

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Barbara Sato. *The New Japanese Woman: Modernity, Media, and Women in Interwar Japan*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003. xiv + 241 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-3008-0.

Reviewed by Dina Lowy (Department of History, Gettysburg College)  
Published on H-Women (December, 2005)



## Modern Girls, Informed Housewives, and Working Women in Interwar Japan

In Japan in the 1920s, industrialization, improvements in technology, rapid urbanization, and increased educational opportunities paved the way for social change. Women were a focal point of this change. Barbara Sato, professor of history at Seikei University in Japan, examines three images of women that emerged at this time: the modern girl, the self-motivated middle-class housewife, and the professional working woman. Sato's exploration of the development of these figures, both real and imagined, complicates the widely accepted stereotype of submissive Japanese women and reveals new possibilities for women in interwar Japanese society.

Sato situates these three new images of women in the context of an emerging mass urban culture, which was facilitated by a strong economy, new technology, and increasingly high literacy. She relies extensively on mass women's magazines of the day, but also draws evidence from other forms of media including songs, radio, and movies. Women were vital to this newly developing popular culture in their role as consumers. With consumerism central to her analysis, Sato does an excellent job of showing women as both objects of media attention and subjects with agency and choices.

This book adds to the existing literature on Japanese women in other ways as well. Sato sees her book as a contribution to a recent effort to shift away from the history of elite women and toward more emphasis on everyday life (p. 6). In examining these new types of women, Sato

positions them as members of a much-expanded middle class. The modern housewife and working woman in particular were recipients of at least some post-elementary school education. With the modern girl, they were all participants in the emerging popular mass culture. To varying degrees they all threatened the status quo of gender relations that presupposed a dominant male and a submissive female. By revealing that many women, and some men, were questioning existing gender roles and experimenting with other possibilities, Sato disputes "the belief that Japanese women were reborn as a consequence of the war" (p. 6). Instead, she argues for a link between the activities of Japanese women in the 1920s and the relatively smooth acceptance of post-World War II legal changes that granted women more rights and equality.

In chapter 1, "The Emergence of Agency: Women and Consumerism," Sato provides the foundation for the rest of her monograph. She presents a brief summary of women's activities since the Meiji period (1868-1912) and gives proper credit to a small, but active group of women in the 1910s, referred to as "new women," for paving the way for the options available to women in the 1920s. She also credits the World War I economic boom, the postwar rise in standard of living, and increased literacy rates as factors that helped produce a mass culture in the 1920s based on consumerism. Sato also sets up a counterpoint that she will employ in subsequent chapters; she discusses the views of male and female intellectuals toward the new mass culture and especially the new

images of women.

Chapter 2, "The Modern Girl as Representation of Consumer Culture," reveals that this new image of women "existed more as an object than as a self-defining subject" (p. 48). The media portrayed the modern girl as trendy, self-indulgent, superficial, and promiscuous. She frequented department stores, cafes, and dance halls. She was seen in advertisements and movies. Her independence and open sexuality were unsettling. Although few in numbers and largely imagined, the modern girl "represented the possibilities for what all women could become" (p. 49).

The focus of chapter 3, "Housewives as Reading Women," is about the mass women's magazines that emerged in the 1920s and the women who read them. Once again Sato skillfully traces the origins of women's magazines back to the Meiji period and documents the transformations in editorial policy, technology, and readership over time. While housewives are central to this chapter, modern girls and working women were reading these magazines and shaping their contents as well. Sato presents these women's magazines as a combination of old and new. They reinforced the "traditional" government-sponsored roles of "good wife and wise mother," but they also exposed women to new fashions, trends, technology, and ideas. Sato explains and gives numerous examples of the mainstay features of these magazines: practical articles, trendy articles, and confessional articles. The confessional articles allowed women to have input and created a dialogue between readers and the magazine. While Sato argues that this enabled women to influence the direction of the magazines and expose readers to a variety of issues, she also cautions that "one must take care not to exaggerate their voices" (p. 89). This balanced approach is another strongpoint of the book.

The professional working woman is the central figure in chapter 4, "Work for Life, for Marriage, for Love." The professional working woman, defined as someone who graduated from a four-year women's higher school, was far more concrete than the ephemeral modern girl, and Sato provides the statistics to prove this. But like the modern girl, being active outside of the home and in regular contact with men sexualized her image. This in turn trivialized her contributions and limited her opportunities for advancement. Even so, middle-class women turned to work for a variety of reasons. Most did so for economic reasons: to contribute to the family income or to seek economic independence. But others saw work as

a path to self-improvement or as preparation for married life. Many of these women imagined a different future. Marriage was still a part of it, but a new kind of marriage based on love, equality, and respect. They shared their frustrations and dreams with other women through reading and writing confessional articles for women's magazines.

Sato's tight writing regularly reinforces her main points and ties together the three images of modern girl, informed housewife, and working woman, even as she distinguishes between them. What emerges is a more complex and nuanced picture of everyday life for Japanese women in interwar Japan than is usually presented in the historiography. Instead of a single, submissive image, we see a variety of images, activities, and possibilities. Sato concludes in chapter 5, "Hard Days Ahead: Women on the Move," by briefly examining what would occur in the future for women. Economic and military needs in the late 1930s pushed more women into the work force, while also limiting their agency. The postwar years brought major legal reforms that improved the lot of women. The dreams, aspirations, and experimentations of modern girls, informed housewives, and professional working girls show that these postwar reforms were not simply imposed from above, but welcomed by many.

Sato's *The New Japanese Woman* is a delight to read. The attention to detail and historical context is impressive throughout the book. Her arguments are well supported by primary sources, statistics, and visual aids. The selection and number of illustrations provide wonderful corroborating evidence and truly enhance her points. Sato also provides detailed endnotes and an impressive bibliography of both Japanese and English sources.

With a book that offers so much, there is little room for criticism. Yet, there are two minor areas where elaboration could have been helpful. First, Sato makes it clear that the women she discusses did not participate in any organized movements. This lends support to her focus on everyday life and ordinary women, but a little more could be said about what prevented them from organizing. Also, while Sato did an excellent job of providing background information concerning women's activities prior to the 1920s and how things changed over time, she could have briefly addressed the fact that there were women who did join organized social and political movements in the 1920s. Some of these women were mentioned as female intellectuals who criticized the modern girl, housewife, and working woman or were disappointed in their

lack of engagement. Again, briefly addressing the activities of these women would have augmented Sato's argument that possibilities for women were expanding in the 1920s.

Also, I felt the concluding chapter could have been more positive. Sato seems a bit apologetic that these women did not more actively organize and effect change. Yet, throughout her solidly structured text she effectively argues for the significance of the modern girl, the informed housewife, and the professional working woman, and convinces us of the potential and real changes they signified. Sato's positioning of these three figures as vital to understanding changes in Japanese women's lives over time is an important contribution to the literature.

Finally, I initially had some reservations about using this book as a text in an undergraduate classroom. As I read the prologue I was concerned about what seemed like a heavily theoretical approach and how accessible this would be to undergraduates. However the prologue is a brief eleven pages, and while the theoretical structure remains strong throughout the book, Sato's writing is clear, her arguments are coherent, and her evidence is strong. By the time I had finished the book, I was convinced that upper-level undergraduates could gain much from reading and discussing such a well-written and well-argued text. Sato's book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of modern Japan and of Japanese women's history.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-women>

**Citation:** Dina Lowy. Review of Sato, Barbara, *The New Japanese Woman: Modernity, Media, and Women in Interwar Japan*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. December, 2005.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10973>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).