

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sandra Buckley. *Broken Silence: Voices of Japanese Feminism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. xix + 382 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-08514-5; \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-08513-8.

Reviewed by Andrew DeWit  
Published on H-Japan (April, 1997)

Readers should not be put off by this book's hackneyed title. Certainly the word "voices" appears so often on covers of progressive-left works that one wonders if some authors aren't actually hearing them. But this book's content transcends the name on its cover.

The author/editor, Sandra Buckley, is a feminist who teaches Japanese studies at an Australian university. In fact, most notable feminists in Anglo-American countries are associated with universities, especially Women's Studies departments. This is not true of Japan, where few women-feminists or not-are employed as faculty members in the better universities. But this appears due not only to gendered opportunities. According to Buckley, many Japanese feminists "make a conscious strategic choice" to keep their distance from academe in order to stay in the thick of activist politics. In consequence, out of the ten feminists Buckley interviewed for this volume, only two are full-time academics.

The ten interviewees include some of Japan's most visible feminists, such as Tokyo University Sociologist Ueno Chizuko, Asahi newspaper editor Matsui Yayori, freelance writer Miya Yoshiko, and Saito Chiyo, the founder of the journal *Agora*. Buckley's goal is "to create a space in English translation where Japanese feminists could speak in their own voices," and thus show that Japan has a thriving feminist community, contrary to the impressions of foreign observers. The book includes no direct representation of lesbians, Korean-Japanese, sex workers, and other minorities, but Buckley invites others to expand on the present work.

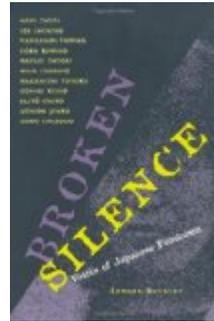
The best things about this book are the interviewees' intellectual diversity, the fact that their own translated writings are incorporated at length in the text, and Buck-

ley's efforts not to impose her own views on the interviews and translated works. Moreover, the interviews per se take up only about a third of the work, leaving ample room for representative selections from the individual feminists' scholarship.

Of the excerpts and interviews, the most interesting are those with Matsui and Ueno. Matsui is highly regarded for her tireless efforts in challenging the sex trade in Asia, and especially its connection to Japan. She was Asian correspondent for the *Asahi* newspaper for several years in the 1980s, and deliberately reported on ordinary people's lives. What she learned of the sex trade was then, and continues to be, horrifying.

Matsui's framework for analyzing the sex trade centres on male economic oppression and how "existing patriarchal structures have colonized women's bodies, Japanese and Filipino alike, just as they have colonized this entire region." This is too methodologically tight-fitting an analysis to apply to such a diverse industry, but her focus is on the seamiest underside of the trade. Read of the almost feudal market in pre-pubescent girls, and one readily understands why Matsui employs an enraged reductionism.

Matsui dwells little on the sexuality of Japanese men. But freelance writer Miya Yoshiko, one of Japan's "new feminists," writes extensively on sex and gender in Japan. She lambastes "the psychological violence against women that so permeates Japanese society" and characterizes the bizarre schoolgirl craze among men ("roritakon" in Japanese, a contraction of "Lolita" and "complex") as indicative of Japanese men's inability to overcome the overpowering influence of their mothers. For these "mazakon" ("mother complex") males, "a mature fe-



male is a terrifying she-devil.”

The term *mazakon* was originated by Ueno, a well-known figure in Japan and overseas. Contrasting what she many Japanese regard as North American feminism’s “devaluing of the maternal or nurturing role,” Ueno notes that in Japan motherhood “is a key concern of feminists and seen as something that must be protected.” The downside, she observes, is that in largely gender-segregated Japan male children are brought up to be future breadwinners by excessively zealous mothers, with father often effectively absent. The boys’ emotional dependence continues after marriage, much to the chagrin of their wives, who however replicate “the same system in the relationship they develop with their own sons.”

Ueno thus appears erroneously to imply that the upper middle class, big-company career track is generalized among the Japanese. But her arguments in general show a quick, iconoclastic mind at work, especially when it comes to the shibboleths of North American feminism,

such as the alleged link between depictions of violence and the real thing. She is also refreshingly honest about the wartime correspondence between feminism and fascism in Japan, offering valuable lessons for contemporaries on the need to balance critical activism with an awareness of the potential for extremism.

One topic that crops up repeatedly in the interviews is the troubling conservatism of Japanese women. Though no completely satisfactory answers are offered for why Japanese women generally support the status quo and conservative politicians, there is much useful speculation on this question, as with a host of other issues. The book is thus well-rounded, well-edited, and well worth reading.

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**Citation:** Andrew DeWit. Review of Buckley, Sandra, *Broken Silence: Voices of Japanese Feminism*. H-Japan, H-Net Reviews. April, 1997.

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