



“Feminism and Imperialism,” constructs a gender-based analysis of the symbiotic relationship between the Japanese imperial institution and the patriarchal *ie* (household) system. Aoki traces the continuities between the status of the emperor and the imperial household and the status of the husband/father and the domestic household. She describes the organic linking of the two as a central strategy in the construction of the modern Japanese nation-state. Aoki interprets the model to be patriarchal and based on systematic exclusion and aggression that inevitably marginalize women. Written in anticipation of the Shōwa emperor’s death, the piece attempts to shift attention away from the popular preoccupation with the question of the emperor’s responsibility for the war. It raises instead the far more provocative issue of the imperial institution’s very legitimacy in contemporary Japan, and the implications of its continued existence for the family, and for women in particular.

Aoki became involved in a major public debate with Ueno Chizuko starting in the mid-1980s. In what became popularly known as the “Aoki and Ueno Debate,” Aoki was criticized for promoting the concept of the “feminine principle” within a theoretical framework characterized as eco-feminism. Ueno and her supporters argued that Aoki’s call for a return to the “feminine principle” as a strategy for rejecting the predominantly masculine mode of the existing structures of power was an essentialist move that risked romanticizing an already problematic construct of the “feminine.” There was also concern that Aoki had conflated the “feminine” and female identity. In combination with Aoki’s strong critique of reproductive technologies, it was easy for her critics to represent her position as revisionist and technophobic. Ueno published her major critique of Aoki’s work in a book entitled *Can Women Save the Earth?* In fact, a close reading of Aoki’s work on the question of the “feminine principle” and eco-feminism shows that much of the criticism was not founded on her actual writing but on an oversimplification of specific terms taken out of context.

Aoki’s analysis of reproductive technology cannot simply be dismissed as technophobic. Her research is thorough, and her conclu-

sions regarding the potential risks to women of an unmonitored technological revolution in reproduction are consistent with those of similar studies by feminist scholars outside Japan, in particular in the third world, where women tend to greet new technologies with caution. One of her specific concerns has been the impact of new technologies—whether reproductive, biogenetic, or informational—on the lives of third world women. Much of her work in this area actually seeks to complicate the distinction between the first and the third world in the current global geopolitical environment. Technofeminists might disagree with her conclusions, but it seems preferable for them to keep the dialogue on technology open rather than simply to reject alternative positions out of hand.

One of the strengths of Aoki's work is her constant insistence on the historical and local specificities of feminist politics and theory, a practice that she identifies as originating in her experience of Japan's imperialist era. She does not claim that women can "save the earth." Rather, she calls on feminists to extend their critique of technological and ecological reform to incorporate a more thorough and sensitive analysis of the differences between women. Aoki argues that we must consider the significantly different contexts within which women develop a relationship to technology. A Japanese woman's encounter with a specific reproductive technology may be liberating or empowering while a South Indian woman's experience of the same procedure may be involuntary and dangerous. There is no doubt that the technology debate among Japanese feminists will continue over the years to come. Aoki's voice is sure to continue to complicate and challenge the assumptions surrounding women's relationship to the contemporary formation of knowledge. Her analysis of the emperor system is grounded in this same assertion that power is negotiated through knowledge of technologies and technologies of knowledge.

## Interview

*SB: One of the things I find difficult to deal with in Japan is the distinction between male and female speech and the power politics of*

*honorifics. I prefer not to use women's language and yet not to do so produces a whole other set of problems.*

AY: What's interesting to me is the recent resurgence of honorifics. If you went out into the countryside in, say, the prewar period or even the years just after the war, the old men and women working in the fields together made no distinction between male and female speech. Back in the home the daughter and mother would use respectful speech when talking to the grandparents, but the grandfather and grandmother usually spoke to each other as equals. When a senior member of the village — say, the village head — came to visit, then the grandmother might introduce some honorifics into her speech. The rest of the time she'd happily refer to herself as *ore*.

All this recent proliferation of women's language coincides with the rise of a class of people determined to establish their own credentials as an elite, sophisticated social class. Ironically there are a lot of incorrect usages in vogue — hyper-corrections. There's a basic difference between the use of honorifics in the male and female speech of today, and what you find in the classical literature.

*SB: How would you describe the difference?*

AY: In contemporary society, where a woman's role is essentially limited to reproduction and even that is given no value as labor, women seek means of enhancing their status in whatever way possible, striving to achieve some positive recognition of their existence. Female speech amounts to an effort through language to reinforce the difference between male and female, and that difference is then invested with the value of femininity. The greater one's skill in feminine speech, the greater the difference and the greater the femininity. Of course, the difference produced by such tactics is a difference that grows out of a preexisting discrimination and only serves to replicate and reinforce the inferior status of the female speaker. This tendency to glorify or aestheticize the feminine reached its peak in the samurai culture. In that society, the distinction between male and female was cultivated over hundreds of years. The expressions used today for

“wife,” *okusan* and *kanai*, literally designate women’s place as within the house. I understand that these terms date from the period of the rise of samurai culture. However, this designation was only true, even in those times, for samurai women, certainly not for the women of merchant or rural households. These women moved freely in and out of the house. They say it was the prostitutes of the pleasure quarters who first started to imitate the language of the samurai class, and then the practice spread slowly from the pleasure quarters out into the town culture of Edo.

It’s not unusual for a social group to imitate the language of a higher-ranking one. With time the “upper-class” or “polite” language of the samurai became a mark of social standing. This seems to have been particularly true for women.

*SB: I met an old woman in Gifu Prefecture some years ago who had spent her whole life in the same rural household. As she had no brothers, her family had adopted her husband into its family register. Her own daughter and son had left Gifu to live in Tokyo. She explained to me that she felt sorry for her daughter, a married woman who had given up her office job to raise children. She said she preferred her life to the one she saw her daughter living. She explained how she and her husband had worked the ricefields together. She felt they shared a deep closeness and saw each other as equals. She also described how she had raised silkworms to earn extra money, which both she and her husband acknowledged as her own, to dispose of as she saw fit. She saw her daughter’s life in Tokyo as a life of dependency and boredom. While I recognize the dangers inherent in romanticizing the past, I was struck by what she said.*

*AY: I agree that there are risks in romanticizing traditional lifestyles and the past. Whenever I’m tempted to romanticize the traditional rural life, I force myself to picture the old country women whose bodies are permanently bent at a 90° angle from years of working the ricefields. What the old woman was describing is a good example of what I’ve heard you call power politics, isn’t it? The urban Japanese wife has very limited power. She’s caught within a system in which*

her primary role is reproductive-nurturing, but she can only fulfill this role in a position of dependence on a male. That's the system that's emerged. Any power the modern Japanese housewife has is delegated to her and can be withdrawn. She manages the household but doesn't control it. Even in cases where the wife works, her income is usually supplemental and considered secondary to the husband's. There have been various surveys that have documented clearly the Japanese housewife's sense of the limited range of her decision-making power. Occasionally, conservatives will claim that the Japanese housewife has become too sure of herself, too pushy, but statements like this ignore the whole picture. You can't discuss the status of women just within the household. It has to be put in the context of the whole society. The power relations between men and women in the family are determined by external conditions. The action of the wife within the household will always be curtailed by society's intolerance of a woman who has been rejected from a household. What she perceives to be the limits of her power will be determined by the available options. And what are the Japanese wife's options? We have to be just as ready to critique the idealization or mythologization of the status of the contemporary Japanese housewife.

*SB: The power the woman yields in the private domain doesn't transfer into the public domain, while on the other hand the power of the man operates in both.*

AY: To be powerful only in the private domain is not to be powerful in any real political sense. Another interesting thing is the division of labor within the household. What a man does and doesn't do in the household is very clearly demarcated. There has been some breakdown of this at a superficial level lately, but fundamentally the divisions are intact. When I was active in the peace movement, I was struck by the fact that even when women moved into the public domain, into the realm of politics (as many women did in the 1960s and 1970s), the domestic division of labor of the private sphere carried over into the public. Women were expected to perform the same

kinds of domestic duties for men as they would at home. The fundamental nature of the power relations of gender is not so easily broken.

*SB: A woman member of the socialist party I spoke with recently complained that she had felt like the tea lady for years after joining the party. I wonder if things changed under the leadership of a woman, Doi Takako. I don't think this is a problem particularly unique to Japan.*

AY: Oh, no. However, I do think there is a greater proclivity here for accepting the situation as normal, even desirable. In situations where I have seniority by virtue of age and/or experience, I still frequently find my male colleagues reluctant to accept that I am an able spokesperson or public representative. Of course, there are some exceptions. The test I think is always the homefront. All too many open-minded, radical young men go home to their wives and sit down and wait for their dinner, demand their cigarettes, or shout for another cup of tea.

*SB: Japanese women are politically active in relation to such issues as environmental pollution, the antinuclear movement, and consumer affairs. They also play an active role in electing left-wing municipal and prefectural governments. At the national level they generally outnumber male voters, and yet at this nonlocal level they show a marked conservative tendency. It actually appears to be women who keep the conservatives in government.*

AY: It's true that women will vote differently in local and national elections. Another interesting point is that women's responses to opinion polls and their voting in national elections are often contradictory. While both an opinion poll and an election vote are anonymous, there may be a perception that the poll will have no direct consequences. In the case of an election in Japan, there are so many considerations other than the stated political issues operating to influence the choice. An election vote is less an individual choice than a household issue. Questions of obligation, business and personal relations, and regional or community interests may affect a voter's

choice. Many of the issues may be determined by the public status of the male household head, his employment, personal links, and so on. I have no statistics, but I think that you'll find many women are influenced in their choice of candidate at the national level by their husband's opinion. Japanese election results don't represent a national preference so much as the state of regional rivalry, the internal politics of the LDP, and the complexity of the network of human relations in Japan.

*SB: When I spoke with Saitō Chiyo of Agora magazine, she said that she feels Japanese feminism is at an important turning point. She sees it as crucial that Japanese feminists assess how best to react to the new conservatism and complacency among middle-class Japanese women.*

AY: I agree. I don't believe we can go on talking in terms of such simple divisions as conservative and radical. I think that the recent emphasis of politicians and parties on guaranteeing a high quality of life is indicative of the new face of politics in Japan. Most Japanese people have come to believe that a certain level of comfort and prosperity is their due. Ideology becomes a secondary issue. Talk to people of restraint, and they will vote "no." Talk of prosperity, and they will vote "yes." What needs to change now is the basic, individual value system, the dominant value system. Otherwise we will all—radical and nonradical alike—be drawn into the new conservatism. It's this preoccupation with comfort and prosperity that is the greatest political threat. I've been involved with various peace groups over the years, but when I've asked other members why they are antiwar, all too often they respond that they lived through the war and suffered the food shortages and other hardships. The objective becomes not so much peace as the maintenance of a given quality of lifestyle. This is no basis for a serious political resistance.

For example, what if our leaders inform us some day that the supply of oil to Japan is threatened. Without oil we can't continue our temperature-controlled existence with air conditioners in the summer and heaters in the winter. The only way to protect our oil supply



is to send the Japanese Self-Defense Forces into the Strait of Malacca to protect the tankers. Another example is atomic energy. Without atomic energy, we can't sustain the power grid necessary to run all the air conditioners and refrigerators in Japan, or so the authorities tell us. How many of our young Japanese could ever imagine life without a refrigerator? Regardless of the possible risks, atomic power plants have gone into operation in Japan with only a murmur of public resistance.

*SB: Do you see any possibility of change in the future?*

AY: At the risk of sounding flippant, I grew up without a washing machine or a refrigerator, and so did many other people. That's not to say we should do away with technology but rather that we should do away with the current state of technological dependence. What needs to be revised is the prevailing perception that a high quality of life is one that requires no manual labor or exertion. Unless there is some return to a more self-reliant system of existence, we will just go further and further down the path of technological dependence, and that can only lead to political apathy.

The risk of war or nuclear disaster will only get higher. An LDP slogan before a recent election said it all: "Carefree, safe, secure." One newspaper report after the election quoted a woman voter as saying, "It's not that I particularly like the LDP, but I couldn't see anything specifically wrong with them either. My life is comfortable and convenient these days, so why change?" This is the political reality in Japan.

Perhaps the biggest single problem in our society today is a lack of imagination. We carry on our daily lives enjoying the comforts of electricity, ample food, and commodity and resource imports, but we don't pause to consider the economic structure that all this rests on. So much of our present way of life depends on exploiting the peoples of the third world. We enjoy our lifestyle at the expense of the environmental heritage of future generations. Individuals need to take stock of the fact that their quality of life is achieved only at great cost to others. The famines and droughts in Africa are man-made, not

natural, disasters. The conversion of whole regions to cash crop mono-cultures has destroyed both the land and the traditional way of life. We can buy cheap coffee for our enjoyment, but at what price to others? Someone once said that we throw away paper with ease, but if we stopped and imagined the paper was a photo of a starving child we might hesitate before wasting another sheet.

It's this kind of imagination, the ability to make connections between our own lives and others' that is lacking. The current education system works to repress rather than to encourage such flights of imagination. Parents need to recognize that this is what happens to their children in school. I suppose it all comes down to consciousness raising. I believe that in our society it is women who presently are most in touch with the nitty-gritty details of everyday life. Even if they don't immediately recognize the discrimination they suffer as women, it is difficult for them not to recognize the more general level of discrimination against others that supports their own existence. It's no accident that the women's movement in Japan has been closely associated with questions of human rights and the environment, the antinuclear movement, Southeast Asian prostitution, and anti-Apartheid activities.

A growing awareness of the reality of sexual discrimination at the level of individual experience goes hand in hand with the recognition of one's implication in the existing systems of global exploitation and discrimination. I disagree with the basic motivation behind a recent campaign among Japanese women's groups to send blankets to Africa, for example. It goes no further than a sense of one's own good fortune in the face of someone else's misfortune. It doesn't begin to recognize our own direct responsibility and involvement. It is our own value system that is contributing to the destruction of the sociocultural and economic foundations of the African nations. Until Japanese women recognize their own complicity in this process and act to counter it, there can be no real women's liberation.

*SB: There have been several books written in English lately on Japanese women, and each one has its own version of the origins of Japa-*

*nese feminism; but there seems to be a general tendency to trace an influence back to the Occupation and then, later on, to the American Women's Liberation Movement.*

AY: It's not unusual for social or political movements to occur independently of one another yet at the same time. However, with each occurrence a movement can take on a new form, a new expression, while each of its manifestations need not exclude or contradict the rest. At the same time they need not be, and seldom are, mere imitations of one another. While the beginnings of feminism are generally recorded in America and England, there was also an early, first wave of feminism in Meiji Japan.

It began with the problem of child prostitution. In the late nineteenth century, twelve- and thirteen-year-old girls (especially farmers' daughters) were being sold into prostitution by their parents to meet family debts. It was the Christian women's groups that first mounted a protest against this practice as a basic infringement of human rights. In those days a father could dispose of his daughter in any way he pleased, and she had no protection. Early attempts to draw the attention of politicians to the problem failed. Women didn't constitute an electoral interest group. Without the vote they had no direct political influence. Thus, out of the initial movement against child prostitution eventually emerged a suffrage movement to obtain the vote for women.

This all happened quite independently of the English or American movements of the same period. Over the ensuing years I think Japanese feminists have learned a lot from Western feminists, but I don't think they have imitated them. Even the second wave of feminism in the late 1960s and 1970s, although it took on the name of "women's liberation" and was accused in the mass media of copying American women, in fact had its own quite distinct origins in Japan. Tanaka Mitsu, one of the early leaders of this second wave, said to me once that she can still remember her own sense of amazement when she discovered the existence of women's liberation in America. She had already found her own identical ground before this. For Tanaka, and

other early members of the women's liberation movement in Japan, the beginnings of the movement, the earliest stirrings of a feminist consciousness, came from our experience of the anti-Vietnam War movement as it was manifested in Japan. At the most basic level there was a discovery that the rhetoric of freedom and liberation did not extend to the lives of the women within the movement. At another level, for me personally, there was a growing sense of doubt about what constituted civilization. Here was a civilized society, a democratic nation, waging warfare in another land, denying the rights of the people of that region, experimenting with various forms of chemical warfare. And all this in the name of democracy and civilization. I began to question whether women and men would govern in the same way, whether women politicians would make the same decisions. I began to sense the need to open up the way for a reassessment of our society, a new way of seeing the world, from the perspective of women.

All this was happening well before any contact with the American women's movement. It was at about the same time, the mid-1960s, that the first campaign was mounted for the reform of the Eugenics Protection Law. The women who fought against the reform bill were not radicals or necessarily even feminists. Their major concern was with the basic human rights issue involved in the proposed reforms. The combination of the anti-Vietnam and the anti-Eugenics movements sparked the possibility of Japan's second wave of feminism as the women who came together around these two issues began to recognize their shared experiences and goals. This all happened at the same time as, but without any direct contact with, the beginnings of American feminism.

*SB: Were there attempts in the early years of the movement to cooperate with American feminists?*

AY: Unfortunately, American feminism, or Women's Lib as it was called then, was introduced to Japan through the mass media. The women in the movement were presented as eccentrics. The media focused on such isolated events as bra-burning ceremonies and the

violent protest at the Miss America pageant. That was Japan's first exposure to the American movement. Japanese feminists were not anxious to be identified with all of this, given the media environment of the day. They were wary of giving the media any excuse to represent them in the same light.

*SB: You talk in various of your works about the problem of the media representation of women in Japan.*

AY: In the past in Japan, in traditional Japan, the endless stereotypes of male and female determined what women should do and think, how they should be. This is still true but not to the same extent. It is more obvious in some areas of the media than others. For example, the image of women presented in commercials is a very clear attempt to define the nature of womanhood: images of happy women contemplating their perfect, white laundry, voice-overs of "Just like mother's cooking" for rice commercials, etc., etc. If you take any one advertisement in isolation, it doesn't seem like much, but a constant input of these images works to reinforce, at a conscious or unconscious level, the sense that a woman's place is in the home, working for the happiness of her family, deriving her satisfaction from providing them with hot meals, clean, crisp laundry, and a sparkling house. The accumulated impact of the combined verbal and visual images is difficult to ascertain, but there has been a lot of research done recently in this area. The advertising companies and their clients are clearly convinced that there is some measurable result.

I don't think there is any real doubt that over time women do internalize elements delivered to them through the media. And this collage of media images works to reinforce the aestheticization and glorification of femininity. It is the process of internalizing this image of "what it is to be women" that is most frightening. Something that starts out as ideology is gradually transformed into an aesthetic and, thus internalized, becomes "natural." People speak of the power of the written word, but I think all the media have the same influence today. Japanese consumers are especially naive in relation to the me-

dia. There is an absurd level of trust in anything seen or heard on television.

*SB: I'm particularly interested in the problem of internalization because of my own work on popular culture.*

AY: Ideology is not intrinsic to the individual. In that sense, it is external to the individual and can be resisted. However, when it comes disguised in the media as self-determination, choice, or taste, like a sugar-coated pill, it's difficult to identify and counter. It is this process of unconscious internalization that is politically dangerous. One's thoughts and beliefs seem to be one's own and yet . . .

*SB: In direct response to the mass media, Japanese feminists have developed and sustained an alternative network of communication — the minikomi.*

AY: I don't think one can overestimate the importance of the *minikomi* system. However, I have some reservations. I think what concerns me is that, while there are so many independent publications in circulation, many of them address the same issues. What I don't sense is that the women behind each publication are addressing one another closely enough. There seems to be a high degree of fragmentation. Many of the publications are still working at the level of individual experiences and self-discovery. I think that Japanese feminism has gone beyond the state of self-declaration or self-affirmation. The feminist project is clear; what is missing is the strategy.

That is what I would like to see as the new focus of the *minikomi*. We live in a country where access to international news is minimal. What we need are alternative sources of news that will provide what we don't get in the major dailies. Even *Newsweek* gives a better range of news and more detail than the Japanese press. Our three major daily newspapers don't offer us the news we need. For example, the fact that only Japan, Russia, and France are still actively pursuing nuclear power as a future energy source is far more useful than another French recipe in the women's supplement. The *minikomi* network is well established and would be an excellent means of cir-

culating alternative news sources in Japan. We need access to news that goes beyond individual or local issues to give us the information we need to put our imaginations to work, to develop new strategies that recognize the intricate links between women's liberation and questions of human rights and the environment.

*SB: If so many minikomi publications are still focusing on individual experiences or local issues, perhaps feminism is at a different stage of maturity or development among different groups of Japanese women.*

AY: Of course, there is always a risk in generalizing. "Japanese women" — that's a very diverse group. It's probably true that for many women it is still important to have access to a channel of self-expression and networking along the lines of the existing *minikomi*. The kind of alternative news network I'm describing need not displace what is already there but could coexist, using the *minikomi* network as one means of circulation.

*SB: The ecological movement in the United States shifted to a more local level of political activity in the 1980s, but what you're describing seems to be a blend of ecology and feminism that would move away from the localized activities of the minikomi toward a larger political strategy at the national or international level.*

AY: The primary focus of much of Japanese feminism has been the economic independence of women. This is a crucial factor in the liberation of women. However, if all it achieves is the right of passage of women into the existing male social structures and practices, I don't know that we have achieved very much. An example of the risks implicit in this course would be Margaret Thatcher. I don't believe we can achieve any real liberation for women until we have some vision of an alternative lifestyle, some other way of existing, not just between man and woman but between humans and the environment. I think that we are seeing the first signs of an alternative value system emerging in such movements as the ecological feminism of Denmark and the Green Party in West Germany.

*SB: Reading recent articles in Agora or Chihei, I get the impression that there are already the beginnings of such a movement in Japan.*

AY: Yes, and these date back into the early 1970s. I mentioned Tanaka Mitsu before. She and the young feminists who gathered around her at the Shinjuku Ribū Sentā had a deep sense of ecological issues and their significance for a feminist project from the outset. When other feminists were shouting slogans for the legalization of the pill, Tanaka Mitsu's group cautioned against a blind acceptance of the virtues of new technology. What they defended was every woman's right to self-determination in all matters relating to her sexuality and her body. They expressed concern that the pill was not a guarantee of liberation but was potentially an extension of the existing mechanisms of control inherent in so much other scientific and technological progress. They considered the pill one more way that technology would touch and alter the nature of female sexuality. This kind of ecological critique dates back then to the early and mid-1970s.

*SB: Were they actually opposed to the legalization of the pill?*

AY: No, not at all. Of course, the legalization of the pill is still a major issue even today, more than two decades later. They were arguing that the pill should not be seen as the answer to the problem for either sexual liberation or women's liberation. They also wanted a more coherent statement of the possible risks or side effects. Because they were in favor of self-determination, the issue was not the banning of the pill but access to adequate information so that each woman could make an informed decision for herself.

*SB: A common complaint among American grass-roots feminists is that academic feminists are out of touch with the concerns of most women, that they constitute a new elite. You stand in an interesting position somewhere between the two here in Japan.*

AY: Until some ten years ago there were no academic women to speak of. There were a few exceptions — for example, Nakane Chie,