Feminism and the Nation-State in Japan

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Abstract
The first Japanese edition of the book appeared at the height of debates about the interpretation of the Asia-Pacific War, debates which were also linked to conflicts about how the past should be represented in school textbooks. Much of this controversy revolved around the issue of enforced military prostitution/military sexual slavery. In 1991 Kim Hak-Sun (1924–1997) was one of the few women to come out in public in her own name to narrate her experiences in the enforced military prostitution system and demand an apology and compensation from the Japanese government. She was soon joined by survivors from Korea and other countries. Their campaign was supported by historians such as Yoshimi Yoshiaki, who revealed documents from military archives which supported claims of direct military involvement (Yoshimi 1992), the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery and such groups as the Violence Against Women in War — Network Japan (VAWW-NET Japan). Subsequent years saw acrimonious debates on how the War should be remembered. By the time Beverley Yamamoto’s English translation of Gender and Nationalism appeared in 2004, the survivors’ campaign had culminated in the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery, held in Tokyo in December 2000, with the verdict of the judges in the Tribunal being handed down in December 2001 (on the tribunal, see Kim 2001: 611–620). In the meantime there had been further controversies about the Asian Women’s Fund which operated between 1995 and 2002. This was a private fund set up to provide funds to the survivors, but without official Japanese government involvement.

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Feminism and the Nation-State in Japan

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Ueno Chizuko’s book Nasionarizumu to Jendát (Nationalism and Gender) first appeared in Japanese in 1998 and has been reprinted numerous times (Ueno 1998). This English edition also adds another essay, “Hiroshima from a Feminist Perspective: War Crimes and Crimes of War,” originally presented at a Symposium on Women, Nuclear Weapons and Peace in Hiroshima in 2000, an author’s introduction (updated in 2003), an author’s epilogue (updated in 2003), and a translator’s introduction by Beverley Yamamoto.¹

The first Japanese edition of the book appeared at the height of debates about the interpretation of the Asia-Pacific War, debates which were also linked to conflicts about how the past should be represented in school textbooks.² Much of this controversy revolved around the issue of enforced military prostitution/military sexual slavery.³ In 1991 Kim Hak-Sun (1924–1997) was one of the few women to come out in public in her own name to narrate her experiences in the enforced military prostitution system and demand an apology and compensation from the Japanese government. She was soon joined by survivors from Korea and other countries. Their campaign was supported by historians such as Yoshimi Yoshiaki, who revealed documents from military archives which supported claims of direct military involvement (Yoshimi 1992), the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery and such groups as the Violence Against Women in War — Network Japan (VAWW-NET Japan). Subsequent years saw acrimonious debates on how the War should be remembered. By the time Beverley Yamamoto’s English translation of Gender and Nationalism appeared in 2004, the survivors’ campaign had culminated in the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery, held in Tokyo in December 2000, with the verdict of the judges in the Tribunal being handed down in December 2001 (on the tribunal, see Kim 2001: 611–620). In the meantime there had been further controversies about the Asian Women’s Fund which operated between 1995 and 2002. This was a private fund set up to provide funds to the survivors, but without official Japanese government involvement.

In her interventions in debates about historical responsibility and historical memory, Ueno argued against those who denied official government and military involvement in the running of the military brothels and the recruitment of the women who were enslaved there. However, in her attempts to navigate these complex debates, she also, at times, found herself in opposition to other feminist researchers and activists. Ueno has always been willing to engage in robust debate with other feminist thinkers, which may be seen as one form of solidarity and commitment to feminist causes.⁴ The linked essays in this book were often crafted in response to ongoing debates in late twentieth century and early twenty-first century Japan, and need to be placed in that specific context. At times, they should be seen as provisional responses, for one of the admirable features of Ueno’s contributions to intellectual debates is her willingness to revise her opinions in the light of subsequent discussion. For educated Japanese readers in the late 1990s, the context of Ueno’s interventions into contemporary debates would have needed little explanation. For English-language readers over a decade later, however, more context is needed. The translator’s preface and notes provide some of the necessary contextual information. In this essay, I would like to situate Ueno’s work in a broader field of writings on feminism and the nation-state in Japan.⁵

Ueno is by training a sociologist, but has become involved in debates on women’s history, feminist history and gender history in recent years. This involvement comes from several sources: her engagement with debates on the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy (Ueno 1990), her need to trace the origins of the “modern Japanese family” in order to understand contemporary gender relations (Ueno 1994; 2009), her involvement in the compilation of numerous document collections and anthologies on the intellectual history of modern Japan, and—perhaps most importantly for this volume—her involvement in academic and activist debates on the issue of militarised sexual violence in the Asia-Pacific War. As Ueno herself admits, in rather self-deprecating fashion, this is not a work of historical research based on primary source materials (2004: 5). Rather, it is an intervention into ongoing debates.

Part I “Engendering the Nation” focuses on the gendered relationship between individual and state and the implications of this relationship for debates on war responsibility. Part II “The Military Comfort Women Issue” analyses the different paradigms which have been used to understand the issue of enforced military prostitution/ military sexual slavery: “the military rape paradigm,” “the prostitution paradigm,” “the sexual violence paradigm,” and “nationalist discourse.” On the subject of nationalism, Ueno has been engaged in debates with Korean diasporic feminists who wish to keep the history of colonialism and the present of postcoloniality firmly in view (on these debates, see Mackie 2005: 207–217).⁶ In Part III “The Politics of Memory,” Ueno addresses questions of historical methodology as they apply to the interpretation of the testimonies of the survivors of the enforced military prostitution system. In Part IV “Hiroshima from a Feminist Perspective:
Between War Crimes and the Crime of War,” Ueno addresses questions of responsibility on both sides of the combat in the Pacific War. If the Japanese need to reflect on the actions of their military in the Pacific War, she argues, then the US, too, needs to reflect on the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Ueno situates her discussion in the context of changing paradigms of writing history. Women’s history focused on bringing women back into the historical narrative. Feminist history links historical research with the future transformation of society. Gender history interrogates both masculinity and femininity, using the analytical concept of gender to understand the structured inequalities between men and women in modern societies. With respect to the history of wartime Japan, there has been a shift from seeing women as passive victims of state-led militarism, to seeing women as supporters and participants in national projects. Ueno recognises the contributions of those historians who have forced a recognition of women’s complicity in nationalist and militarist projects. She suggests, however, that those who decry Japanese women’s support for militarism need to be similarly critical of women who supported militarism in the ‘victor’ nations. One might add that there is an even more pressing need to analyse and deconstruct male citizens’ support for militarism, rather than assuming a natural connection between masculinity, militarism and the state.

Engagement with the question of war responsibility has led Ueno into debates with denialists and with other progressive and feminist historians. Much of the debate between denialists and their opponents hinges on questions of evidence. Denialists were quick to find flaws in the oral testimonies of survivors of the enforced military prostitution system. These were elderly women, often illiterate, narrating events from half a century before. It is unsurprising that there might at times be inconsistencies in the details of their accounts. Ueno argues that the response to the denialists is not to try to trump them with superior evidence, but rather to challenge historical positivism. In accepting the opposition between authoritative documentary evidence and individual testimony, however, Ueno is rather too ready to give up on the conventions of historical research. Rather than a simple opposition between documentary evidence and oral testimony, historians always work with a range of sources, triangulating different sources of evidence. Oral history is all the more convincing when there are multiple testimonies which reinforce each other, and even more so when oral testimony is backed up by documentary evidence. All historians recognise the limitations of each historical text (using ‘text’ in the broadest sense), which must be read with a consciousness of its conditions of production. To understand these limitations is not to give up on the use of documentary evidence and oral testimony, but to use and interpret such evidence judiciously (Curthoys and Docker 2006).

A certain faith in arguing from the evidence of historical documents and testimonies is also necessary in court cases about historical wrongs and in such people’s forums as the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery. 7

Discussions about the relationship between individual and state in wartime Japan are also connected with contemporary political questions. In attempting to understand the relationship between individual and state, Ueno notes that citizenship has largely been based on masculine models, and argues that feminists should not simply seek citizenship on the same terms as men. In examining the different ways in which women have been incorporated into modern nation-states, Ueno posits that there have been two main strategies: integration and segregation. An integrationist model – as in some of the former socialist states – would see women enter the paid work force on similar terms to men, but this model has generally failed to address the question of the ‘double burden’ of paid work and domestic work. A segregationist model would operate on differential gender norms for men and women, officially relegating women to a domestic sphere and marginalising them from the paid work force.

At first sight, equality appears to be achieved by the strategy of disregarding gender. However, for as long as the public sphere is defined in terms of masculinity, women who become producers or soldiers have to resign themselves to being second-class workers or soldiers. Otherwise, all that awaits them is a choice between denying their femaleness and seeking to become male clones. This means taking on a double burden and doing their best to maintain their womanly role while being reduced to an auxiliary labour force. Both traps are all too familiar traps within modern feminism. (Ueno 2004: 63)

Here, Ueno draws on work in feminist political science which has shown that citizenship in modern societies originally developed on a masculine model. As the franchise was gradually extended from property-owning males to a broader group of adult males, there were trade-offs. Citizenship was based on such duties as paying taxes. In the case of male citizens, the price of citizenship was the possibility of conscription into the armed forces. This was also true in modernising Japan, where conscription was in force from 1873 to 1945 and the franchise was extended to all adult males—but not women—in 1925. Women did not gain the vote in Japan until the revision of the Electoral Law in December 1945.

However, some care is needed in applying this understanding to Japan in the post-Second World War years. Almost all legal distinctions between men and women have been removed from the legal code. No-one in Japan—male or female—is subject to military conscription, and the soldier is no longer the ideal citizen. Indeed, one could argue that the experience of the Second World War has discredited military models of citizenship in Japan. The model of a citizen in Japan is still gendered, but the relationship between soldiering and citizenship is no longer as clear cut as it was in Imperial Japan (1890-1945). Rather, it could be argued that the salaried worker is the archetypal citizen (Mackie 2002: 200-229). When we talk about the gendering of citizenship, we need to historicise this relationship, with a sensitivity to the different legal systems, welfare systems, employment systems, family systems and childrearing practices of Imperial Japan and post-Second World War Japan. 8
Ueno’s rejection of masculine models of citizenship is connected with her antipathy to nationalism. She notes that the nation-state is a modern construction (with due acknowledgment of Benedict Anderson’s [1983] discussion of the nation as an “imagined community”). Anderson noted that we ‘have’ a nationality in the same way as we ‘have’ a gender (1983: 5). Ueno also notes that both ‘nation’ and ‘gender’ are constructed categories with their roots in the transformations of modernity. She explores the ways in which women were incorporated into the modern Japanese nation-state as ‘national subjects’ (kokumin). This process, she argues, took place through the state, through ideas, discourses and imagery, through mass mobilisation campaigns, and through daily life and customs (Ueno 2004: 16).

In this discussion her focus is largely on the mass national mobilisation of wartime Japan. It is possible to argue convincingly that women in Imperial Japan were “second class citizens.” They were mobilised into support for nationalist and militarist campaigns as mothers, workers and members of nationalist women’s organisations, and provided with a measure of national belonging. This partial incorporation into state programs, however, was without any trade-off in terms of the vote or the ability to stand for political office. Ueno argues that this mode of incorporation of women into the nation-state “means nothing other than women share a common fate with the nation-state while still burdened with the paradox that ‘woman’ does not equal ‘citizen’” (Ueno 2004: 64-5). While this is true of wartime Japan, it is difficult to generalise this to the relationship between women and the nation-state in other times and places. An effective theory of the state would describe the differences between the wartime ‘mass mobilisation’ state and the postwar liberal democratic state. It would map the changing relationship between the state and capitalist enterprises and between the state and the military at each stage.

Several recent English-language works specifically analyse the Japanese state’s policies with respect to gender (Gelb 2003; Takeda 2004; Kobayashi 2004; Murase 2005). A full analysis of the gendering of the contemporary Japanese state, however, would go beyond a focus on women and gender-specific policies. It would look at the workings of both masculinity (cf. Dasgupta 2012) and femininity, the workings of gender in all policy areas (and not just gender-specific policies), the gender balance in the Diet, local government and the bureaucracy, and the ways in which the occupations of parliamentarian and bureaucrat are gendered (Dalton 2008a; Dalton 2000b; le Blanc 1999; 2010). A full analysis would also consider the privileging of the heteronormative nuclear family in state policies and corporate practices (cf. Mackie 2002; 2009).

This English edition of Nationalism and Gender thus provides insight into a series of debates among feminists in Japan in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Those who wish to pursue other aspects of Ueno Chizuko’s thought through English-language sources could also consult Jordan Sand’s translation of Ueno’s essay on history and memory (Ueno and Sand 1999: 129-152). Sandra Buckley translated an earlier essay on gender and Orientalism with respect to Japan (Ueno 1997: 293-302) and this has made its way into several other anthologies (Calichman 2005; de Bary et al 2005). Ueno’s (2009) survey of the historical development of the family system in Japan has also been translated fairly recently.

A more recent compendium on feminism in Japan has been edited by Kumiko Fujimura-Fanselow (2011). This provides an updated and expanded discussion of issues first canvassed in an earlier collection co-edited with Atsuko Kameda (Fujimura-Fanselow and Kameda 1994). It is interesting to see how the framing of these issues has changed in the intervening years. Fanselow and Kameda’s earlier collection was focused on “Japanese Women,” but demonstrated an apparent shift in thought in the course of its compilation. It also included essays on the then emerging field of masculinity studies, even though the title referred to Japanese women. Similarly, the chapters on women from what were then called ‘minority’ communities sat strangely with the title ‘Japanese women’ (emphasis added). Fujimura-Fanselow’s latest collection builds on the earlier anthology (a few chapters appear in both anthologies). However, it also reflects more recent developments in feminist thought. The title no longer refers to ‘Japanese women’ as an illusory unified (and somewhat essentialist) category. Rather, the focus is on ‘feminism’ as a political movement.

The inclusion of the word ‘diversity’ in the title signals an interest in recent theoretical debates on intersectionality. That is, gender is considered in its intersection with other dimensions of difference and inequality. Feminism is shown to be a complex political movement which can not simply focus on gender issues, but also needs to consider how individuals are positioned according to these multiple axes of difference and inequality. Diversity is a major focus of this collection. However, there is some instability in the approach. While the title of the book refers to ‘diversity’, the introduction is framed in terms of an older paradigm of ‘minority groups’. In current scholarship, there is an interest in exploring how so-called ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ cultures are constructed through discourse, rather than simply taking majority culture for granted.

The title’s claim that “Feminism and Diversity” are “Transforming Japan” also seems optimistic, for the language of diversity has not yet become influential in social policy in Japan. Nevertheless, one can not help but be sympathetic to Fujimura-Fanselow’s claim, and hope that her statement is prophetic. Another major advance in this collection is that rather than simply focusing on the ‘experiences’ of marginalised groups, several chapters focus on the political movements (feminism and other social movements) which have sprung up to attempt to influence the policies of the Japanese government. This returns us to the theme of feminism and the nation-state.

In the latter decades of the twentieth century, the issue of enforced military prostitution prompted feminist critics to consider the gendering of the Japanese nation-state in the years leading up to 1945. Ueno Chizuko was a prominent critic of the masculinist, patriarchal and imperialist wartime nation-state, as reflected in her book, Nationalism and Gender,
numerous other essays. The issue of enforced military prostitution also necessitated an attention to the question of intersectionality, as critics debated the different dimensions of this issue—gender, class, ethnicity and nationality—and the different political positions mobilised in these debates—feminism, nationalism, pacifism, anti-colonialism and postcolonial critique. These developments are also reflected in Fujimura-Fanselow’s latest anthology.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the events of 11 March 2011 have once again focused attention on the nature of the Japanese state. In the wake of the Great Tōhoku earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster, citizens are asking questions about the nature of a state which could compromise the welfare of so many of its citizens. Because of the relationship between the national government, local governments and the electric power corporations, decisions were made to locate nuclear power plants in impoverished rural areas. These were areas with disproportionate numbers of the elderly; and these rural communities were often the very areas which had welcomed immigrant brides, international students, and immigrant workers. With these events in mind, a critique of the postwar Japanese nation-state seems all the more urgent. A feminist critique is one element of the analysis which is developing through the emerging civil society movements in opposition to nuclear power (Slater 2011), but activists and critics are also necessarily engaging with issues of diversity and intersectionality as they gauge the unequal distribution of pain and precarity in the wake of these events (Wöhr 2012).

Notes

[1] An expanded Japanese edition of Nashonarizumu to Jendā has recently been released which includes several more chapters (Ueno 2012). The prestigious publisher, Iwanami, has released new paperback editions of several of Ueno’s works. See also the special issue of the journal Gendai Shisō [Contemporary Thought], which marked Ueno’s retirement from the University of Tokyo (Gendai Shisō 2011). Ueno is now chairperson of the Women’s Action Network non-profit organisation.

[2] I use the term ‘Asia-Pacific War’ to refer to the period between 1931 and 1945, in recognition that conflict on the Asian mainland predated the outbreak of hostilities in Europe in 1939.

[3] There is no one accepted term for this system. I prefer to avoid the euphemism ‘comfort station’, except in quoted material. I refer to ‘enforced military prostitution’ in order to emphasise the institutionalised nature of this system, but respect the choice of others to refer to ‘military sexual slavery’. There is no one satisfactory way of describing the women who were subject to this form of sexual violence and exploitation. I prefer to avoid the euphemism ‘comfort women’ except in quoted material. To refer to the women as ‘sex slaves’ is sensational and dehumanising. In many cases, I will refer to the women as ‘survivors’, or use other phrases depending on the context.

[4] This is perhaps compatible with Setsu Shigematsu’s concept of ‘a critical praxis of feminist solidarity’ (2012: 1)

[5] I will mainly focus on works which are available in the English language, although brief reference will also be made to relevant Japanese-language works where appropriate.

[6] Yamashita Yeong-Ae’s recent essay, “Revisiting the ‘Comfort Women’: Moving Beyond Nationalism” (2011: 213–227) attempts to move beyond the polarities of the original debates. Yamashita can speak from the position of someone of mixed Japanese and Korean heritage. As with the other interlocutors, of course, her opinions can not be reduced to a function of her ethnicity.


[8] It should be noted that there have also been moves to consider the continuities between Imperial Japan and postwar Japan (Yamanouchi et al 1999).

References


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