

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

AMPO–Japan Asia Quarterly Review, ed. *Voices from the Japanese Women's Movement: Ampo Japan-Asia Quarterly Review*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1996. xxi + 207 pp. \$90.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56324-725-5; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56324-726-2.

Reviewed by Ronald Loftus (Willamette University)
Published on H-Japan (August, 1997)



On the whole, this book delivers what it promises: the reader hears from twenty-eight different women who have been active in the women's movement in Japan. The book consists of twenty-six chapters grouped under three headings: I. The Women's Movement; II. Issues Facing Women; and III. Voices of Women. Topics range from the Equal Opportunity Employment Law, Comfort Women and Commodified Sex, to Lesbians and Sexual Self-Determination, Consumer Cooperatives and Fighting Back against Serving Tea. Most of the articles are short—many are just 2-3 pages, the longest is 19 pages—and many are quite topical. The principal weakness of the book is that, because of the brevity of each article, the reader is inevitably left with a sense that the topics raised are not developed very fully. By the same token, as one might expect from a collection of a large number of short articles such as this one, there are a number of themes which are repeated: women are not faring well in the workplace, redress for the sexual enslavement of "comfort women" during WWII is required, foreign women from Thailand and the Philippines are the sexual slaves of the present day, Japan's rapid economic growth has been a mixed blessing for Japanese women, Japan's corporate society operates as a discourse of oppression, and so forth. Here again, many of these refrains call for elaboration, but this is often lacking.

Part I contains the three longest articles in the volume, including Kanai Yoshiko's "Issues for Japanese Feminism," but the other two are in the "zadankai" or discussion format. In Kanai's piece, she argues that "radical feminism has not taken root in Japan. We have not made sufficient efforts to analyze the cultural and psychological oppression of women" (p. 13). She notes the appearance of a "third generation. ... a post-feminist

generation" of Japanese women who "address themselves up to be pretty and cute," but are incapable of engaging the fundamental issues of the day such as the oppression of women, childbirth and childrearing, the aging society and the environmental crisis (p. 4). Kanai sees great promise in the appearance of "ecofeminism" in the mid-1980s as a way to challenge the statist-capitalist model of economic development, but feels that it was ultimately co-opted into premodern theories of "Japanism" which stressed national identity and tradition (p. 11). In Japan, she argues, "real demands made by women were distorted" by what she calls "housewife feminism," a brand of feminism which seemed satisfied as long as women could involve their husbands more in housework and child-care (pp. 14-17).

On the other hand, Kanai holds out some hope for the utility of Foucault's theory of power "which can explain in detail the structures of invisible power functions; how oppression is structured in language and discourse; how women's subjectivities are formed within the male-centered linguistic order" (p. 17). Therefore, she would call for a revival of radical feminism, and urge that serious consideration be given to ecological feminism. Only these could provide a ground sufficiently strong to challenge the corporate society and the powerful nation-state of Japan "where there is no independent subjective force capable of" standing up to these powerful entities (pp. 19-20).

I allot considerable space in this review to Kanai's remarks because she is one of the few authors to raise theoretical issues and to present her arguments in a scholarly manner. She is also one of the few to include extensive footnotes. Kanai's article is followed by two addi-

tional pieces, both of which are “dialogues” between Kitazawa Yoko, Matsui Yayori and Yunomae Tomoko on the one hand (“The Women’s Movement: Progress and Obstacles”) and Matsui and Yunomae joined by Ehara Yumiko and Nakajima Michiko on the other (“The Movement Today: Difficult but Critical Issues”). These two wide-ranging discussions touch on many of the issues which Kanai raised and which surface in the remainder of the book such as women in the corporate society, women in grassroots social movements, war and sexuality (the comfort women issue), empowerment, prostitution, and ecology. On the issue of empowerment, Matsui makes an interesting observation when she argues that Japanese women—especially the younger generation—are disempowered, despite any appearances to the contrary, because “any interest they might have had in social issues has been destroyed by a conformist educational system, material affluence, and a culture of mass consumption” (p. 32).

One of the more informative essays in Part II is Nakano Mami’s discussion of “Ten Years under the Equal Employment Opportunity Law,” a well-organized analysis of the EEOL’s failure to bring fundamental change for women in the workplace in Japan. She notes not only the purely voluntary nature of the articles affecting employers’ responsibilities to recruit, hire and promote women, but the negative impact of the prolonged recession on women’s participation in the workforce (pp. 65-70). Towards the end of her essay, under the heading “Prospects for Equality,” Nakano voices a plea that is echoed by others in the volume: “It is extremely important that women acquire a status equal to that of men ... Equality should mean that men participate in family life and exercise their right to participate in child-rearing. This could provide men with an escape from selfless devotion to companies and restore their humanity. In Japanese corporate society, private life is horribly neglected, both in terms of how countries operate and how workers, who shoulder the industrial economy, are treated. As a result, women are discriminated against in terms of wages, while men are discriminated against in terms of the right to participate in family life” (p. 77).

Yamazaki Hiromi’s article on “Military Sexual Slavery and the Women’s Movement,” Yunomae Tomoko’s “Commodified Sex: Japan’s Pornographic Culture,” Okura Yayoi’s “Promoting Prostitution,” and Murata Noriko’s “The Trafficking of Women,” are all powerful indictments of past government policies and current injustices. Yamazaki makes her point forcefully when she describes how “women were locked inside a room, given mea-

ger food, exposed daily to physical abuse and raped by dozens of soldiers every day—a condition which can’t be called anything other than sexual enslavement.” Moreover, Yamazaki argues that this constituted “a system of violence against women by the state of Japan: a sexual enslavement system whose supreme responsibility resided in the late Showa Emperor” (p. 92).

Also interesting are Ann Kaneko’s “In Search of Ruby Moreno,” about the portrayal of Filipinas in the media, Hara Minako’s “Lesbians and Sexual Self-Determination,” and Takazoto Suzuyo’s “The Past and Future of Unai, Sisters in Okinawa.” The word *unai* means sisterhood and refers to women’s “great spiritual power” (p. 140). Takazoto describes the emergence of a sense of sisterhood among Okinawan women beginning in 1985 when a number of them attended the UN Conference on Women in Nairobi. Linking her discussion to the role of festivals in Okinawan life, Takazoto describes a “space for interchange” in which “various groups and organizations, including labor activists, artists, feminists, and alternative natural childbirth groups, peace and human rights activists, a group for mother and children’s issues, recycling groups, international cooperation groups, a women’s manager’s society, and a consumer cooperatives could thrive (p. 141).

Hara Minako, “a 38-year-old lesbian with a child,” notes that she has “taken part for the past ten years or so in work to create a safer space for lesbians in Tokyo” (p. 129). She concludes her brief discussion with the observation that “there is still a considerable lack of awareness among both men and women regarding the fundamental rights of women and girls to determine whether or not, when, why, with whom and in what way they want to express their sexuality ... I hope I live to see the time when it becomes recognized that any violation of women’s right to sexual self-determination is a grave human rights violation” (p. 132). It is refreshing to find this kind of declaration for, as recently as twenty years ago, I can recall being assured by both men and women that there was no such thing as lesbianism in Japan!

In Part III, the final section of the book, “Voices of Women” are heard, including *buraku* women, Ainu women, *zainichi* Korean women, and local women’s groups in Yokohama, the Miura coast, Sapporo, and Zama city. Ooishi Yoshino discusses “Photography from a Woman’s Perspective,” Arimura Junko writes about “Working at a Consumer Cooperative,” and Tomizawa Yoshiko discusses “From Child-Care to Local Politics” in Sugunami ward in Tokyo. In all, there are ten selections

in this final portion of the book, all reflecting the voices and experiences of women in everyday walks of life. Indeed, Ooishi underscores this in her essay on photography when she observes that while “men live mostly in their own heads, ... when women write or take photographs, they do not overlook the little details of everyday life” (p. 173).

Voices from the Japanese Women’s Movement offers a wealth of information about the everyday experiences of ordinary women in Japan. Although there is no note about translation, if, indeed, most of the essays are translations from the Japanese, the quality is very high. It is a very useful volume for those interested in the Japanese women’s movement, as it makes a number of infrequently heard voices accessible to the reader. It is also an interesting volume because most of the “voices”—the authors—are not from the academy (Ehara Yumiko and Kanai Yoshiko being among the prominent exceptions) so are not as familiar to western readers as are scholars like Ueno Chizuko, Suzuki Yuko, Aoki Yayoi, Mizuta Noriko and Yoneda Sayoko. In this connection, the contributors list, with its brief description of each author’s background, is very helpful. It is a pleasure to learn that we are hearing from freelance filmmakers, photographers, members of feminist cooperatives, lawyers and assembly

women to name just a few of the occupations listed.

If there is something missing from this volume, however, I would say that it is historicity. Readers of this volume would scarcely be aware that there was a prewar women’s movement, and the names of women who pioneered consumer cooperative movements, engaged in labor agitation for women’s rights, and worked toward world peace such as Oku Mumeo, Yamakawa Kikue, Takai Toshio and Kora Tomi are conspicuous by their absence. To be fair to the authors and compilers, it was never their intention to address the prewar history of the women’s movement in Japan. Yet if authors are going to voice their concerns about the shallowness of the younger generation’s understanding of social issues, and the ease with which they can be seduced by the material trappings of the mass consumer society, then perhaps they owe their readers some passing references to a deeper historical context. Nevertheless, I find this to be a most useful collection which not only benefits specialists in Japan and in Women’s Studies, but can be profitably read by generalists and students alike.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact h-net@h-net.msu.edu.

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

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

Citation: Ronald Loftus. Review of Review, AMPO–Japan Asia Quarterly, ed., *Voices from the Japanese Women’s Movement: Ampo Japan-Asia Quarterly Review*. H-Japan, H-Net Reviews. August, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1182>

Copyright © 1997 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.