

# Exploring Japanese Interpretations of the "New Woman": *Seitô* at the Dawn of Feminism in Japan

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This paper explores cultural encounters by analyzing interpretations of the "New Woman" in Japan in relation to the development of feminist thinking in the early 1910s. Feminism in Japan,<sup>1</sup> like other countries, has its own history, beginning in the early decades of this century. However, it is not my intention to chronologically reconstruct the activities of the women who were committed to *Seitô* magazine.<sup>2</sup> Rather, I am interested in what was being questioned by these women of *Seitô* circle in their search for new alternatives for women--alternatives outside the social practice dominant at that time. I will begin by discussing the *emic/etic* distinction as a methodological question on how we can understand generalization and specification in studying specific cultural traditions while, at the same time, remaining fully aware that we continually experience cultural encounters. This question is basic to all cross-cultural study, not only as a methodological question of translation of terminology from one language to another, but also as a question of interpretation in relation to our understanding of different cultures. In the latter part of this article, I discuss changes in the meaning of the expression "New Woman" as shown in discourses between 1910 and 1914.

## *Emic/Etic* Distinction and Feminism

In discussing social development in modern Japan, researchers must work with concepts and terms of Western origins to determine whether or not Japanese culture is more different and unique than other cultures. Feminist researchers in Japan are not exempt from the question of how to understand "feminism" as a framework in studying cultural traditions and social change in Japanese society. The question is deeply related to translations of concepts from one culture to another, especially when studies of Japanese culture and society are examined using those translated concepts. Or, is there such a thing as translated concepts? The question becomes more crucial when the results of these studies on Japanese culture are presented in a language other than Japanese. For example, Harumi Befu, an anthropologist, points out that "the problems that arise when 'translating' a conceptual framework from one language to another are relevant insofar as these disciplines engage in cross-cultural or comparative research."<sup>3</sup>

The discussion presented by Befu urges us to reconsider the *emic/etic* distinction. The *emic* approach brings more sensitivity towards linguistic interpretations that exist within the society being studied. Whereas it may limit its focus to what is linguistically expressed in the native language(s) of the society, it emphasizes the cultural uniqueness by concentrating on those concepts which are expressed in native language(s). In contrast, the *etic* approach normally is more universal, but risks falling into excessive generalization with less sensitivity toward the uniqueness of each society (Befu, 1989). In brief, the *etic* approach is based on applicability of concepts or measuring tools across cultures, whereas the *emic* approach focuses on an *emic* reality and cultural concept which may partly be distorted by translation into another language.

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In applying the *emic/etic* distinction to understanding feminism in Japan, it is important to discuss how a concept with foreign origin has found meaning in Japanese culture, because the Japanese term *feminizumu* is indeed a translation from English. We are drifting between the two phases of feminism: *feminizumu* in the *emic* sense now as a Japanese word and feminism in Japan in the *etic* sense as something universal without regard for cultural differences.<sup>4</sup> Most feminist researchers in Japan seem to focus on *feminizumu* in the *emic* sense rather than "feminism" in the *etic* sense, and much work has been done to articulate gender issues with reference to Japanese society. Many other researchers have done similar work in their native societies, yet we all speak of feminism.

### Cultural Traditions and Feminism

In discussing feminism in view of the *emic/etic* distinction, we question how "feminism" can be understood in relation to cultural traditions in a given society. Traditions in terms of *dentô* tend to imply persistent opposition to any possibility of change in Japan despite her experience of modernization and westernization primarily since the nineteenth century. The Japanese term *dentô* refers not only to a set of traditional culture (*dentô bunka*) as is often represented by kabuki theaters or tea ceremony schools. Rather, a reference to the term *dentô* also reminds us of the ideology that Japanese culture should hold unchangeable eternity in its core beyond the passage of time. With this in mind, the discourses on Japanese culture (*Nihon bunkaron*) appear to make sense as researchers strive to define the Japanese national identity; modernization, however, provides the Japanese people with ample opportunities for gaining a greater sensitivity toward cultural encounters. These encounters with others, however, may also create an excessive awareness of one's own culture, a tendency associated with ethnocentrism although the border between self and others or between cultures may not necessarily be clear-cut.<sup>5</sup>

Although traditions may be regarded as a conservatism that preserves established social practices in a society, there are other methods of examining traditions. In using the Japanese term *dentô* for traditions, we usually reflect on an ambiguous past, tracing a core of national identity in order to rediscover and share it in the present. We must be aware of prejudices,<sup>6</sup> both our own and those of researchers, whenever we try to come to an understanding because both are involved in our understanding.<sup>7</sup> As Gadamer (1985) stated, "Tradition is not against development but actually provides the possibility for development; tradition is constantly an element of freedom and of history itself" (p. 250).

It is controversial to understand traditions as solely opposed to any possibility of change. Feminist thinking often questions and even criticizes gender stratification and inequality embedded in our understanding of traditions. In this sense, at a first glance, *feminizumu* and *dentô* may appear to contrast sharply, as traditions in terms of *dentô* may be too fixed to open and react to any challenge. However, I am not suggesting that traditions as a whole discourage feminist thinking. This is, in fact, a prejudice on traditions. However, as Susan J. Hekman (1990) points out, "prejudice is not arbitrary understanding but, rather, a knowledge of what our prejudices are, an understanding that involves and entails critique" (p.15) Hekman continues by stating that "the self-understanding fostered by feminist analysis is at the same time a critique of the sexist prejudices of our society" (pp. 15-16). In view of Japanese discourses on cultural traditions and on feminism, it is essential to clarify how cultural traditions in Japanese society are influenced by sexism. In the early 1910s it was still rare and extraordinary for women in Japan to express their opinions in public through journals or speeches. In those days, the Ministry of Education publicly recommended "good wives and wise mothers" in girls' education. Girls/women should

be given education for their mission as homemakers, while boys/men should dedicate themselves to nation building. Moreover, mainstream attitudes, represented mainly by newspapers and critiques, were not in favor of some brave women who dared to declare their search of emancipation from the stereotype of "good wives and wise mothers."

### Genuine or Subspecies?

Some may still believe that "there was originally no feminism at all in Japanese or any other Asian cultures, because feminism was born in the West and introduced from the West to the rest of the world."<sup>8</sup> It is thought that feminism spread from the West<sup>9</sup> to the rest of the world with the advent of modernization. Here, modernization appears to be understood primarily in terms of westernization, through which Western civilizations exerted influence over non-Western cultures, as implied in the contrast between the West and the Other<sup>10</sup>/Asia. However, the division of Western and non-Western cultures may not be so clear, and there is, of course, more than one way to understand modernization and feminism with regard to a specific culture.

The belief that "feminism" spread from the West seems to be linked to evolutionist and postcolonialist interpretations of feminism and social development. Social development is often referred to by citing economic growth and achievements, thereby indicating that human rights and social justice, including gender and ethnic equality, are guaranteed if one maintains a certain level of economic affluence. Moreover, social development also seems connected with the idea of a civil society in which citizenship is shared by members of the society.<sup>11</sup> According to Bryan S. Turner (1993, p. 2), citizenship may be defined as that set of practices (juridical, political, economic, and cultural) that define a person as a competent member of society and that, as a consequence, shape the flow of resources to persons and social groups.

When feminism in Japanese society is examined from the viewpoint of Western feminism, it is viewed with suspicion, and the question is raised concerning the concept of feminism itself in any cross-cultural study. All societies--whether Western or non-Western--are influenced by changes and interactions in a world where interdependence is increasing more than ever.

In discussing the state of women's emancipation in different countries, there may be ambivalence in identifying the women in question. How do we understand the differences among women? For example, when we speak of Japanese women, to whom are we referring? In discussing feminism, do we think of feminism or feminisms? In recent years, several scholars (Trin, 1993; Chan & Oka, 1995; Moore, 1996) with interests in postcolonialism and global feminism have discussed similar questions on differences among women (Ehara, 1989, p. 92). These differences are based not only on nationalities, but also on our images of women that may, in turn, be based on ethnic prejudices. Even in the turmoil caused by the increasing voices of multiculturalism in many societies, one may come to understand feminism, because to discuss feminism ultimately questions our cultural identities.<sup>12</sup> This is not meant to undermine feminist efforts to bring attention to their concerns by raising questions about sexism in different societies. According to Ehara Yumiko, a leading feminist sociologist, feminism has attempted to increase the visibility of work done by women, but that is usually accomplished without recognition. Simultaneously, feminists oppose the idea that this "invisible" work is given to women because of their female attributes (Ehara, 1989, p. 92). Being a woman, however, does not make one exclusively "invisible" in a society. When the focus is limited to women's "invisible" contributions or achievements, one risks the possibility of falling into nationalistic

thinking,<sup>13</sup> or indifference to the social complexity in relations between gender, ethnicity, and class. We must continue asking who we are from a cultural identity viewpoint and keep in mind that gender identity is a part of that multifaceted cultural identity.

### Seitô Women and "New Woman"

Over eighty years ago, Hiratsuka Raichô (1886-1971), one of the early Japanese feminists, proclaimed "Once, woman was a sun" in her preface to the first volume of *Seitô* magazine published in 1911.<sup>14</sup> In relation to the development of Japanese feminist thinking, it is interesting that Hiratsuka Raichô was not yet familiar with the ideas of Western feminist thinkers in general when she published the first volume of *Seitô* magazine (Kobayashi, 1987, p. 333). In this sense, the preface written by Hiratsuka provides contemporary readers with an exciting feeling of taking a new step forward. A few years later, Hiratsuka began to show more interest in Western feminists and thinkers including the Swedish feminist, Ellen Key, and, most notably, the discourse on motherhood<sup>15</sup> (*bosei ronsô*) in the late 1910s. Although the ideas of some Western feminists did attract early Japanese feminists, they were mainly concerned with issues related to women's life in Japanese society (Kôchi, 1988). Thus, it is impossible to state that early Japanese feminists simply copied Western ideas by following certain models of Western feminist movements.

It is not known who belonged and contributed to the circle of *Seitô* magazine except for distinctive individuals like Hiratsuka Raichô and Itô Noe. Due to its small size and organizational weakness, some may regard the emergence of the *Seitô* group as an insignificant phenomenon. Further, what was done by the women through *Seitô* magazine did not have such a broad and striking social impact so as to become a movement. It appears that *Seitô* magazine was not managed by a fixed group of women; rather, it was edited and issued primarily by amateurs who were not very good at organizing themselves.<sup>16</sup> Neither were the new women of *Seitô* always good at practical matters like publication activities.<sup>17</sup> In short, it was only a limited number of brave women who dared to express their disagreement to the men-centered view on gender relations by writing articles for *Seitô* magazine. However, *Seitô* magazine may be characterized as the true interest of women with a strong will to express themselves even against the common opinion of their days. Because of this challenging and critical attitude towards the conventional view of women's life, officials sometimes banned the magazine.

The expression "New Woman" was often associated with a fairly negative connotation of light-minded young women who lead a loose life, referring, in particular, to the *Seitô* women. Hiratsuka Raichô, herself, was aware of this association, and she wrote the following in the October 1914, issue of *Seitô* magazine:

It was about one year later [after the first publication of *Seitô* magazine] when such expression like New Woman gradually began to appear in newspapers and magazines. [...] It then became nearly a name for us who are active in *Seitô* magazine, and various ridiculous meanings were added to this naming. (Horiba, 1988, p. 128)

On the other hand, Horiba Kiyoko believed the image of the "New Woman" was not firmly established at the beginning, but rather evolved under the strong influence of newspapers. In 1910, Tsubouchi Shôyô referred to the "New Woman" (*atarashi'i/atarashiki onna*) in his lecture about the development of modern theaters.<sup>18</sup> With regard to Tsubouchi's theater, the "New Woman" resembled the image of Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *Dukkehem*. Between May 18 and July 23, 1911, the *Tôkyô Asahi Shimbun* (newspaper) ran a series of articles about the "New Woman." The first article stated, "Women's movement in the world can no longer be restrained

by anyone; that is called feminism (*feminizumu*)." At this point, the expression "New Woman" seemed to refer in general to those women who lived extraordinary lives, far exceeding the standard expectations for women (Horiba, 1988, pp. 68-69). The "New Woman" was also discussed in a series of articles in *Yomiuri Shimbun* (newspaper) between May 5 and June 13, 1912. It is noteworthy that in the first half of 1912, the expression "New Woman" did not as yet necessarily denote a negative image. This expression was not limited to include only the *Seitô* women, but also referred to those women who had accomplished remarkable achievements in literary or other fields of arts and culture (Horiba, 1988, p. 109).

However, a turning point occurred in July 1912, after a short essay on the cocktail drinking of five colors appeared in *Seitô* magazine, and some *Seitô* women visited the Yoshiwara Quarter. After that, "New Woman" acquired an even more malicious nuance against the *Seitô* women. Between July 12 and July 15, the *Kokumin Shimbun* (newspaper) reported these acts of the *Seitô* women in sensational articles on the "so-called New Woman" (*Iwayuru atarashi'i onna*). During the latter half of 1912, the *Seitô* women were labeled as the "so-called New Woman" and faced bitter slander, reported primarily by journalists of several newspapers.<sup>19</sup>

Horiba's study of the changing image of the "New Woman" reveals a misfortune of the *Seitô* women--at least for Hiratsuka and a few of her colleagues--whose reputations became the target of merciless criticism by journalists. It also serves as a warning, indicating how cautious one should be when dealing with public relations in general. A couple of events were enough to change the image of "New Woman" into "shameless, dangerous, and harmful women." However, to this author, whether or not Hiratsuka's view about the "New Woman" is definitely "against the reality" (*jijitsu ni hansuru*) as Horiba (1988, p. 69) argues remains questionable.

Another problem in Horiba's treatment of Hiratsuka's writing occurs because Horiba does not quote Hiratsuka's writing in its entirety. In her writing, Hiratsuka (1987) mentions the various shades of meaning with regard to the "New Woman":

It was about one year later when such expression like New Woman gradually began to appear in newspapers and magazines. It first meant such a woman who has a socially appreciated position, such a woman who lives an independent life with her own profession, or a single woman. It did not especially refer to anything about thinking or view of life. However, it then became nearly a name for us who are active in *Seitô* magazine, and various ridiculous meanings were added to this naming. (p. 194).

This part of Hiratsuka's writing in 1914, which was excluded in the earlier citation by Horiba, indicates that Hiratsuka was aware of the shades of meaning for the expression "New Woman." The timing of the public emergence of the expression "New Woman" may be regarded as a problem, as was mentioned in Hiratsuka's writing.

When the expression "New Woman" began to be associated with *Seitô*, it was understandable that Hiratsuka was extremely concerned about the meaning as being the *raison d'être* of *Seitô* magazine and of all the activities related to the *Seitô* circle. This does not mean that Hiratsuka neglected other meanings of "New Woman." The difference between Hiratsuka's and Horiba's interpretation of the meaning of "New Woman" seems to derive from different viewpoints--or different state of life. Obviously, Horiba is correct in pointing sharply to the various shades of meaning in the expression "New Woman." Still, Hiratsuka's life was associated with the expression "New Woman" regardless of her personal wishes, and it is natural that she found meaning in the expression "New Woman" specifically in the scope of her own life. In considering how the social environment surrounding Hiratsuka and *Seitô* magazine influenced her interpretation of "New Woman" as abusive against her colleagues and herself, this author is hesitant to follow the black-and-white judgment about Hiratsuka's view as Horiba's argument implies.

Horiba's study on the various shades of meaning of "New Woman," however, helps us to reconsider what severely damaged the reputation of *Seitô* women and why some acts could be so harmful for the image of the "New Woman." The visit by Hiratsuka and some of her *Seitô* colleagues to the Yoshiwara Quarter provided journalists an opportunity to distort the image of the "New Woman." At the same time, however, the journalists did not question the disgraceful existence of Yoshiwara. The purpose of the visit was not to bring public awareness on the plight of Yoshiwara, but to shed light on a sensitive part of the ideology of sexuality, which, in those days, was embodied in the family moral. Although this moral forced women to be bound to the *ie* system under fear of penalty for adultery, behind the moral was a given, one-sided flexibility that permitted men's commitment to the institutionalized prostitute.

However, we must not focus solely on these acts by the *Seitô* women that resulted in sensationalism by the media because such an approach may divert our attention from the more essential ideas of the *Seitô* circle. In January 1913, several *Seitô* women publicly declared themselves to be "New Women," and in October 1914, Hiratsuka (1987) wrote the following in *Seitô* magazine:

Towards the society, we have been saying without hesitation that we are new women. However, the new woman spoken in public completely differed in its contents from the one we mean. Those outer new elements which were listed up in public made no sense for us. We refer to it with more internal meaning. And, we try to be always new women in this very internal sense. It is no doubt that such is expected only for the woman with emancipated self. (p. 194)

In internalizing the "New Woman," Hiratsuka problematizes the old elements closely linked to marriage and the family system. In order to make these taken-for-granted social practices controversial, Hiratsuka and her *Seitô* circle colleagues dared to become "New Women" in search of emancipation.

While the criticism of *Seitô* women in terms of "New Woman" quickly increased beginning in July 1912, some magazines later took the new wave surrounding *Seitô* women seriously, including *Taiyô* (June 1913) and *Chûô kôron* (August 1913). *Chûô kôron* stated the following in an advertisement:

The nineteenth century was the period of the ordinary people and the twentieth century is the period of women's emancipation, as scholars state. Now, it is outdated to examine New Woman simply from viewpoint of curiosity or to make gossips of women's question. . . (cited by Ide, 1987, p. 103)

In particular, *Chûô kôron*, with its focus on "New Woman," contained several articles that contrasted sharply with one another (Ide, 1987, p. 103). The very presence of these different opinions revealed that the image of "New Woman" was not completely tainted. It is likely that as the publicity of the *Seitô* woman as the "so-called New Woman" increased, more attention was drawn to the "New Woman" as a controversial topic for discussion. The discourse on the "New Woman" and the emergence of *Seitô* magazine provided multilayered interaction in Japan in the early 1910s. *Chûô kôron* and *Taiyô* magazines both represented the voice of urban middle-class citizens. Diversity in opinions on the "New Woman" in these magazines implies a diversity in understanding of cultural traditions. *Seitô* magazine succeeded in stimulating the discourse on the "New Woman" and highlighting dissonances in understanding between cultural traditions and the vulnerability of "fixed cultural traditions."

The changes in the meaning of "New Woman" in the early 1910s revealed the reaction of the society to which these "New Women" also belonged. As the controversies surrounding *Seitô*'s "New Women" increased the visibility of women's accomplishments, *status quo* in the society was increasingly questioned and challenged. When the name "New Woman" began to be used for *Seitô* women, it was

intended to label these unfavorable women as exceptions and to exclude them in their own society. With their own voices and actions, the women of *Seitô* circle played an essential role in awakening public awareness, even though *Seitô* magazine had only a short life and malicious criticism appeared against them in print. The voices once raised from *Seitô* continued to be echoed in other public forums, including the discourse of motherhood (*bosei ronsô*) during 1915 and 1919. Still, this was only the beginning of the endeavor by the early Japanese feminists to seek more meaningful ways of being for the "New Women" who were born with *Seitô* at the dawn of feminism in Japan.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Horiba, 1991, p. 366, who points out the term of "feminism" was already known as *feminizumu* in the 1910's in Japan within a limited circle of the Japanese journalists who reported the rise of feminist movements in the West. On the other hand, the word *feminizumu* has most broadly prevailed in Japan since the early 1970s along with the women's liberation (*ûman ribu*) movement.

<sup>2</sup> *Seitô* magazine was published between September, 1911, to February, 1916.

<sup>3</sup> Befu, 1989, p. 323. "Because many of the descriptions of Japan are implicitly comparative it is fitting to consider the ramifications of the *emic/etic* distinction and its significance for cross-disciplinary research concerned with understanding Japan both in its own terms and in comparison with other societies."

<sup>4</sup> See Bhabha, 1994, p. 34. The concept of cultural difference focuses on the problem of the ambivalence of cultural authority: the attempt to dominate in the name of a cultural supremacy which is itself produced only in the moment of differentiation.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Aoki, 1990, p. 175, who argues that as the transformation of the discourses of Japanese culture (*Nihon bunkaron*) presents, the positive and negative views on one's own culture have rather emotional and ideological elements rather than theoretical.

<sup>6</sup> See Gadamer, 1985 [1975], pp. 237-238, who discusses the fore-meaning and fore-understanding accompanied with the usage of language.

<sup>7</sup> As to the fusion of these horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*) in Gadamerian hermeneutics, see e.g. Keta, 1994, pp. 268-269.

<sup>8</sup> I heard this from a female professor of Finnish language in Finland in her letter commenting on my manuscript in Finnish. See Takahashi, 1995.

<sup>9</sup> See Hall, 1992, pp. 276-277, who points out that the concept of the West functions to classify societies into different categories; the image of the West condenses a number of different characteristics into one picture; the idea of the West provides a standard or model of comparison. Hall (*ibid.*) also states that, "these days, technologically speaking, Japan is 'western', though on our mental map it is about as far 'East' as you can get."

<sup>10</sup> See also Bhabha, 1994, p. 31, who argues with reference to critical theory, "...difference and otherness thus become the fantasy of a certain cultural space or, indeed, the certainty of a form of theoretical knowledge that deconstructs the epistemological 'edge' of the West."

<sup>11</sup> Civil society greatly relies on self-image of "the proper way of life" among citizens in a society, while citizenship is also a controversial concept, especially in the light of gender and ethnicity (see, e.g., Chon, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Brah, 1992, pp. 142-143, who argues: "Identity is never a fixed core. On the other hand, changing identities do assume specific, concrete patterns, as in a kaleidoscope, against particular sets of historical and social circumstances." See also Maher, 1993, p. 150, who points out that languages are used in the ways which are

respectively specific for each individual in discussing cultural identity in relation to use of languages.

<sup>13</sup> For example, the case of Takamura Itsue in pre-1945 Japan and of some Finnish feminist academia who have recently published *The Lady with the Bow* in 1990 (Manninen et al.). However, we should not confuse ourselves with a mythical idea of nation-building nor with an illusory idea of a homogeneous society.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Horiba, 1988. This preface to the first *Seitô* magazine was written at the end of August in 1911. During January, 1915, and February, 1916, it was Itô Noe who solely took charge of publishing *Seitô* magazine. About the change of the editorship from Hiratsuka Raichô to Itô Noe, see, e.g., Itô, 1970a and Itô, 1970b. As to the preface for the first *Seitô* magazine, Hiratsuka herself commented three years publication that this preface seemed to her incomplete and even childish, even though there was no change in the basic idea. See Hiratsuka, 1987 [1914], p. 193.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Kôchi, 1988. See also Rodd, 1991, pp. 189-198 who presents the essence of this discourse in English.

<sup>16</sup> Many of those who participated in publishing the *Seitô* magazines gained higher education at Nihon joshi daigaku (Japan Women's University) established in 1901 in Tôkyô, one of the first private universities for women in Japan. See Horiba, 1988, pp. 60-78.

<sup>17</sup> The *Seitô* magazine was also known for plenty of misprints and finally closed after a short time. See, e.g., Kobayashi, 1987, p. 328; Horiba, 1988, p. 128.

<sup>18</sup> See Horiba, 1988, p. 51 & p. 82. In addition, Henrik Ibsen's *Dukkehjem* (Doll's House) was first presented in Tôkyô in September 1911, which much increased public attention to the New Woman. It was approximately at the same time when the first *Seitô* magazine was published

<sup>19</sup> See Horiba, 1988, pp. 111-113. Responding to the increasing criticism against *Seitô* women, *Seitô* magazine of January, 1913, focused on the topic of the New Woman. Hiratsuka herself openly declared to be a new woman in her short contribution to *Chûô kôron* magazine of January, 1913. See also Hiratsuka, 1991 [1913].

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