

Women of Japan: The Incoming Workforce and Quality of Life from Meiji to Taishō Era

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The transition timeframe from the Meiji era (1868-1912) to the Taishō era (1912-1926) will emphasize whether the quality of life for women was still oppressive, especially when comparing their work conditions to their male counterparts and that of women, perpetuating views with sexualization and undermining their abilities. As Japan rapidly embraced Western influences and restructured its economy and social systems, the role of women underwent significant change. During the Meiji era, state ideology emphasized the ideal of the “Good Wife, Wise Mother,” aligning with Confucian patriarchal norms that reinforced women’s roles as caretakers and supporters of the family state. However, as industrialization advanced, especially in the textile industry, a growing number of women; mainly from the lower classes entered the workforce under often harsh and exploitative conditions.

Changes from the Taishō era catalyzed broader discussions about women's rights and gender roles. The emergence of the “New Woman” symbolized both feminist aspirations and societal anxieties about modernization. Women’s participation in factory work, involvement in labor movements, and representation in cultural discourse—such as the rise of café waitresses and the modern girl or *moga*—reflected tensions between tradition and modernity, domesticity and independence, and objectification and empowerment.

Based on what the textbooks and research that has been gathered so far, which consists of five physical textbooks, a page document of “*Moga, Factory Girls, Mothers, and Wives: What Did It Mean to Be a Modern Woman in Japan?*” There will also be images, more specifically, photographs of the café waitresses and one photo of the ‘Seitōsha 1913 New Year Party.’ With images, there will also be illustrations included that lean towards the topic of Café waitresses and

how they are portrayed in the context of this new “modern women” and how it leads to an idea and expectations to fit into this controversial traditional breaking alluring women that was perpetuated much from the aftermath of Meiji era exposure of western influence and the Meiji “New Women” that was advocating for greater opportunities and recognition as being equal to men, of course there are some that upheld the continuation of the “good wife and wise mother” ideal.

Feminism in Japan is an ongoing research field for many historians who specialize in studying Japanese women's rights and feminism as a broader field. This paper will focus on a more specific topic: Japan's workforce development and how feminism contributes to said development. To expand further, the Japanese patriarchal society has subjected women to an inferior position of the traditional values of motherhood to create a feminist movement through the development of the rising labor forces, such as the initial agricultural labor, factories, and later heavy industries. On that note, with the topic of women's roles starting with the presumed functioned role being that of “Good Wife, Wise Mothers” there is also to take into account the class distinction within it, as Japanese women in poor and peasant classes were facing a different reality and expectation than that of noble women and later on around the Taishō era, there was the emergence of the middle-class. Discussion of morals and the treatment of emerging working women will also be weighed in as workforce development continues in the coming years. To place this in historical context, this paper will start with the Meiji era, and the short-spanned Taishō era. The Meiji era section will focus on the patriarchal hierarchy and how the traditional motherhood role was soon changed due to Japan opening its “walls” to Western imperialism and its new ideals and influences. The Taishō era will dwell on the discussion of defining the “New Women” and expand on the cultural specificity of Japanese feminism.

The discussion of Japan's Workplace Development through the lens of feminism and its history will focus on three texts and one peer-reviewed chapter. These first three texts out of the five being that of *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945* by Bernstein Gail Lee, *Japanese Women: New Feminist Perspectives on the Past, Present, and Future* by Kumiko Fujimura-Fanselow and Kameda Atsuko, and finally *Rising Suns, Rising Daughters: Gender, Class, and Power in Japan* by Joanna Liddle and Sachiko Nakajima. The scholarly peer-reviewed paper is *Rethinking Japanese Feminisms: 1 Women's Rights as Proletarian Rights* by Elyssa Faison. On the surface level, all three texts, minus the latter, discuss Japanese Women's history and gender relations. However, Bernstein Gail Lee's text will take much focus on this writing as it is vital to compare it with other readings as said others do not expand the nuance of not only Japanese women in workplace development but the topic of women's class system and roles, and power that women held or lack thereof, and proletarian rights is limited. From domestic work to labor, the advancement of Japan's entry into global politics is also in play with all of the following readings. The doubling expectation of motherhood and women working is a recurring subject matter that all texts have noted, along with the discussion of education and family that correlates with the further acceptance of women entering the workforce. Historical context, cultural expectations, and social structures shape the interpretations and understandings of women's roles in Japan's workplace development. Examining these texts, it becomes clear that the intersection of gender, class, and labor provides a complex picture of Japanese women's experiences and their evolving roles in both domestic and professional spheres. Analysis of the readings reveals how feminist perspectives have contributed to rethinking the narratives surrounding women's empowerment, labor rights, and social mobility in Japan's modern history.

Gail Lee Bernstein's *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945* is a text consisting of a wide array of essays that scholars and students of Asian and women studies provide regarding the exploration and development of the definition and feminine identity that evolved over many eras. Much of the texts examine the changes in the gap between the idealized womanhood and the reality of Japanese women's lives.¹ Bernstein argues that, unlike Western womanhood, as it takes account of race, religion, and ethnicity, Japanese womanhood is experienced through social class and biological age.² The experiences of Japanese women from the Tokugawa era to the end of World War II are diverse, as women's contributions and reality shaped much of Japan's homogeneous society in the socio-political field, the home, family structure, and being part of the workforce.³ Bernstein emphasizes the complexity of Japanese women's roles, pointing out that their identities were not solely defined by these imposed categories but also by their ability to negotiate, resist, and occasionally redefine their position within the broad social structure. Much of the argument holds up with the backing of historical data, personal accounts, and case studies that highlight how societal expectations and realities intersected in the lives of Japanese women.⁴ Critiquing this text, for at least “Part Two: The Modern Discourse on Family, Gender, and Work: 1868–1945”, it is notable that the organization is neatly chronologically and each sub-section of part two follows a theme of womanhood and how its definition change over the years as women purpose was change as Japan steer up to entering global-politics. There is also the matter of acknowledgment of the ethical consideration of sexism into account as the Tokugawa tradition of Confucianism still lingers on as subservience still shows even in the workplace. Structure-wise, the text is well-

¹ Gail Lee Bernstein, *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945* (Berkeley University of California Press, 1991), ix.

² Ibid. 1.

³ Ibid. 2.

⁴ Ibid. x.

organized, with each essay building a cohesive narrative. However, some sections could benefit from further exploration of the intersectionality between gender, class, and ethnicity, which are key to understanding Japanese women's roles. While the historical context is well-covered, a deeper focus on women's agency and resistance to imposed gender norms would make the text more nuanced.

Comprehensively into Part Two of the text, focusing on the first half of the Meiji Restoration and the following effects, the restoration impacted the potential of women's opportunity to enter the socio-political sphere and in this instance, the need for more people in labor work is needed for Japan's economy. The evolving roles of Japanese women from the Meiji to the early years of the Showa era were influenced by societal expectations of subservience and the nation-state policy. Around the 1890s, Japan continued the advancement of industrialization made "... women have become the backbone of the developing Japanese industrial economy. Female workers outnumbered males in light industry, especially in textiles".⁵ With Japan's industrialization, the social change of the majority of women working in rural farms has now moved to work in factories, expanding the rise of the working middle class.⁶ While many women initially accepted their roles passively, societal and economic shifts sparked increasing activism, with some women engaging in labor strikes and collective action to challenge their subjugation.⁷ Japan's response aims to manage these changes, framing women's labor as both a patriotic allegiance during wartime and in maintaining the family-state structure. It is quite apparent from this response that Japanese women's roles require looking at both their family (reproductive) and work (productive) roles, showing how household work helped sustain the social order in a

⁵ Ibid. 153.

⁶ Ibid. 223.

⁷ Ibid. 218.

capitalist society.⁸ This role duality that has been shaped by state intervention and pertinacious traditional expectation has signified the complex and contradictory intensity molding women throughout modern Japanese history.

Joanna Liddle and Sachiko Nakajima's *Rising Suns, Rising Daughters: Gender, Class, and Power in Japan*, is a compilation of detailed reviews, starting in the 1870s and the end of the 1980s. The premise of this text is to look into how the roles of women and gender relationships in Japan have changed over the centuries. This change is notable in the socio-political aspect of global politics and women's social expectations. Both authors argue that gender and class are deeply connected and have been used in struggles for power between Japan and the West, specifically the United States.⁹ Japan is an intriguing instance because, while now a modern capitalist country, it has faced both domination by Western powers and its history as a colonial power. From the structure standpoint, it has six parts with chapters, within those, it has sub-sections of a specific topic. Methodology-wise, the text's reliance on the interviews and surveys holds validity to the main argument and supports said argument.

Both authors, Joanna Liddle, and Sachiko Nakajima, focus on the historical time frame between the late 19th century and early 20th century, which they argued to be a transformative era for the evolving role of Japanese women in the workforce as Japan's political and economic trajectory was also evolving. This was from the start of Japan's imperial ambition to compete at the same level as Western powers with its military expansion.¹⁰ In 1876, Japan pursued control over Korea, which escalated to the first Sino-Japanese War and then, years later, the Russo-Japanese War. Both wars were claimed victorious for Japan. From these wars, Japan gained

⁸ Ibid. 269.

⁹ Ibid. 1.

¹⁰ Elyssa Faison. *Rethinking Japanese Feminisms*. Edited by Julia C. Bullock, Ayako Kano, and James Welker. (University of Hawaii Press), 23.

colonial control over Korea and Taiwan and shaped its country narrative as a liberator of Asia.¹¹ However, this narrative push was undermined by the annexation of Korea in 1910, which created a paradoxical nature of Japan's imperialist expansion to these geopolitical changes, and from this change, the role of women and its link with Japan's economic development evolved in the industrial field. Women. Often from rural and poor backgrounds, they were the backbone of Japan's textile industry by the 1890s, as they made up the majority of employers.¹² Although long hours, low pay, and systematic abuse were present; it was justified with the Japanese narrative that "... state image of the Japanese woman as the good wife, wise mother was to suggest that woman who went to work in the factories were young, unmarried, and without caring responsibilities for husband, children or parents-in-law, who would be there for short-term basis until they got married" (62). The early 20th century, specifically the Taishō period, was where feminist movements grew as women began challenging traditional gender roles. Prominent figures like Yosano Akiko, Hiratsuka Raicho, and Yamakawa Kikue pushed for different forms of feminism, from equal rights to socialist ideas.¹³ However, the media's portrayal of the "modern girl" in the 1920s, who was independent and sexually liberated, often separated her from feminism, portraying her as apolitical to avoid threatening men's power.¹⁴ As Japan faced economic strain from war, more women, especially the "Middle-class occupations meant white-collar or professional jobs, and for women, this was mainly teaching, nursing, midwifery, clerical work in offices and banks, and shop work" (117). Despite Japan's reliance on women's labor, tensions grew between official regulations and women's push for more freedom, paving the way for post-war feminist movements.

¹¹ Ibid. 24.

¹² Ibid. 60.

¹³ Ibid. 115.

¹⁴ Ibid. 116.

Kumiko Fujimura-Fanselow and Kameda Atsuko's *Japanese Women: New Feminist Perspectives on the Past, Present, and Future* is an edited volume, specifically, 'Part Four: Women at Work' section of the text, focuses on the early industrialization with the rise of female workers. Initially, around the Meiji Restoration, Japan's economy was dependent on agriculture, but with the 1873 Land Tax Reform, agriculture was shifted away to new labor due to taxes changed from being paid in crops to being paid in cash, based on land value, and at high rates and forced farmers, especially poorer ones, to adapt or lose land.¹⁵ This reform has led to hardships for the majority rural population and would result in poor families sending their children to work as wage laborers and even migrants for these children, who are young unmarried women, to take part-time factory jobs. Women's participation was shifted toward now with the light industry such as the spinning and textile industry entering the late Meiji and early Taishō eras and remained the core industry till heavy industry quickly developed after 1910, but women's participation was still vital and growing.¹⁶ With factories ever expanding and employing more women in the workforce, there was a law implemented known as "The Factory Law of 1911," which was not enforced for another fifteen years, as the law required twelve hours per work days and required two days off each month. However, this dominance of female labor in manufacturing began to decline after 1930 as the expansion of heavy industries, which hired more men, took precedence, and even though women factory workers persisted in continuing the labor, it is evident that they were paid on unequal levels with their male counterparts.¹⁷ With World War II coming to a close, the continuing shift of women entering the labor market, whereas men left to be recruited into the military, slowly dwindled as men returned from war and took back positions held by women. Leading to "The economic

¹⁵ Fujimura-Fanselow, Kumiko, and Atsuko Kameda, eds. *Japanese Women : New Feminist Perspectives on the Past, Present, and Future*. (Feminist Press at the City University of New York), 272.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 273.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 275.

recession during and after the war, and the return of soldiers and repatriates from overseas, caused massive layoffs, leaving 14 million unemployed.”¹⁸

It is no secret that the development of the textile industries for women has been complex and, for the most part, overlooked by Western scholars. It has already been pointed out that female workers were not seen as valuable in the workforce, as the labor force undermines the women's ability to continue doing labor, even though said employees worked prolonged hours in hazardous work conditions and were paid meager wages compared to their male counterparts. Despite facing brutal conditions, their labor transformed the nation's economy and contributed to its global power. Moreover, their experiences and the analysis of figures like Yamakawa Kikue highlighted the critical intersection of gender, class, and labor in modern Japan, pushing for greater recognition of the unique challenges and importance of working-class women within both the feminist and socialist movements. The exploitation of lower-class women in factories was rationalized by the state's image of the Japanese woman as the “good wife, wise mother” by suggesting that these factory workers were young, unmarried, and without familial responsibilities, working only temporarily until marriage. However, these women's significant and sustained contribution to national wealth and strength fundamentally contradicted this idealized image, forming a crucial part of the lived experience and identity of a large segment of Japanese women.

Much of the treatment towards female factory workers that has been documented is often described to be disdainful and poor, as the song provided by the factory inspired by the workers to push the women to continue their duties:

“Raw silk, Reel, reel the thread. Thread is the treasure of the empire! More than a hundred million yen worth of exports, What can be better than silk thread? Factory girls, We are soldiers of peace.

¹⁸ Ibid. 275.

*The service of women is a credit To the empire and to yourselves. There are trials and hardships, yes, But what do they matter?”*¹⁹

There is no doubt that many factory corporations sway potential recruiters with promises of an improved lifestyle, a sense of stability with money, and even a sense of patriotism by giving back to the nation. However, this allure of potential is often just a ruse to benefit the factory's sake and exploit the workers for their labor. It has always been the capitalistic drive to earn more profits while undermining the brutal overtime hours put in by the women who are working in malnourished conditions that are more often than not, supervised by the men who see the many women as money-making units. To put this in perspective, there are two songs written by the women in the factories regarding their insight into their lives now working in the factories. The First one following:

*“If a woman working in an office is a willow, A poetess is a violet, And a female teacher is an orchid, Then a factory woman is a vegetable gourd.”*²⁰

The second is as follows:

*“At other companies there are Buddhas and gods. At mine only demons and serpents. When I hear the manager talking, His words say only [“money, money, and time.”] The demon overseer, the devil accountant, The good-for-nothing chrysalis. If you look through the factory's regulations, You see that not one in a thousand lies unused. We must follow the regulations; We must look at the foreman's nasty face.”*²¹

To elaborate further on how worse the conditions became for many of the factory workers, there were a number of noted events around the early 1920s. Japan saw increased labor unrest,

¹⁹ Patricia E. Tsurumi, *Factory Girls: Women in the Thread Mills of Meiji Japan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), Document H.

²⁰ Ibid. Document H.

²¹ Ibid. 9.

with 20,000 iron workers striking in 1920 and 35,000 dockworkers briefly taking over Kobe's docks in 1921 before the army suppressed them.²² These uprisings inspired support for burakumin and women's groups. Prime Minister Hara Kei was assassinated, and for a time, revolution seemed possible. The 1923 earthquake led to chaos exploited by right-wing nationalists to massacre Koreans, Chinese, and political opponents.²³ In 1925, the Peace Preservation Law criminalized liberal and communist ideas, targeting leftists. This era, often called Taishō "democracy," was marked by intense class and gender struggles. Together, these songs expose how factory women were systematically dehumanized, reduced to expendable tools within an industrial system that prioritized profit and discipline over dignity and humanity. When placed alongside the labor unrest and political repression of the Taishō period, these voices express that the exploitation of female factory workers was not an isolated issue, but part of a broader structure of class, gender, and state control.

Elyssa Faison's *Rethinking Japanese Feminism* contribution of *Part 1: Women's Rights as Proletarian Rights* is an academic article that goes into the discussion of the women's suffrage movement, specifically on the topic of Proletarian and Unions. Taking place around the Taishō era, one of the figures brought in this writing is Yamakawa, one of many pioneers of the Women's Suffrage League. Both Yamakawa and the leadership of the Women Suffrage League agree that the proclamation of the prewar period legally structured the family system, which made women excluded from owning property and legal decision making capabilities and ordained a male head-of-household system.²⁴ Yamakawa, further into the women's proletarian movement, wrote a

²² Liddle, Joanna, and Sachiko Nakajima. *Rising Suns, Rising Daughters: Gender, Class, and Power in Japan* (Zed Books, 2000), 114.

²³ *Ibid.* 114.

²⁴ Elyssa Faison. *Rethinking Japanese Feminisms*. Edited by Julia C. Bullock, Ayako Kano, and James Welker. (University of Hawaii Press), 22.

manifesto named “Thesis on a Women’s Bureau,” where she claims that female factory workers were essential to the Japanese labor movement and to improve working conditions in further recognition.²⁵ Yamakawa similarly argues that female factory workers were controlled by a feudal “master/slave” system, where industrialists used the family structure from rural areas to restrict women's freedom in the workplace.²⁶ According to Yamakawa, class consciousness would eliminate the feudal family system within the working system and between the sexes.²⁷ Expanding the structure of this scholarly article is one chapter with five mini-sub-sections, in this instance, the attention will be towards the ‘Suffrage and Women’s Rights’ and ‘Women’s Rights and Wartime Mobilization’. The ‘Suffrage and Women’s Rights’ make a note of the original argument and that women’s issues are also intersectionality linked with class and must be taken seriously. One critique that can be inferred from this academic work is that.

The 1923 earthquake’s significance and the correlation it has brought forward to the women's proletariat movement, while it is a fact that the ‘New Women’s Association’ was disbanded, the earthquake that ruptured the ground became a challenge to much of the government's ability to restore order. The destruction and urgency created by the disaster exposed not only physical cracks in the earth but also deep societal flaws, prompting women to step up and act.²⁸ Without waiting for guidance from men or government authorities, women quickly assumed leadership roles and organized themselves under the newly formed Federation of Women’s Associations of Tokyo. Starting with essential services like milk distribution, they coordinated efforts across forty-two different organizations by November, guided by familiar figures such as Kawai Michi and Dr. Yoshioka Yayoi, along with support from Mary R. Beard, a noted women’s

²⁵ Ibid. 23.

²⁶ Ibid. 23.

²⁷ Ibid. 24.

²⁸ Dorothy Robins-Mowry, *The Hidden Sun: Women of Modern Japan*. (Westview Press, 1983), 70-71.

historian visiting Japan with her husband, urban planner Charles A. Beard.²⁹ This moment marked a turning point in Japanese history for women, as their leadership in crisis response was not only accepted but respected by society. Their swift, independent actions became a powerful precedent, signaling a future in which women would routinely identify and address pressing social issues, often ahead of official authorities. As one woman from that time reflected, it was during this period that Japanese women truly “found themselves.”³⁰ These early leaders embodied the vision of the modern, empowered woman in a rapidly changing Japan.

As mentioned above, Yamakawa Kikue was a highly significant figure in the Japanese women's movement, primarily known for her focus on proletarian women's rights and her critique of both the mainstream socialist movement and the bourgeois feminist group. Her critical analysis of capitalist exploitation and gender inequality within the Japanese context, and her persistent efforts to integrate women's issues into the socialist movement. Her distinct focus on class and labor differentiated her from other prominent figures in the Japanese women's movement of the time, like Hiratsuka Raicho, who primarily addressed the concerns of middle-class “New Women.”³¹ Expanding on Yamakawa and her contribution to women's proletarian rights, she has spoken out on the importance of women's true freedom and to advance herself from the shackles of subservience to men through socialism. As she remarks “... under current social conditions, it is impossible for women to devote all their energies to becoming free, autonomous personalities. Does [Hiratsuka] Raichō believe that those who are frustrated by this dilemma are only those

²⁹ Ibid. 71.

³⁰ Ibid. 72.

³¹ Ibid. 69.

women who are self-aware and cultured... that they are distinct from lower-class working women...?”³²

Yamakawa was a pivotal figure who relentlessly critiqued the prewar Japanese socialist and labor movements for their failure to adequately address women's issues. Her central argument was that the socialist movement needed to recognize the “special” demands of women, particularly working-class women, as integral to the broader proletarian struggle. One of her key points was the neglect of women's concerns by her male socialist colleagues. To counter this, she argued for recognizing women's specific needs and, in her 1925 “Thesis on a Women's Bureau,”³³ asserted that female factory workers were “the key to Japan's labor movement...” She advocated for the creation of a women's bureau within the Labor Union Council (Hyōgikai) to improve their poor working conditions. This focus on female factory labor set her apart from liberal feminist contemporaries who primarily concentrated on political rights like suffrage.

Yamakawa also emphasized the impact of Japan's legally codified family system, particularly the head-of-household system, which denied women legal decision-making capacity and property ownership. She and the Women's Suffrage League both opposed this system. Yamakawa and the Women Division of the Political Studies Association proposed several vital demands for any new mass proletarian party, including:

- The abolition of the head-of-household system.
- The abolition of all laws relating to the political incapacity of women, regardless of marital status.
- Equal rights for men and women in marriage and divorce.

³² Patricia E. Tsurumi, *Factory Girls: Women in the Thread Mills of Meiji Japan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990). Document H.

³³ *Ibid.* Document F.

- Equal opportunities for education and employment for women and peoples of the colonies with that of Japanese men.

Furthermore, Yamakawa stressed the basic issues affecting working-class women. Her “Special Demands of Women” included concrete proposals such as:

- The implementation of a standard living wage without regard to ethnicity or sex.
- The implementation of equal wages or salary without regard to occupation for people of the colonies, men and women.
- The provision of break rooms for women with nursing infants and nursing breaks.
- The prohibition of firing women for reasons of marriage, pregnancy, and childbirth.
- The complete abolition of licensed prostitution.³⁴

Yamakawa argued that men in the socialist movement needed to understand that women's issues were fundamentally class-based and essential to the success of the labor movement. She believed that fostering class consciousness among female factory workers would dismantle feudal family relationships and gender inequalities. She even considered men who ignored women's issues as “class traitors.”

While she was highly ambivalent about the importance of advocating for women's suffrage during the prewar period, viewing “bourgeois” women's groups' focus on it as primarily benefiting elite women, her perspective shifted after the war. She saw the acquisition of suffrage as a significant step towards liberation. In her 1946 essay, she connected women's suffrage to the sacrifices made during the war and the resulting democratic reforms. She believed that

³⁴ Yamakawa, “‘Fujin no tokushu yōkyū’ ni tsuite” (Japan Press, 1925). 126.

participation in democracy would foster political autonomy among women and lead men to see women as full human beings.³⁵

Bluestockings (Seitô) and Hiratsuka Raicho

“In the beginning, Woman was truly the sun. She was a genuine person. Now, Woman is the moon. She is a sickly, pale moon, living through others, shining by the light of others.”

- Hiratsuka Raicho³⁶

This quote is the essential pinpoint of what the *Seitô* 青鞵 uncovers about how Japanese women are portrayed in reality and how women, are regarded as genuine and valued human beings on par with men, with women being parallel to the Shinto pantheon sun goddess Amaterasu. Yet, women in Japan were faced with resembling the pale moon and reflecting other people and not their ambitions. The Taishō era was the dawn of women entering further debate about the expected gender roles, which were perpetrated and set up by men. The *Seitô* magazine, pioneered by Hiratsuka Raicho, was a publication that consisted of poetry, short stories, essays, plays, and translations of Western media. Hiratsuka's start-up with the publication is to essentially help women understand their potential not only in their intelligence but also to help women boost their quality of life from their strength as a “New Woman” and break free from the previous traditional archetype that was expected.³⁷ Much of this magazine entails the advocacy of women's self-awareness to be greater, as we have seen the first opening line of the first issue is that of Hiratsuka's manifesto that the “New Women” is that of the great sun and not of the pale moon, “living through others.” In essence, it is the Meiji Japanese feminism.

³⁵ Elyssa Faison. *Rethinking Japanese Feminisms*. Edited by Julia C. Bullock, Ayako Kano, and James Welker. (University of Hawaii Press, 2018). 27.

³⁶ Hiratsuka Raichō, “In the beginning, woman was the sun...,” *Seito* [Bluestocking], no. 1 (September 1911).

³⁷ Dina Lowy, *The Japanese “New Woman”: Images of Gender and Modernity*. (Rutgers University Press, 2007). 8-9.

To expand further, Hiratsuka Raicho was a prominent figure throughout the late Meiji and much of the Taishō era, who spearheaded the “New Woman” movement in Japan through her leadership of the Seitosha and her influential writings. Raicho's feminist perspective is identified as maternalist essentialism within the broader spectrum of feminist thought during the Taishō period. Maternalist essentialism is best defined to be the idea that women are better suited for the roles relating to childcare, as mothers would provide quality care for the child. She articulated a vision of female independence and challenged the patriarchal foundations of Japanese society, leaving a lasting impact on the trajectory of women's rights in the country. Of course, she was not alone in the contribution of the *Seito* magazine as she let many other intellectuals voice out their advocacy and frustrations of women's existences being restricted when the Taishō era was the



dawn of a “new” way of thinking and let go of the “curses of yesterday.”³⁸

In this photo, there is an image of the early meetings of the Seitosha. Specifically, this is the New Year's Party Celebration in 1913, where the core members of the *Seito* Magazine gather.³⁹ Raicho's definition of the “New Women” can be best described by her New Year Essay, where she proclaims:

I am a New Woman.

At least, everyday I pray, everyday I strive to be the truly New Woman I want to be.

In truth, and eternally, the new being is the sun.

I am the sun.

³⁸ Ibid. 9.

³⁹ The Bluestockings' New Year's Party, 1913. Pictured from left are Kobayashi Katsu, Iwano Kiyō, Nakano Hatsu, Araki Ikuko, Yasumochi Yoshiko, and Hiratsuka Raichō. The photo appeared in *Seitō*, vol. 4, no. 2 (February 1913).

At least, everyday I pray, everyday I strive to be the sun I want to be.

. . The New Woman curses "yesterday."

The New Woman cannot bear to walk meekly, silently the path the Old Woman walked.

The New Woman is not satisfied with the life of the Old Woman, who was made ignorant, made a slave, made a piece of flesh by the selfishness of men.

The New Woman desires to destroy the old morality and laws that were constructed [tsukurareta] for the convenience of men.

However, the various ghosts that haunt the minds of Old Women persistently pursue New Women.

When "today" is empty, it is then that "yesterday" invades.

New Women battle daily all kinds of ghosts.

A moment of neglect and the New Woman is an Old Woman.

I am a New Woman. I am the sun. I am simply a person. At least, everyday I pray, everyday I strive to be the being I want to be.

The New Woman desires everyday . . . to create [sosaku suru] a new realm where new religion, new morality, and new laws will be put into practice.

In fact, herein lies the mission of the New Woman. So, what is this new realm? This new religion? This new morality? These new laws?

The New Woman does not yet know.

She will study, train her mind, strive and agonize for the sake of that which she cannot yet know, for the sake of her personal mission.

The New Woman at present simply desires strength.

She desires the strength to endure the studying, training, striving, and agonizing she must do for the sake of that which she cannot yet know, for the sake of fulfilling her mission.

The New Woman at present does not desire beauty. She does not desire virtue. She is simply crying out for strength, strength for the sake of building [tsukuran] the as-yet-unknown realm, for the sake of her noble mission.⁴⁰

Raicho makes a point where she acknowledges that men are the root cause of women's long history of oppression, but even with the source, she is concerned about the matter of women themselves holding back on their furthering desire to reach the higher potential of honing their skills to create and to not be restrained of the "Old Women" flesh vessel. The dichotomy of the "Old Women" and "New Women" is a polarizing societal struggle for much of Japanese women, as the "Old Women" were characterized as being subservient to men and only pleasing other individuals' desires out of their selflessness, for the "New Women" it is to once finally strive to go forth in the new modernized life out of their interest and to "simply desire strength" and the separate themselves from the past and to foster a sense of resilient determination.⁴¹ This is true for much of the Seito publication. While the publication line was short lived, Hiratsuka Raicho, while ambitious and outspoken for the women's suffrage cause, was also of a well-off background, and had yet to be put in the shoes of a working woman. Her writings, while bringing forth the conceptualization of the "New Women," delve into the complexities of those who were economically suffering, nor has she politically expressed the contrasted treatment and bias that a middle or upper class is better off, whereas a poor/working woman must hurdle through life. Much

⁴⁰ Raicho New Years Issue (Essay). 1913.

⁴¹ Dina Lowy, *The Japanese "New Woman": Images of Gender and Modernity*. (Rutgers University Press, 2007) 83.

of the idea of the “Old Women” still lingers behind many poor women, as many must work in the factories out of interest for their families, whether out of their own decision or not.

Taishō Era Cafe Waitress and the “Modern Women”

Symbol of Modernity and the “Modern Girl”: The Japanese café waitress was considered a working-class embodiment of the Modern Girl. Like the Modern Girl, she could generate considerable discussion and was associated with new leisure activities. The café waitress was a significant figure who embodied the contradictions and complexities of modern Japanese society. The ‘Modern Girl’ was a symbol of modernity, a working woman navigating economic realities, an erotic figure subject to both objectification and her expressions of desire, and an individual existing within a framework of state surveillance and social control. The experiences of many cafe waitresses offer valuable insights into the gender roles, sexuality, class dynamics, and even colonial influences of the era.

To understand the Cafe waitress role during the Taishō era and how they were perceived and assimilated into the modernization of Japan, we must first understand the term of the “Modern Girl” (モダンガール), also referred to as “Moga” in much of the media and grander societal scale. According to Nii Itaru, a Taishō era intellectual who was given credit for coining the term ‘modern gaaru,’ she is portrayed as both animated and suggestive.⁴² Still, simultaneously, she is apolitical, but militantly autonomous, according to Kitazawa Shuichi, another Taishō era intellectual and artist. She was not necessarily fighting for women's rights or pushing suffrage, but she was more determined not to be a slave to men. She had liberated herself from age-old traditions and conventions and aimed to be on equal footing with men.⁴³

⁴² Miriam Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times*. 1st ed. Vol. 1. (University of California Press, 2007). 52.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 52.

The “Modern Girl” is the subject of both awe and criticism; the image of the “Moga” was widely circulated through the mass press, and he also generated significant discussion and criticism.

Feminist critics like Kitamura Kaneko defended her, pointing out the double standards in judging women's sexual behavior as there is a point that iterates on “For a woman to have played around with a man was considered bad, but if there were women who had transgressed with men, there must have been men who had played around with women.”⁴⁴

While the café waitress and the Modern Girl are both interlinked, and it can be argued that the café waitress is the origin of the epitome of the Taishō era Modern Girl, it is important to highlight the distinguished difference between the two. The café waitress was understood as a worker with her own experiences of eroticism and workplace dynamics, whereas the Modern Girl was primarily a media representation. To clear this understanding, Silverberg remarks “Like the Modern Girl, the café waitress could generate a disturbed tenor of the discussion, whether in relation to frustrated customers, lonely housewives, or the down-and-out café waitresses themselves. However, unlike the Modern Girl, the café waitress did not cross the culture line; she was undeniably Japanese.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ibid. 53.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 77.



The “*Waitresses at the Cafe*” postcard was created around the 20th century, specifically the 1920s. This postcard is under the collection name “Kitagawa Chikashi Collection.”⁴⁶ This photo alone outlines the convergence of both traditional Japanese attire with the Western apron on top of the kimono. This creates a fascinating image that Japanese society and politics were rapidly changing into modernization. While the shift to Western influence is rapid, the Taish era waitress has yet fully succumbed to the ‘Moga’ caricature.



“*Cafe Waitress (Jokyu)*” by Shimazaki Ryuu, painted during the Taishō Period, illustrates a cafe waitress who seems to be taking a break from her shift in a Western-style cafe.⁴⁷ Uniformed in a kimono under an apron, she wiped her face with a napkin in one hand, while the other rested on top of a table with a Western ashtray, set of sauces, and a glass (presumed) alcoholic bottle. While the setting is French-styled and adored with an apron, she retains the traditional Japanese style, not only by clothing but

also by following the traditional beauty standard of white powder face and up-do hairstyle.

Now, to distinguish the ‘Moga’ and the cafe waitress, there is a point iterated early in the essay that the modern girl is more media representation rather than a flesh individualistic Japanese woman of a famous novel known as “*Naomi*” also called “*Chijin no Ai*” (痴人の愛; *A Fool’s*

⁴⁶ “*Waitresses at the Cafe*.” Kitagawa Chikashi Collection. 1920s.

⁴⁷ Shimazaki Ryū, *Café Waitress (Jokyu)*, mid-1910s or later, Taishō period (1912–26), hanging scroll; ink and color on silk, 53 × 22 in. (134.6 × 55.9 cm), Japan, Purchase, Sachiko and Lawrence Goodman Gift, 2023, 2023.3.

Love) from Tanizaki Jun'ichiro. Serialized in 1924 and published in 1925, this novel follows the perspective of salaryman Joji Kawai (28) who "falls in love" with Naomi (15), a cafe hostess. This dynamic is explored throughout the novel, initially starting Joji gradually grooms Naomi into shaping her into his idealized Moga, giving Naomi a shift into perspective, and with Western influence or learning to manipulate her groomer, or even a combination of both, she slowly gains the upper hand in the relationship as she grows confidence. This, on top of Joji letting Naomi get her way, has led the dynamic to shift. Joji, seemingly obsessed with the West, has made Naomi enable her to grow into the desired, independent, and breaks the traditional societal upheld of being subservient. Moga reflects Western women who are deemed dominant and for Naomi to gain confidence in her allure, she has Joji around her fingers.

To reiterate, the evolution of women's roles in Japan's workforce has been deeply influenced by the broader feminist movements within the context of a patriarchal society. Starting with the Meiji era, where traditional roles like "Good Wife Wise Mother" were challenged by Western ideals, Japanese women began to shift from agricultural labor to factory work, thus contributing to the nation's industrial growth. The Taishō era marked the rise of the middle class and the emergence of the "New Women," reflecting cultural shifts and the growing feminist discourse. This historical course underlines the ongoing tension between traditional expectations and the changing realities of women's labor, marking the role feminism played in shaping workforce development in Japan.

The focus on the Taishō era raises important questions about the quality of life and whether it remained oppressive, particularly when comparing the work conditions of women to those of their male counterparts. The portrayal of women during this time often involved sexualization and a diminishment of their capabilities. My research, informed by textbooks and various sources,

leans toward the examination of café waitresses and their representation as part of the emerging concept of “modern women.” This portrayal contributes to the expectations of women as traditional, yet alluring figures, a narrative that emerged from the Meiji era’s exposure to Western influences and the advocacy of the “New Women” movement. This movement sought greater opportunities for women and aimed to establish their equality with men, though some still embraced the traditional ideals of the “good wife and wise mother.”

It is evident that while Japanese women were granted more opportunities to participate in society and gain independence during this period, they simultaneously faced new expectations and standards associated with the “Modern Woman” archetype. Although this identity encouraged women to be more outspoken and assertive, it also subjected them to sexualization because of their boldness and defiance of traditional norms. Thus, the “Modern Woman” can be viewed as the descendant of the “New Women” movement.