



Ronald P. Loftus. *Telling Lives*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004. vii + 310 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-2753-3; \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8248-2834-9.



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A Life Less Ordinary

Several scholars have written about liberal, socialist, and labor movements in Japan in the early-twentieth century. There are far fewer studies which deal with “the question of the gendering of political participation” (p. 15) according to V. Mackie, who recently published an excellent study of the “development of movement of socialist women in early twentieth century Japan” (p. 21).[1] What has been lacking so far is the translation of liberal women’s autobiographies in which they give their own perspective on the times they lived in, on their own activities, and why they made certain important choices in their lives. Ronald Loftus fills this noticeable gap in the English-language scholarship about Japan. In his new book *Telling Lives*, he allows people who do not speak Japanese to get an insight into what liberal Japanese women in the beginning of the twentieth century thought and how they themselves explained their activities.

The volume contains a collection of selective translations taken from autobiographies of “new” women in the prewar years in Japan. It is a valuable resource for any scholar for whom Japanese is not a native lan-

guage. Ronald Loftus has translated autobiographies of five Japanese women, all of whom came of age in the 1920s and who participated in various liberal activist movements in pre-war years. These translations allow us a glimpse into the lives of five women who believed in independence and equality between men and women, at a time when only very few women were aware of discrimination against them and fought against it. All the autobiographies were written in the 1980s, when the women’s liberation movement strengthened the interest in the early Japanese feminist movement.

Loftus chose to translate autobiographies of Oku Mumeo, Takai Toshio, Nishi Kiyoko, Sata Ineko and Fukunaga Misao. The autobiographical genre allows these women to tell their lives in their own voice. As a result, besides mentioning important political events and changes as well as their role in them, this book also gives a good picture about the lives and expectations of women from middle and working classes in Japan. Some of these women were educated in the best Japanese universities open to women at that time, and some did not finish elementary school because they had to start working.

Besides Oku Mumeo and maybe Sata Ineko, the lives and names of these women are not widely known in Japan or abroad. The first autobiography presented is that of Oku Mumeo. She was an important activist in the 1920s, and she continued to pursue her aim of improving ordinary working women's lives in Japan after the war. She served in the House of Councilors from 1946 to 1965 (when she retired), and established the Japan Housewives Association. Loftus points out that while her postwar accomplishments are widely known, her prewar activities have so far attracted less attention. Loftus translates sections of her autobiography *Fires Burning Brightly*, which tells us about her early years, her deep involvement in fighting for women's right to be involved in politics, and how she made political speeches and participated in demonstrations.

After the movement succeeded in reforming the Public Peace Police Law and women were granted the right to participate in political activities, Mumeo started gradually distancing herself from the movement. In her autobiography, she explains how the lack of wide reactions from ordinary women (many were not aware or not interested in the liberalization of the political status of women) to their success made her realize that at that stage not the presence or absence of political rights but improvement of the quality of everyday life was most important for proletarian housewives (p. 58). This led her to quit the women's movement and become actively involved in forming the Women's Consumer Cooperative Society. The Society, much to her regret, dissolved later, but her strong belief in the necessity of a women's consumer union led her to establish the Japan Housewives Association in the post-war years (p. 68). In the 1930s, she became active in establishing women's settlements in poor regions in prewar Japan. Loftus translates Mumeo's imaginary dialogue with a radical Marxist, where she clearly advocates her new views on the matter. Mumeo also wrote, "so my idea of what a women's movement should be is one in which housewives, mothers, and working women all dig down into the root of their very existences, organize on that basis, and participate in politics" (quoted, pp. 72-73).

Mumeo's various prewar experiences led her to become disillusioned with any kind of "men's" party politics, after having seen the Women's League pressured to dissolve by proletarian party leaders (a subject which Fukunaga Misao writes about in greater detail), and the state's use of women's settlements "to win the war" (p. 77).

The second autobiographical excerpt is from Takai Toshio's *My Own Sad History of Female Textile Workers*. Takai Toshio, a common law widow of Hosoi Wakizo, a worker and a pioneering researcher of working conditions of female textile workers in Japan, is a working-class woman who spent most of her life working in textile factories. Detailed scenes from women's lives in the factories are the background to the story, in which she writes about her early life, her years with Hosoi and the years following (p. 85). Much of the story is an attempt to describe her relationship with Hosoi Wakizo and her status as his common law wife. This story reveals much about the beliefs and social norms concerning marriage in Japan at that time, in which many of the present views and norms about marriage and family in Japanese society are rooted. The story of her not being able to find a job because she was perceived as Hosoi Wakizo's widow and at the same time not being able to receive royalties from his book because they were never legally married highlights the controversy and disadvantageous position of a common law wife.

The third chapter is from the autobiography of Nishi Kiyoko, a journalist. She was an acute observer of the reality of women's situation in the pre-war years as well as the general decline in liberties and the strengthening of the military regime. Her mother was the only daughter of a merchant and was compelled to marry a man who was ready to take over the family name and business. Her mother committed suicide when Kiyoko was still a small girl. As an adult, Nishi Kiyoko reasoned her mother's suicide was due to the fact that she was unhappy with her marriage, feeling trapped between a strong-willed father and a husband. This made Nishi herself, also the only daughter in the family, strongly desire financial independence from her family as a means to be able to choose her own marriage partner.

Kiyoko then describes how she attained this goal. After graduating from Waseda University as an auditing major (women were not accepted as fully matriculated students at the time), she found a job at the *Oriental Economist*, a progressive journal for the time. Among other things, working there presented her with an opportunity to become involved in the women's movement. Earlier, while sympathizing with liberal social views, she had never become directly involved, as she was worried that it might interfere with her primary goal of achieving independence. The chapter ends with her description of the turbulent war and postwar years. After the war, Kiyoko started working for Yomiuri Shinbun, while retaining her interest in women's issues. While Kiyoko

modestly states that she was “nothing more in the end than a little ‘Marx-Engels’ Girl” (p. 154), we learn from her autobiography that she did her best to spend time in the company of leading feminists of the time, helped to organize the Seminar of Women and Economics, and was recommended by a Labor Ministry to be a member of America Observation team. One can say that she represented the upper-intellectual stratum of feminism.

The fourth autobiography is the one of Sata Ineko, a prominent proletarian writer. It is a fascinating story of how a young girl with hardly any education became a proletarian writer. She received the Akutagawa Prize for one of her works. Sata Ineko never finished elementary school because she was encouraged by her father to start working at a caramel factory at the age of twelve. While she was one of the best students at school and was always an avid reader, she believes that her talent would not have been developed if she had not met a group of progressive-thinking young people from the Proletarian Literature Movement when she was working as a waitress in one of the fashionable Tokyo cafes. She married one of the liberal-thinking young men. What is striking is that their marriage failed because her husband could not accept her having a serious career, which resulted in the fact that sometimes her work obligations were more important to her than taking care of her husband.

The final autobiography is that of Fukunaga Misao, a Japanese female communist. She clearly subscribed to the communist ideals, but at the same time this chapter can be taken as one of the strongest criticisms of the Japanese Communist Party. Fukunaga Misao grew up in a very traditional household, where the father was the undisputed ruler and the mother a professional housewife. She grew up wanting something very different for herself than the family of her parents. Since, in her own words, her older sister was much prettier, Misao was allowed to continue education after school and go to the Tokyo Women’s College. There she became involved in a Marxist Women’s study group and eventually secretly joined the Communist Party whose ideology resonated with her deep beliefs in the equality of all human beings.

She had to discover that the leaders of the JCP were subscribing to the idea of gender dominance as strongly as the most traditional men of the time. She expresses genuine bitterness with the party, which crushed the Women’s League (which Oku Mumeo also covers) with its “despotic and oppressive orders” (p. 251) because of the “fear on the part of JCP leadership that if women formed their own women’s league consisting of women

only, then this would be the first step toward women awakening to a democratic autonomous self-awareness” (pp. 250). While Misao never gave up her communist ideals and preferred to go to prison rather than to renounce the party, her story exposes the hypocrisy of the party’s claim to fight against inequality among human beings.

All these women’s stories give us a clear and, at times, rather personal view of the prewar years. They give us a deep insight into women’s lives in those days, the common problems they faced, and what they thought and worried about as well as believed in. The book leaves us with a strong feeling of respect for these women, against a background of pervasive traditional beliefs in a society which determined the living conditions and shaped the opportunities of even the most progressive men and women.

In his comments, Loftus repeatedly tries to attract our attention to gender as being a source of a strong disruptive force in the interwar years in Japan. The book cover concisely summarizes his first chapter in the following way: “In their concern for women’s political rights and economic independence and their desire to transcend the narrow limitations of the ‘good wife, wise mother’ imposed by the state, these ‘self-writers’ were active participants in a wide variety of discourses that, when taken together, constituted a substantive oppositional ideology.”

While the women’s oppositional movement was definitely important, this book strikes the reader as a testimony of how essential gender was for these women’s everyday life experiences. Gender determined whether they were accepted as matriculating students or not, gender determined their salary, gender even turned out to determine whether one was accepted as an equal comrade into the Communist Party or as a sort of housekeeper, playing a subordinate role for men who were believed to be strong enough to try to change the society. What makes these women special is that they were aware of the discrimination against women and fought against social norms and perceptions, whereas the majority accepted it. Therefore it is particularly stunning that for some of these most liberal and broad-minded women of their times, the fiercest battle they had to go through was the inner battle with the traditional social norms they themselves subscribed to (see for example Sata Ineko’s marriage experiences pp. 215-222). In sum, it is not clear from the text of this book that women had the power to change Japanese society; it rather testifies to how all-pervasive gender indetermination was, how one was treated, and which opportunities were open to one

in life.

The book consists of six chapters and a brief conclusion. In the first chapter the author claims that he will analyze the autobiographies presented in a feminist tradition. It might have been beneficial in understanding his position if he had expanded on why he chose this perspective and why he believes it is superior to other traditions of analyzing autobiographical writing.

In the first chapter Loftus points out the four lines of argument he wants to develop in the book. First, for many of these women their work and participation in women's movements was more important for them to write about than their love and marriage relationships, and they appear to be more interested in social than in personal issues. Secondly, "the feminists and activists are best treated as sites—historical locations or markers—where crucial political and cultural contests are enacted" (p. 17). Thirdly, he stresses "that our understanding of how Japanese women began to think and act in new ways during the interwar years—how they developed their own sense of historical agency—can be enhanced by reading Japanese women's autobiographies" (p. 17). His fourth point is "that female self-writing not only changes, but often subverts the dominant discourse" (p. 18). The first three arguments are well borne out by the autobiogra-

phies presented; the fourth, however, seems to be more difficult to substantiate. One gets a strong feeling that the sense of "contestation and risk" (p. 18) that is clearly present in all the autobiographies stems from women's life experiences rather than from the autobiography as a literary form, that "was designed and developed in order to tell men's stories" (p. 18).

The conclusion of the book appears a bit confusing. It proclaims the importance of studying Japanese autobiographies and the need to compare them to the Western tradition of autobiographical writing, an aim that was not mentioned earlier. Being of a rather fundamental nature, this claim would probably have deserved a more thorough discussion.

This book is essential reading for anyone interested in early twentieth-century Japanese feminists, activists and writers. The autobiographies of women also provide us with a thick general description of women's lives in Japan in the first half of the twentieth century. Any scholar seeking to get a better picture of people's lives in the interwar years in Japan will find it interesting and useful.

Note

[1]. Vera Mackie, *Creating Socialist Women in Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

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