. For Raichō, motherhood was an experience of the fundamental powerlessness of human existence.

Impotent and powerless in my own strengths, there was nothing I could do. I was really beyond the reach of anyone’s help in this world but my own, pitiful and forlorn. (HIRATSUKA 1987, 97)

This encounter with the “other” provided Raichō with a glimpse into the lives of the socially weak. In contrast, Akiko saw the experience of childbirth as basically “a matter of life and death,” an experience of ultimate values:

Men have nothing to do with the life-staking event of birth and are of no use in it. This is a great role that women always and everywhere bear alone. As important as the nation is, whatever one may say about scholarship or war, I cannot imagine any great task to surpass that of a woman giving birth. (Yosano 1985, 32)

For modern militarist nations, the highest human good is to give one’s life for one’s country. In contrast to that scale of values, Akiko’s description of the experience of motherhood in birth represents it as a no less life-staking event that tolls a philosophy of birth loud and clear against a philosophy of death.

The fierce “debate over motherhood” that waged between Raichō and Akiko was to prove a decisive stimulus for modern Japanese women thinkers to break new ground in a “philosophy of motherhood.” The debate is not to be taken simply as a political discussion over the patronage of motherhood. It has rather to be seen as an attempt to think through the experience of motherhood. And this attempt, in turn, opens

up a dimension of ontological ethics that conceives of the female body as the primary ethical body that is bound structurally to the other.

Takamure Itsue, whom Raichō called “my philosophical daughter,” took a further step towards an ethics of the female body by describing the natural process of nursing. The female body is structured to give a birth and nurse the new life. Women live unconsciously with this body opened primarily to the other. At the same time, Takamure described the tragic split between the ethical body of women and established social rules (TAKAMURE 1930). Her wider message is clear: it is not the female body that is to be moralized. Society itself must be moralized.

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