

Introduction

Gail Lee Bernstein

Japanese women's lives, like those of women everywhere and in every time, have been shaped by a multitude of factors. The many forces that have affected their fate include their position within the family (and the nature of the family system itself); their social class standing; the predominant religious and social values of their society; and the prevailing legal, economic, and political institutions. These have changed continuously over the course of Japanese history, altering women's status and the roles they were expected to play. It makes little sense, therefore, to talk about Japanese women as though they formed a monolithic, unchanging group. Even within one historical time period, the lives of an upper-class woman, a merchant woman, and a female servant in a wealthy farm family were worlds apart in terms of work, clothing, norms of behavior, and the countless other indicators of standard of living, status, position—in short, life experience. Indeed, the distinction between femininity and masculinity itself has varied. Gender has been continuously recreated.

We are specifically concerned here with the creation of female gender. How has womanhood been defined and redefined over the past 350 years? Who did the defining? What gave femaleness its meaning? And what caused changes in the common understanding of differences between femininity and masculinity? Our underlying assumption is that

Following East Asian practice, Japanese surnames precede given names in this book, except in cases of Japanese scholars whose English-language works are cited or who reside in the West and observe the Western practice of giving surnames last. Unless otherwise indicated, Tokyo is the place of publication of all Japanese references.

gender, unlike sex, is not a biological given but is, in the words of Evelyn Fox Keller, “a socially constructed and culturally transmitted organizer of our inner and outer worlds.”¹ Whereas sex roles refer merely to the fixed range of capabilities of female and male genitalia,² gender roles are sociohistorical conventions of deportment arbitrarily attributed to either females or males. “Women” and “men” are culturally created categories.³ Our goal is to understand continuity and change in Japanese ideals of femininity, in the processes by which women were trained to approximate these ideals, and in the ways their actual roles diverged from these ideals.

Our starting point, the Tokugawa or Edo period (1600–1868), is variously viewed as the traditional, late feudal, or early modern period of Japanese history. During this time the Tokugawa military house, which had its capital in Edo (present-day Tokyo), monopolized the title of shōgun and ruled over lesser military houses. Below the hereditary military (samurai) class were three other fixed social or occupational classes—peasant, artisan, and merchant (in descending order of social status)—as well as numerous other groups, such as physicians, artists, and a court aristocracy, who did not fit precisely into any of these four official classes. Members of one class could not legally intermarry with members of other classes or change their occupational status. Thus, merchants could not become samurai, and samurai could not farm; peasants were forbidden from leaving their land and migrating to the cities to engage in trade.

By the eighteenth century, many of these restrictions were honored more in the breach. Nevertheless, the hierarchical social class system, reinforced by Confucian philosophical thought, dominated people’s thinking about social relations and elevated elders, males, and officials above other members of society. Even after the abolition of feudal class distinctions in the late nineteenth century, an age- and gender-based hierarchy still held to varying degrees, both in society at large and within the family.

Because Japanese society, unlike American society, has been relatively homogeneous but highly rank-conscious, especially in the Tokugawa period, Japanese women’s experience of womanhood historically had more to do with social class and biological age than it did with race,

1. Evelyn Fox Keller, “Making Gender Visible in the Pursuit of Nature’s Secrets,” in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 67.

2. See Carol Vance, “Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality,” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carol Vance (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 9.

3. Linda Gordon discusses the history of women’s history, including the notion of gender, in “What’s New in Women’s History,” in de Lauretis (ed.), *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, chap. 2.

religion, or ethnicity. A woman's socioeconomic position, in turn, was determined by her family's social standing. Most people lived and worked within the family, which remained the basic unit of society. Therefore, any discussion of women and gender construction must center on the family system.

The ideal family in the Tokugawa period, as Uno (chapter 1) describes it, was the *ie*, the stem-family household, which retained only one child as heir in each generation. More than a biological unit, the *ie* is frequently defined as a corporate entity in the sense that it embraced nonkin (servants, adopted heirs, and the like) as well as blood relations (grandparents, their married heir, and his or her unmarried children). The *ie* also connoted household property, domestic animals, ancestors, and such intangibles as family reputation. Like a well-established business, the *ie* was devoted to its own perpetuation.

Although most, but not all, households were headed by a male as dictated by custom and law, Confucian teachings about filial piety gave older women a full measure of respect and care from junior household members, male as well as female. That respect was rooted not only in the older women's seniority but also in the influence and authority they earned during their life by demonstrating loyalty to the family and competence in the performance of household tasks and the preservation of harmony among family members. Hard physical labor in the fields and in the kitchen, an accommodating nature, and good relations with in-laws: these were the qualities expected of young wives in Japan's largely agrarian society.

Although all women were expected to marry, childbearing was not necessarily a woman's primary obligation. While children, and especially sons, were essential to the continuity of the *ie* and the care of the elderly, the Japanese family system had ways to compensate for infertility and infant mortality. Adoption of sons, of sons-in-law, and even of married couples guaranteed heirs, as did the custom of designating daughters as heirs. Thus, from the Tokugawa period and earlier to well into the twentieth century, womanhood was not primarily equated with motherhood, and motherhood was not necessarily defined biologically.

Nor was childrearing the "fundamental determining experience of womanhood."⁴ Uno argues that older women, such as grandmothers, and younger children, wet nurses, and servants all participated in child-rearing, as did fathers and grandfathers. Since the household was an economic unit of production, both the family's business and its reproductive functions took place at home, where several generations living

4. See *ibid.*, 26–27. In contrast, motherhood was the "fundamental defining experience of womanhood" for late-nineteenth-century feminists in the West.

together under one roof participated in tasks crucial to the household's survival.

Walthall (chapter 2) confirms Uno's claim: at least for rich peasants, a woman's "womb was . . . less significant than the ability to maintain the family's fortune and reputation," and the Japanese woman did this in part by serving as a competent household manager. Indeed, Confucian ideology discouraged the active participation of young mothers in their own children's upbringing on the grounds that they were morally unsuited to such a serious role or were likely to spoil their children. Women were thus valued as workers, wives, and especially daughters-in-law, not solely as mothers.

Of course, we cannot always assume that official teachings concerning gender were reflected in social reality, as Walthall's copious documentation of peasant women's activities warns us. What women did (and what they got away with) was very different from socially prescribed norms, which usually were observed, if at all, by the small minority of women in the upper classes. The peasant women in Walthall's study experienced lives of much greater freedom and diversity than the official ideology would lead us to believe. Depending on their economic circumstances, family composition, and myriad other factors, they might go to school, travel, work for wages, choose their own marriage partners, enter into matrilocal marriages, marry men who were not heir to existing households and so help to found new households, divorce, remarry, engage in adulterous affairs, and serve as household heads. Promiscuous girls, barren wives, willful daughters-in-law, and divorcées all managed to survive relatively unstigmatized by village social sanctions. In fact, Walthall argues that precisely this flexibility in women's roles ensured the survival of the family itself and its individual members.

Nevertheless, the importance of women as wives and daughters-in-law is a repeated theme in Japanese history since 1600, with demographic implications that Cornell spells out in her discussion of mortality rates for elderly women in Tokugawa Japan (chapter 3). Despite the inevitable tensions between the young wife and her mother-in-law, this dynamic relationship was crucial to the life expectancy of women. Elderly women living with a daughter-in-law, Cornell finds, were more likely to live longer, especially if the daughter-in-law was young and had produced grandchildren. Those without family fared less well. The giving of care to the elderly thus becomes an enduring theme in the definition of womanhood. The dutiful daughter-in-law appears in many guises throughout the pages of this volume, but whether breadwinner, farm laborer, or simply household manager, she typically engaged in these activities to support her husband's family, including her long-lived mother-in-law.

What of women who did not marry out? Under what circumstances could a woman resist becoming a daughter-in-law? And what were the consequences of such unconventional behavior? Three examples of such women in the Tokugawa period appear in this volume: Robertson's Shingaku (Heart Learning) teacher, Fister's poet-painter, and Lebra's sake brewer (chapters 4–6).

Although the Shingaku movement carefully prescribed how women should behave to overcome congenital moral infirmities, not all Shingaku women performed according to their proper role. This role consisted of acquiring such virtues as obedience, frugality, modesty, and purity, and was best done in the context of marriage—that is, in service to her husband's family. "Marriage," in Robertson's words, "made possible a woman's achievement of 'female' gender": her female-likeness was premised and contingent on the marriage institution.

Jion-ni Kenka, an eighteenth-century disciple of Shingaku, illustrates a successful departure from the insistence that the only female-like woman was a married one (or a male Kabuki actor impersonating a woman). Resisting marriage, Kenka became first a Buddhist nun and then a disseminator of Shingaku teachings. Other female proselytizers spreading moral teachings about women's proper role followed in her footsteps. But, as Robertson observes, "female disciples and teachers of Shingaku did not epitomize the Shingaku Woman, even though they participated in her construction." A female-like woman was not supposed to be traveling around the country, even if her mission *was* to preach that the only female-like woman was a married one who stayed at home to serve her husband's family!

The religious life represented one legitimate alternative to marriage in the Tokugawa period, but there were others as well. Talented women could support themselves as professional entertainers, or geisha. A few gifted women were supported by their natal families. One example is the poet-painter Ema Saikō. A distinguished nineteenth-century *bunjin*, or scholar of Chinese studies, Ema was celebrated for her Chinese-style verse, calligraphy, and ink paintings. Throughout her life she remained under the wing of her doting father, himself a noted scholar and physician, and enjoyed the patronage of leading male artists of the day. By staying single, she avoided the strenuous obligations incumbent upon married women. As Fister points out, "The freedom from childbearing, conjugal domestic responsibilities, and manual labor allowed her to mature fully as an artist." Nonetheless, as an adult this brilliant woman suffered pangs of regret for missing out on a "normal" married life.

To the extent that Japanese women had a choice between pursuing a vocation or marrying, it was a painful one. Nevertheless, not all women had to make such an either/or decision. By entering into matrilineal,

matrilineal marriages that enabled their families to “take a son-in-law,” the female sake brewers in Lebra’s study managed to become wives while avoiding the domestic duties imposed on daughters-in-law. The traditions of the merchant class, especially in the Kansai area, apparently encouraged women to be active in their natal family’s business. Lebra provides several examples of such female entrepreneurs, perhaps the most outstanding of whom was Tatsu’uma Kiyō, whose “management strategies made her a pioneer in the [sake-brewing] industry during its period of most rapid growth and prosperity.”

Kiyō circumvented customary constraints on active female participation in business by hiring male brewmasters and managers and by arranging marriages for her daughters that maximized the interests of the family business. “The practice of relying on wives and daughters to run the venerable family business,” Lebra reminds us, “was already well established by the time Kiyō was born. Rather than automatically entrusting the business to a son with questionable ability, merchant houses could select the most talented apprentice-clerk as an adopted husband for their daughter, thus ensuring the success and continuity of the family business.”

Once again we see how preservation of the *ie* took precedence over all other considerations. We also see, however, that although family interests could and did severely restrict women, under certain circumstances, as the case of Kiyō illustrates, it could also justify the transgression of customs and laws that favored men, such as marital residence patterns, primogeniture, and head of household succession. To be sure, women who became famous and powerful in their own right were not necessarily recognized or appreciated as such by their families or by society. Indeed, if, like Kenka, they succeeded by violating gender roles, they might be seen as dangerous. Tokugawa authorities regulated such roles and punished women who violated them. Kenka’s own father was dismayed by her transgression of feminine norms of behavior. Whereas the family of Ema Saikō to this day proudly honors its talented ancestor by preserving her artwork in their family collection, later generations of Kiyō’s sake-brewing family seem to have been embarrassed by her spectacular success in outwitting all other competitors. Their reticence to discuss this entrepreneurial matriarch and their failure to preserve records documenting her business achievements suggest a lingering ambivalence toward women who succeeded in unconventional, nonprescribed ways.

With the defeat of the Tokugawa regime in the middle of the nineteenth century and the establishment of a centralized nation-state, the new Meiji leadership ushered in a host of changes designed to rid Japan

of its feudal past and to set a course toward “enlightened civilization.” Thrown open to Western commerce and diplomatic contact, the long-isolated island country underwent a bewildering series of reforms, including the dismantling of the four-class system, the abolition of feudal privileges, the introduction of universal compulsory education, and the promotion of industrialization. The Meiji period (1868–1912) was a time of questioning old customs and practices and of experimenting with new forms, frequently under Western influence.

In this era of rapid change, it is not surprising that the question of women’s roles should come under scrutiny. The Meiji government, in its efforts to remake Japan into a modern state, tried to take an active role in the creation of a new citizenry dedicated to the nation and loyal to the emperor. One aspect of this reformation was gender construction.

The aim of remaking Japanese women as part of the remaking of Japan was captured in the slogan “Good Wife, Wise Mother” (*ryōsai kenbo*) promoted by bureaucrats in the new government. Here for the first time, the definition of womanhood at least partly in terms of motherhood gained legitimacy. The words “wise mother” signaled the newly recognized importance of educating all women so that they could better perform their home duties, and in particular childrearing in accordance with “the latest scientific knowledge and practice.” In a significant departure, the new state’s pronouncements on gender, by addressing all women, “gradually replaced the premodern differentiation of women by class.” The new ideal woman represented a composite of the “cardinal feminine virtues of the various Japanese classes.” All women, for example, were enjoined to practice frugality in order to contribute to the nation’s savings for investment in modern industry. This “constellation of virtues”—modesty, courage, frugality, literacy, hard work, and productivity—was “so appropriate for economic growth” that Nolte and Hastings (chapter 7) call it a “cult of productivity.”

Still, Nolte and Hastings warn us that it would be wrong to confuse the “Good Wife, Wise Mother” slogan still current in Japan with the cult of domesticity popularized in present-day Japan and in Victorian England. Not all Meiji women were necessarily expected to confine themselves to kitchen and nursery. Middle- and upper-class women ideally engaged in charitable and patriotic activities as well, and lower-class women of necessity worked outside the home in factories vital to the nation’s economic development. Indeed, the state’s view of the family as “an essential building block of the national structure” in effect turned the home into a “public place”—the state writ small, blurring distinctions between public and private. Women’s vital function as cornerstones of the family made them civil servants of sorts.

Legal support for this view of women and the family came from the Meiji Civil Code of 1898, which established the samurai ideal of the *ie* as the national standard for the family and reinforced the legal authority of the household head, who was usually male. The code legally subordinated women to men in a number of ways: A wife needed her husband's consent before entering into a legal contract. In cases of divorce, the husband took custody of the children. A wife's adultery (but not her husband's) constituted grounds for legal divorce and criminal prosecution. The household head's permission was required before women under twenty-five (and men under thirty) could legally marry.

Enforced until the end of the Second World War, the Meiji Code in its treatment of women as wives reflected not so much the Confucian belief in a wife's ineptness as the Meiji leaders' efforts to "ensure the smooth operation of a male-centered, authoritarian traditional family"; it did so by assuring that the family would not have two masters, just as "in the heavens there are not two suns."⁵ Thus a woman's role, not her sex, mandated her subordinate position. Indeed, precisely because women were so important to the family, and the family to the state, women were excluded from participation in politics on the grounds that, as in the case of public officials and schoolteachers, partisan politics was an inappropriate activity for them. They needed to concentrate all of their energies on the management of the household, the education of their children, and the promotion of economic development. Yet as late as the end of the Meiji period, Nolte and Hastings remind us, the slogan "Good Wife, Wise Mother" connoted "Japanese state policy [that] placed much more importance on a woman's responsibilities as a wife [and as a kind of public servant] than on her function as mother."

In the First World War era, increasing numbers of literate women graduating from Japan's newly established national education system lent fresh voices to the national discourse on gender in Japan. The privilege of defining femininity—which through most of world history has been limited to "priests and philosophers, physicians and politicians"⁶—was now seized by Japanese women themselves. By encouraging women's creative talent, literary genius, and female sexuality, the "Bluestockings" (Seitō) group described by Rodd (chapter 8) necessarily confronted the new ideology of the proper female role. Although these women did not consciously set out to be political, various organs of the

5. Margit Maria Nagy, "How Shall We Live? Social Change, the Family Institution, and Feminism in Prewar Japan" (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1981), 41, quoting Ume Kenjirō, *Minpō yōgi* (Yūhikaku Shobō, 1908), 1:39.

6. Marilyn J. Boxer and Jean H. Quataert, eds., *Connecting Spheres: Women in the Western World, 1500 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press), 5.

state, such as the Ministry of Education, the Home Ministry, and even the Metropolitan Police, accused their literary magazine, *Seitō*, of “corrupt[ing] the virtues traditionally associated with Japanese women” and undermining the concept of “good wife, wise mother.”⁷

The state’s “ongoing ‘management’ ” of issues related to women and the family inevitably raised the question of the state’s role in protecting mothers and children.⁸ If the positive valuation of motherhood in the debates over state protection seems conservative to Western feminists today, it was certainly novel to early Taishō (1912–26) society. The traditional Japanese family had never stressed women’s mission as mothers (and certainly had not argued for their biological superiority), but rather had stressed their duties as wives and daughters-in-law. And the Meiji government, its slogans notwithstanding, had not actually called for state support of mothers but, on the contrary, had solicited mothers’ support of the state.

Not all Taishō feminist writers, to be sure, considered motherhood to be “women’s heaven-ordained occupation.” The poet Yosano Akiko, herself the mother of ten, argued that, in Rodd’s words, “any human being should be allowed to take on as many roles as she or he can manage.”

What is remarkable, however, in all these women’s discussions of womanhood, is their contemporary ring: whether demanding state welfare to support the family or insisting on female suffrage, equal economic opportunity, freedom of education, and the right to express their individuality, feminists in early Taishō Japan boldly explored the full range of possibilities for the “new woman.” Regardless of their particular point of view, women themselves, and not male sages or the state, actively engaged in a lively discourse on the meaning of female gender.

This discourse on gender did not take the form of words alone: women helped stretch and shape the boundaries of socially sanctioned female behavior by their deeds as well. During the 1920s an increasing number of women entered the workplace. Not only the unmarried daughters of the rural poor, but also the wives and daughters of the urban middle class—“respectable women”—appeared at train stations on their way to jobs in department stores and office buildings, occasioning the alarm of bureaucrats concerned about the social implications of a growing female labor force. As Nagy (chapter 9) reports, “The phenomenon of the middle-class working woman created profound anxiety.”

7. Sharon L. Sievers, *Flowers in Salt: The Beginnings of Feminist Consciousness in Modern Japan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 180.

8. *Ibid.*, 226n.32.

eties about the future of family life and national unity, especially since the middle class was viewed as the bastion of social stability in an era of social and political turmoil."

Married working women struck at the heart of family-state nationalism, the ideology that subsumed the interests of women within the family and linked family stability to the preservation of national unity. Of course women, married and single, had always done productive work. But in the largely agrarian society of pre-twentieth-century Japan married women had worked on family farms or in family businesses, and single women had worked in factories on a temporary basis until marriage, in a pattern of labor known as "life-cycle service."⁹ Now even middle-class married women still in their childbearing years were working for pay outside the home. Could working wives and mothers continue to sustain family stability? Conversely, could the middle-class family in a decade of economic dislocation survive without the wife's supplemental earnings? The outpouring of articles, surveys, and governmental studies on this subject in the 1920s testified to the importance of "women's issues": the nature, status, and proper sphere of women in this decade became the preoccupation of bureaucrats, journalists, and women alike.

Women's entrance into urban public space inevitably forced redefinitions of the bounds of proper decorum traditionally associated with female gender. Nagy's survey data on middle-class working women show that they still wanted to live up to traditional role expectations: they feared sacrificing their femininity, and they hoped "not to lose their special virtue as females" and to "cultivate accomplishments as a future housewife." Yet these surveys also indicate that at least some middle-class working women welcomed employment as both a guarantee of economic independence and an opportunity to develop themselves as individuals.

Further evidence for this emerging autonomy among working women in the interwar period is presented in Molony's chapter on activism among women in the Taishō cotton textile industry (chapter 10). The factory workers' decision to leave their rural families for employment in the mills shows that they refused to be passive victims; similarly, their agitation for better work conditions and participation in strikes belie the standard portrait of them as docile. Molony concludes that female factory workers by the 1920s and 1930s had developed considerable self-confidence and a sense of themselves as workers rather than simply as wives and daughters. Influenced by their education and by the activism of male workers, and hardened by their own work experiences,

9. L. L. Cornell, "Hajnal and the Household in Asia: A Comparativist History of the Family in Preindustrial Japan, 1600-1870," *Journal of Family History* 12, nos. 1-3 (1987): 155.

they increasingly learned how to make rational choices and to “determine their own economic and social conditions.”

The growing sense of women’s empowerment alluded to in the chapters by Nagy and Molony may help explain the public’s fascination with the “modern girl” (*moga*) of 1920s media. This multivalent symbol, as Silverberg describes her (chapter 11), captured all the ambiguity associated with the emergence of autonomous, liberated working women in that decade. Depending on the perceiver, the *moga* was either the model of the very modern woman or the epitome of moral decadence. She challenged age-old definitions of femaleness with her open sexuality, her public flirtatiousness, and above all her independence from family—all by-products of her income-earning ability: if this “free-living and free-thinking” modern girl was making history, Silverberg suggests, it was “partly because she was making her own money.”

The emergence of the modern girl symbolized the crisis in the traditional family, or *ie*, and the emergence of the smaller nuclear family that Nagy’s survey data also disclosed. Women’s newly expanded economic roles, writes Silverberg, called into question provisions of the Meiji Civil Code and other laws from that era which had denied women their political and legal rights because their place was within the Japanese family.

It is interesting that a female symbol came to portray all the contradictory values that were pulling Japanese society apart in this interwar period. The modern girl, half Japanese but also vaguely Western, highlighted the message that had first gained currency in the Meiji era—namely, that as women go, so go the “traditional family,” Japanese values, and national unity. The modern girl was an “emblem for threats to tradition,” Silverberg concludes, “just as the ‘good wife and wise mother’ had stood for its endurance.”

The tension between the ideal of women’s domestic role and the reality of their work and life outside the home has been an ongoing theme of Japan’s last hundred years. It exploded under the strain of wartime, when the state again tried to appropriate women and the family as public institutions, part of the “state apparatus.” Now, however, in order to shore up the old Meiji family-state ideology of nationalism, government leaders in their propaganda and legislation specifically underscored women’s role as mothers. As a consequence of the state’s pronatalist policy, women achieved what some feminists had been calling for since the early Taishō period: state protection of motherhood, however meager, legislated in the form of ordinances requiring employers to provide day-care facilities in plants with over two hundred workers. Miyake (chapter 12) argues that the celebration of female fecundity made government leaders reluctant to draft married women of childbearing age

for military service or factory work, despite the urgent need for labor to replace conscripted males. And the women who were drafted—mainly young, unmarried women—enjoyed none of the protections extended to women of childbearing age. While mothers were glorified, female workers were exploited. The family again became part of the public sphere, producing, reproducing, fighting, and dying for the state.

The ideological insistence that women be not only pillars of the family but also housebound, even in the face of national need, social reality, and historical experience, is captured in the wartime films reviewed by Hauser (chapter 13). In these films, women “are background figures, holding the family together, supporting their husbands and sons when they are called into the military, and preserving family solidarity when the menfolk go off to war.” The only women in these cinematic depictions who legitimately serve outside the household are single women not needed at home—entertainers, nurses, and prostitutes who volunteer to go to the front or to work in the war industries.

The wartime division of labor between single and married women described by Miyake is thus echoed in Hauser’s study. Even the women in postwar films who are cast as critical of the war and of Japanese society remain essentially apolitical homebound domestics absorbed in the preservation of their families. It is as though the female factory workers, office workers, artists, teachers, preachers, entrepreneurs, volunteers, and political activists—all the women who appear on the pages of this book—never really existed, and the *moga* was nothing but a figment of media imagination.

Postwar Japanese society, reviving the gender construct of wartime Japan, recreated woman as mother. This time, however, she was the urban mother of the small conjugal family, removed from farming and factory or office work, separated from her in-laws, and, thanks to the state’s postwar promotion of birth control, freed from excessive child-bearing responsibilities. Conforming to the pattern of labor force participation in existence since the Tokugawa period, she worked for pay before marriage and was therefore treated as a temporary worker. After marriage, ideally, she focused entirely on her family’s welfare and especially on her children’s education, though she may have returned to work in an unskilled, part-time position after her children were grown. The postwar Japanese woman thus helped to perpetuate the myth that Japanese women never “worked” and have always been mothers first and foremost.

The thirteen essays in this volume, to the contrary, speak to the diversity that has characterized the lives of Japanese women and the discourse on them in the past four centuries. They illustrate how the mean-

ing and proper role of woman have changed over time and among classes, differing in such essentials as the importance of biological mothering, the place of the mother in childrearing, the nature of women's work, the extent to which women should be educated, and the range of their sexual license. Whether women should focus on childrearing, how many children they should have, whether they should receive education and for what purpose and how much, whether they should or should not work for pay outside the home, whether they should participate in political matters or serve as household heads or run family businesses—these questions have been formally addressed in moral tracts and laws and played out in changing customs among various classes over the course of Japanese history. Numerous participants have shaped this discourse: the state, the scholarly community, the media, society at large, and women themselves. Indeed, Japan may be unique in having waged such a conscious discourse on women for such a long period of time, for since the early days of the Tokugawa rulers the “woman question” has engaged political leaders and the intellectual and moral elite alike. The issue of how women should behave and what they should and should not do has rarely been left either to chance or to individual choice.

If official ideology has been remarkably consistent in defining women in terms of certain traditional virtues and in assigning them the task of preserving the family, the way women were expected to perform their role, as well as the way they actually did so, has not been immutable. According to Tokugawa teachings, women served the family best by being uneducated, whereas in the Meiji period just the opposite was the case. In Tokugawa times they were expected to contribute mainly as farm laborers and household managers, yet in the Meiji era their place was either in the home, raising good disciplined citizens, or in the factories, supplementing household income and providing cheap labor for Japan's industrial effort. In wartime Japan they were called on to raise large families to contribute to Japan's imperialist efforts, while in post-war Japan they were enjoined to raise small families to foster Japan's economic prosperity.

The need to link women and the family to the new nation-state has been a major preoccupation of political leadership in the past century: excluded from politics, women have rarely been excluded from political considerations or bureaucratic concerns. Since the Meiji period both economic imperatives and nationalist ideology have catapulted women, figuratively if not always physically, out of their homes. Urged to serve as “good wives and wise mothers,” as “public-spirited rational homemakers,” and, in recent times, as “education mamas,” Japanese women have also had other demands placed on them, ones going beyond simple pi-

ety and devoted nurturing. Organized into relief organizations, patriotic associations, textile factories, and defense industries, women have been variously valued not only for their management of the home, the education of their children, and their fecundity, but also for their productivity. The state has eulogized them for their contributions to war relief, to savings, and even to capital formation. As testimony to their deemed importance, bureaucrats have studied women's work conditions, their health, and their family relations and, with varying degrees of success, have tried to draft legislation to protect them as workers, mothers, and wives in the service of the state.

This vigilant concern with the scope of Japanese womanhood also characterized the pre-Meiji era, when the meticulous definition of femalelike behavior absorbed the minds of political authorities and the literati. Far from being invisible or ignored, Japanese women have captured the attention of moralists and the state for well over three hundred years. With their gender roles publicly prescribed, scrutinized, lauded, or condemned in government edicts, law codes, moral tracts, slogans, short stories, theatrical performances, folk tales, family histories, magazines, and films, Japanese women have never been without clear role models. Put another way, they have never been left alone.

Still, some women managed to steer courses for themselves around officially prescribed or socially sanctioned standards of femalelikeness. Since most of the published material in English on Japanese women has treated the women's movement, focusing on what women tried to change, we have tended to lose sight of what women could already do. In the period between 1600 and 1945, women asserted their autonomy in a variety of ways: through divorce and remarriage, wage work, business acumen, or artistic talent, and by participation in strikes, the modern suffrage movement, and literary publications that coined or advertised new slogans for themselves, such as "bluestockings," "new woman," or "modern girl." But they also achieved a measure of independence and influence in more socially acceptable, traditional ways, for example as matriarchs of successful families. In all these ways, women participated in the discourse on female gender and helped shape its contours.

The definition of womanhood is an ongoing process in Japan (and elsewhere in the world). Demographic statistics in the early 1990's herald possible new roles for Japan's women who, on the average, now marry later (at twenty-six), bear fewer children (1.5), and live longer (to eighty-one) than most other women in the world. How society and women themselves respond to the consequences of these changes may very well "predict," in the words of Nagy's concluding quote, "the shape of Japanese society in the twenty-first century."