

Women Mass Organizations and War in 20th Century Japan – An Overview

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Abstract

Gender inequality is a 'sexy topic' for students and research on Japan in Indonesia. Many students and even experts wonder why in such a modern and prosperous society like Japan, women lack behind men in almost every aspect of social life, especially being excluded from social and economic participation. Most of the experts rationalize by pointing to 'ryosai kenbo' (good wife, wise mother) as cultural or traditional value that confine women in domestic sphere. In this essay, I argue, by presenting historical facts and data, that Japanese women were encouraged to and they did actively participate in public sphere during the wartime in the 20th century.

Keyword: *women patriotic organization, women emancipation and war participation*

Introduction

The creation of modern Japan state was preluded by civil war, launched by alliance of southern Japan local elites against the Tokugawa government. The civil war, known as Boshin War (1867-1868; broke out on 1867, the year of Boshin according to Japanese lunar calendar), was fought with modern weaponry. Southern Japan alliance, supported by Scottish arms trader, defeated the Tokugawa army, which was militarily assisted by the army of Napoleon III, the emperor of France. After the war, the new government, dominated by the military elites from southern Japan by claimed itself as Meiji government, built a shrine in

Tokyo, the new capital, to commemorate soldiers who fought and died for the Meiji government. This shrine later changed its name and now known as Yasukuni shrine, regarded by Chinese and Koreans as the symbol of Japan's militarism. As soon as the Meiji government got settled, in 1873, it promulgated The Conscription Law (Choheirei), which obliged all physically healthy young men of 20 years old to be conscripted.

Thus, it is obvious that Japan entered the modern era as a militaristic state. This is natural since it coincided with the age of imperialism in global history. Interestingly, the first nationwide

women organization in Japan was also related to militarism.

It was Aikoku Fujinkai (Patriotic Women's Organization), established in 1901 by Okumura Ioko, and fully supported by Japanese government and military officers.

1. The founding of Aikoku Fujinkai

Okumura Ioko (1845-1907) was the daughter of a Buddhist priest from Shinshu Higashi (east) Hon'ganji sect. Her father was an aristocrat from Kyoto, meaning that their family had been related to the imperial family. These 2 factors explain why she took the initiatives to found Aikoku Fujinkai.

Shinshu, formally Jodo Shinshu, was a Buddhist sect founded in late 12th century as part of Buddhism reform in Japan. It spread rapidly among Japanese peasants and in the late 16th century, it had become so powerful that Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the 'ruler of Japan' then, stepped in to 'divide' it into 2 mutually hostile sect, namely the East and the West sect. During the Tokugawa era (1603-1868), 'the east sect' was pro Tokugawa, while the 'the west sect'

was hostile to Tokugawa. After the regime change in 1868, widely known as Meiji Restoration, the east sect was more than eager to show its loyalty to the new government, by actively conducting propagation abroad, first in the Korean peninsula (then under the rule of Chosun dynasty), then in China.

It was under such a historical background that Ioko's brother, Enshi, went to Korea in 1877, soon after Japan signed a treaty with Chosun dynasty which allowed Japanese to reside in several port cities in Korea. In 1890s, Ioko followed her brother for Buddhism propagation in port city Kwangju in southern Korea. The Okumuras also founded a school, Kwangju Technical School. This resembles Christian evangelism, which combines religious teaching with vocational education.

We should bear in mind that it was during the last decades of 19th century, when Japan was competing fiercely with China and Russia over political and economic domination of Korea. Buddhist priests of various sects in Japan were backed up by their government and military officers to establish 'religious

authority' outside Japan, including Korea. The Okumuras (Enshin and Ioko), with their 'foothold' in Korea and their relations to the imperial family, were successful in obtaining financial support from influential politicians and high rank officers from ministry of domestic affairs, as well as military officers.

It was through her experiences abroad, witnessing Japan's relatively weak position vis a vis Western powers, that Ioko came to believe that as a civilian, she should do her best to support her government in winning Japan's national cause in Asia.

The decisive event for Ioko was the Boxer Rebellion which broke out in northern China in 1900. Japan, together with United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Russia and Austria-Hungary, jointly sent troops to suppress the rebels. It was for the first time that Japan embarked on a joint military operation together with Western powers.

Ioko was moved by the plight of Japanese soldiers in China, and motivated to establish a national women organization in order to support Japan's military campaign

abroad. Back home to Japan in 1901, Ioko began lobbying the national elites circle and sought support to establish Aikoku Fujinkai (AF; Patriotic Women Organization), in order to mobilize women nationwide to support Japan's military campaign in China. Among the influential politicians supporting AF were Konoe Atsumaro, a prominent aristocrat who initiated the founding of Toa Dobun Shoin (East Asia Common Culture Academy) in Nanjing, China, in 1899 (closed and moved to Shanghai, China, in 1901, existed until Japan's surrender in 1945), in order to educate and train future Japanese bureaucrats in charge of China affairs. The common purpose of AF and Toa Dobun Shoin was quite similar, namely to pursue Japan's national interest abroad, especially in China.

AF saw a significant growth due to the outbreak of Russo-Japan War in 1904. It was the first war, in modern history, that was fought between a 'non-white' nation vs a 'white' nation. AF set up local branch in almost every provinces and cities as well as villages, mobilizing women for collecting

donation for national defense, sending messages of gratefulness and prayers to soldiers in battlefield as well as comfort bags (similar to goodies bags containing basic daily needs for soldiers in the battlefield), attending send-off ceremony to deployed soldier at each village, as well as welcome-home ceremony for soldiers coming back from battle field, taking care of families (especially wives) of soldiers, and visiting Japan's soldiers stationed at battlefield abroad.

In order to be able to make donation, AF launched campaigns for 'rationalization of family life'; in concrete, women (girls and house wives) were given instructions on how to management household affairs efficiently, how to lead a frugal living by eliminating unnecessary spendings, in order to save money for donation; how to save time in order to be able to participate in social activities, especially attending ceremonies of sending-off and welcoming soldiers.

Other activities of AF members were organizing housewives and girls to offer stitches for soldiers' belt; it was called

senninbari, literally meaning one thousand stitches; it was waist belt made of cotton and to be wrapped around soldier's waist; Japanese people then believed that a cotton belt with a thousand (or many) stitches on it put by a thousand (or many) women would protected the soldiers against bullets in battlefield. The design of belts were tiger, since there was a common belief that tigers run one thousand li and still able to come back, so it became the symbol of hope that those soldiers wearing tiger design belt would certainly come home safely.

AF started in 1901 with 13,000 members; during the Russo-Japan war, the membership increased to 463,000 and to 707,000 in 1907. Afterward, AF continued to increase its membership that in 1937, it numbered more than 3 millions, including members from its branches in Japan's colonies, such as Taiwan, Korea and Manchuria.

2. AF in peacetime: encouraging women participation in social works

The end of Russo-Japan War presented a 'new normal' for AF,

since there was no more mass deployment of soldiers to battlefield abroad. AF revised its article of association in 1917 and changed the focus its activities from military support to women's social education for life improvement. It set up centers for social service, including center for consultation on child health, child care center, informal education center for women, etc. Just like other social education programs in Japan, those program by AF also aimed to equip women with knowledges and skills so they can lead a better life, and to imbue them with consciousness as Japanese subject, or sense of nationalism, as well as 'dos and don'ts' as a decent Japanese women.

3. Women's role in family education: Dainippon Rengo Fujinkai (DRF)

In 1931, a government (ministry of education) sponsored women organization, Dainippon Rengo Fujinkai (Federation of Greater Japan Women Organizations) was founded. Though not as well known as AF, this organization was headed by

Sanjonishi Nobuko, who was the younger sister of empress Kojun, the wife of emperor Hirohito. Its missions were to disseminate the importance of formal education among women and to promote family education, and channeling government's policies on family education. Just like AF and Kokubofujinkai (discussed below), the organization was dissolved by the government in 1941.

4. Housewives as supporting pillar of national defence: the founding of Dainippon Kokubofujinkai (DKF)

The most 'jingoistic' women organization in prewar Japan was Kokubofujinkai (Greater Japan Women Association for National Defense), founded by housewives living near Osaka port in 1932. Those women were organized to attend sending off and welcome home ceremonies for soldiers dispatched to and coming back from battlefield in China. It was on the aftermath of Manchurian Incident in November 1931, when Japan's army began to send large number of troops to occupy northeastern China,

marking the beginning of war with China till 1945 (known as ‘Fifteen Year War’ in Japan’s historiography).

Those Osaka women, mostly stirred by the bombastic propaganda in mass media, were more than eager to prove that women staying home can also contribute to the victory of Japan in battlefield. Their slogan was more than clear: national defense began at kitchen; their uniform was Japanese style apron, showing that they were really ‘merely housewives’.

Unlike AF and DRF, which were authorized by aristocrats and directed by the government, DKF was a truly a spontaneous women organization of the ‘commoners.’ It was after the May 15th Incident, which saw the end of parliamentary system and the beginning of military rule in prewar Japan. The army gave active support to DKF, providing opportunities for active participation in national military enterprise to those ‘commoner’ women, while ‘exploiting’ them for the military cause. The main activities of DKF at each village or cities were

organizing and attending sending-off ceremonies for soldiers, providing material and spiritual support for families (wives and children) of soldiers at duty abroad, organizing and attending welcome home ceremonies for soldiers returned home with physical disabilities or dead (funeral ceremonies), collecting and sending comfort bags, as volunteer workers at military camps and army related hospitals, and conducting air raid drill. Those activities were intensified after the outbreak of Sino-Japan War in July 1937, when Japan’s army began sending millions of troops to be stationed in China.

5. Total war and total participation of women: Dainippon Fujinkai (DF)

In December 1941, Japan officially launched war against United States of America. This required further active participation of all national human resources, including women. The three existing women organization, namely AF, DRF and DKF, were dissolved by the army, in order to be merged into a single national women organization in 1942: Dainippon Fujinkai (DF;

Greater Japan Women Organization). Since Japan's battlefield had been extended to include the whole area known nowadays as Southeast Asia, while Japan was still mired in battlefield in China, more and more soldiers were sent abroad, meaning that more and more attention should be paid to their and their families' wellbeing. For unmarried young men receiving draft papers, DF members would help them find a bride, by persuasion or coercion, and arrange the wedding ceremony even one week before their departure, with the hope that the brides would get pregnant before their husbands departure, and these young men's families would be relieved somehow, even though their sons could survive the war. For unmarried soldiers coming home with physical disabilities, which meant that it would be extremely difficult for them to find a spouse, DF members conducted seminars, lecturing young unmarried girls to respect and to marry those

disabled ex-soldiers. The key terminology was 'houkoku' or patriotic; marrying a man even just one week before his departure to the battlefield, and marrying a physically disabled ex-soldiers, were 'patriotic' conducts, evidence of women's patriotism.

6. Women in modern Japan: victims or willing supporters of the patriarch state?

In Indonesia, studies on Japan's feminism movement tend to focus on Gender Equality Index, which shows the low percentage of women's participation in public sectors. This is true and it requires further data collecting and analysis. However, many studies tend to ignore historical facts discussed in this essay, and just 'jump into conclusion' by concluding that it follows Japan's tradition of 'ryosai kenbo' (good wife, wise mother). It was not really like that just several decades ago.