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changing lives: the 'post-war' in Japanese women's autobiographies and memoirs

Ronald P. Loftus, Association for Asian Studies, Ann Harbor, MI, 2013, 216pp.,
ISBN: 978-0-924304-69-9, \$25 (Pbk)

Changing Lives introduces the lives of six Japanese women who lived through the post-war years and faced the dramatic changes brought about by Japan's defeat in World War II. Through selective translations and summaries of autobiographies and memoirs by essayist Okabe Itsuko (1923–2008), actress Shinya Eiko (1928–), newspaper reporter and professor of African American literature Kishino Junko (1930–), non-fiction writer Sawachi Hisae (1930–), writer and critic Yoshitake Teruko (1931–2012) and journalist and activist Kanamori Toshie (1925–2011), Loftus' new work aims to illustrate how Japanese women experienced the end of the war in ways that profoundly differed from men and how they dealt with its unexpected challenges and opportunities.

The volume is mostly constituted of Loftus' beautiful translations of long excerpts from these women's autobiographical writings, which he uses as powerful windows into Japanese post-war history. The translations are interspersed with bridging sections that either summarise omitted passages or provide a commentary on the women's words. This last group, however, offers only limited insights because Loftus' commentary often verges towards mere paraphrasing and as a result feels somewhat repetitive. The chapters are loosely organised in chronological order: the traumatic experience of the imperial broadcast on 15 August 1945 announcing Japan's unconditional surrender; the early post-war years, which granted women the right to vote and were marked by historical changes in women's access to higher education and employment; the 1960s, with the explosion of citizens' protests against the renewal of the US-Japan Security Treaty (Anpo); up to the 1970s, with the emergence in Japan of a new women's liberation movement (Woman's Lib). Each chapter ends with a section of analysis that does not add much to what the authors have already compellingly stated in their autobiographies or to Loftus's comments scattered throughout the chapters.

Loftus admittedly wrote *Changing Lives* with a course on post-war Japanese history in mind and this may explain the rather naïve and didactic tone of much of his commentary. Nonetheless, the book constitutes a welcome addition to the scholarship on Japanese women's history, as his elegant translations make

accessible to the English-speaking audience fascinating documentary evidence about women's experience of the post-war. The female voices and memories presented in the book offer moving, vibrant recollections of a period of intense social transformation and enrich long-established accounts of the post-war era with a refreshing perspective. The institutionalisation of co-education, the surfacing of unforeseen job opportunities, the episodes of painful confrontation with a traditional mentality resistant to change and women's growing sense of subjectivity and autonomy are all aspects that these autobiographies foreground.

Of particular interest are the excerpts from Yoshitake Teruko's memoir. Her recollection of deeply personal experiences intertwines with a history of post-war Japanese women's movements and organisations. The narration of her encounter with Woman's Lib when she was already in her forties offers a lively first-hand account of the movement's powerful appeal well beyond its main constituency of young women in their twenties and thirties. At the same time, Teruko recalls her involvement in previous protests for peace and social democracy, such as the Anpo struggle and the protests in the rural village of Uchinada, where the government decided to use the land for artillery testing. Her narrative provides thus a heterogeneous representation of a woman's growing social and political awareness and offers useful documentary evidence to read side by side with Shigematsu's recent book *Scream from the Shadows: The Women's Liberation Movement in Japan* (2012), the first book-length study in English on the Japanese Woman's Lib.

Changing Lives suffers, however, from the lack of a solid theoretical framework. Although Loftus repeatedly expresses his interest in the narrative strategies employed by women autobiographers to reflect upon and reconstruct their position in relation to significant post-war events, an engagement with such strategies is never carried out in consistent or systematic fashion. Absent also is any methodological consideration that may account for the selection of women's autobiographies: Why did Loftus choose these women and what kind of exclusions does his choice perform? The text seems to suggest, for example, the suspicious notion of a homogeneous, female narrating self that is unencumbered by notions of class, 'race' or ethnicity (this despite the fact that the plight of *zainichi* Korean women—Korean women resident in Japan—is addressed in Shinya Eiko's autobiography). Finally, the conclusions are rather weak and do not provide particular insights into what has already been explored in the preceding chapters.

Overall, it seems to me that *Changing Lives* owes much of its potential to the quality of the memoirs it brings together and to Loftus' graceful translations. While it will be of interest to post-war historians, scholars of gender, women's self-writing and Japanese studies, it will also require the reader's determination to come to terms with its structural shortcomings.

reference

Shigematsu, S. (2012) *Scream from the Shadows: The Women's Liberation Movement in Japan*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Alessandro Castellini

Gender Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science

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