

WOMEN'S MAGAZINES AND THE TRADITION OF CONFESSIONAL WRITING IN JAPAN

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A very interesting aspect of women's magazines not only in Japan, but also in other countries such as Germany, is the tendency to publish "confessional articles." Barbara Sato has described this as an important element of pre-war women's magazines. The same seems to apply to contemporary women's magazines. In the summer of 1998, *Kurowassan* (Croissant), for example, published confessional articles by women such as Ueno Chizuko, professor of Sociology at Tôkyô University and a well-known feminist, on the topic "Yonjûdai no koi" (Love in Our Forties). In the September issue of *Fujin kôron* of the same year, the famous singer and dancer Koyanagi Rumiko, whose husband left her, discussed her innermost feelings. In the column "Dokusha taiken shuki" (Notes About the Experiences of Readers) in the same issue, four female readers described why a husband's relatives can be such a nuisance. In June 1984, *Kurowassan* published the winning contributions from a contest in which female readers were asked to confess their strategies for divorce.

In Japan, confessional writing comprises an important element in literary tradition. It can be traced back to the *nikki bungaku* (diary literature) of the Heian period. The vast majority of contributors to this genre were women who wrote about their daily lives.¹ In modern Japanese literature, a specific autobiographical genre, the *shishôsetsu* (or *watakushi shôsetsu*) was popularized by male writers during the Taishô era (1912-1925), who wrote in a confessional style about their private lives. This kind of autobiographical writing is regarded as one of the most important literary genres in Japan, even today.²

This literary tradition may account for the tendency of women's magazines to print confessional articles by female readers as well as professional women writers. When the editors of *Seitô* (Bluestocking) and *Shin shin fujin* (New True Woman), journals put out by women for women in early Taishô, spoke of themselves as *atarashii onna* (new women) or *shin shin fujin* (new true women),³ this self-revelation made them possible sources of inspiration for a female audience.

In 1936, *Fujin kôron* serialized the first autobiographical novel by Sata Ineko, who also deserves the rubric "new woman." Sata, one of the best-known female writers of the proletarian literary movement of the 1920s and 30s, married an activist in the movement. While her husband was imprisoned for his political activities, Sata's own career as novelist took off. Her success caused serious problems in their relationship after the husband's release from prison, and they eventually separated. When the news became public, the editor of *Chûô Kôronsha*, the publisher of *Fujin kôron* (Woman's Review), urged Sata to write in detail about her per-

sonal crisis. In Japan, famous writers enjoy a status similar to movie stars, and people are interested in their private lives.

The central theme of “Kurenai” (Crimson), the novel Sata published in *Fujin kôron*, concerns the heroine Akiko’s difficulties in combining the roles of a professional women, wife, and mother. Akiko speaks out against the *ryôsai kenbo* (good wife and wise mother) ideology. She not only discovers that the outside world expects her to act according to this ideal, but also that she herself has largely internalized it. The heroine eventually becomes desperate when her husband decides to leave her for a life with a “normal wife” who is not an intellectual.⁴ Sata worried that this novel might discourage young women from trying to liberate themselves. In an essay published shortly thereafter, she insisted that not all married working women faced such difficulties, and that the couple featured in her novel was a special case because both husband and wife were writers. Obviously, Sata recongized the influence of her novel on female readers, especially since it was published in the mass media.

The tendency among female readers to take the heroines of novels as their role models is also demonstrated in Sata’s “Karada no naka o kaze ga fuku” (A Wind is Blowing Through the Body), serialized in the *Asahi shinbun* (Asahi Newspaper) from 1956 to 1957. The protagonist of the story is a divorced working woman with two small children. Her young lover would like to marry her, but she refuses him because marrying a divorcee could be harmful to his career. When this episode came out, Sata received a letter from one of her female readers. The woman confessed that she herself was in exactly the same situation as Sata’s heroine. Having been influenced by the novel’s protagonist, she planned to give up her own marriage plans. As a result, Sata decided to change the outline of the story and give it a happy ending. Later, Sata received an invitation to her female reader’s wedding.

In contemporary Japan, the tendency to regard fictional characters in literature and the media as role models continues.⁵ One survey shows, that women watch TV dramas not only for pleasure, but also to gain knowledge about life (Masumedia Bunka to Josei ni Kansuru Chôsa Kenkyûkai (ed.) 1986: 109). This attitude no doubt contributes to the popularity of autobiographical literature and confessional articles in Japan because such writing seems to guarantee authenticity.

“Confessional articles,” a distinguishing feature of prewar Japanese women’s magazines, are still found in present-day magazines. But how about the so-called “family-articles” (*katei kiji*) which prevailed in magazines like *Shufu no tomo* and *Fujin kôron* in the 1920s? Is the family still an important theme in contemporary women’s magazines?

At a conference on the image of the family in the Japanese media organized in 1995,⁶ magazines formed a genre in which the topic of the family was almost absent, in contrast to its treatment in TV dramas, TV animation, TV commercials, newspapers and novels. A content analysis of nine popular magazines conducted by Morohashi Taiki in 1994⁷ shows that the percentage of articles dealing with the theme of the family was extremely low. This held true not only in general magazines (*ippanshi*) and men’s magazines, but also in five women’s

magazines. Morohashi sees this as a common tendency except in magazines specializing in child rearing issues (*ikujī zasshi*) (Morohashi 1998: 265). Interestingly, *Nikkei Woman*, targeting career women, had the highest percentage of articles dealing with the theme of the family. The focus, however, addressed the difficulties of balancing a professional career and caring for a family (*ibid.*: 275).

Morohashi's analysis only included five women's magazines. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental change in the mainstream of Japanese women's magazines. Once synonymous with women's magazines, the so-called *fujinshi* targeting married women, are now on the decline (*ibid.*: 267). Instead, fashion magazines for the young, and life-style magazines are increasing in popularity.

Although the family is no longer directly addressed in many women's magazines, cooking occupies 35.5 percent of the magazine *Orange Page* and 25 percent of *Sutekina okusan* (Wonderful Spouse) (Morohashi 1998: 281). This demonstrates that household chores still occupy an important place in women's lives, ranking next to "beauty."

Gossip about famous people, prevalent in women's weeklies (*josei shūkanshi*) like *Josei jishin*, is a cause of consternation for Morohashi (*ibid.*: 204). The negative attitude of many intellectuals towards women's magazines has been pointed out by Barbara Hamill Satō and Ulrike Wöhr (both in this volume). A change of paradigm, however, can be detected in Japan and other countries. At a conference on women's history held in Enoshima in September 1998, Professor Inoue Teruko, the founder of a study group on women's magazines (Josei Zasshi Kenkyūkai), confessed that she herself does not dislike women's magazines. She mentioned that analyzing the contents of women's magazines makes her aware of her own concept of femininity. This kind of self-reflection may be a key to a deeper understanding of women's magazines.

NOTES

- 1 One of the most famous examples is the "Kagerō nikki" which describes the desperate situation of a woman in a society where polygamy prevailed. See Sonya Arntzen (1997) for an inspiring introduction to her English translation of this autobiographical text.
- 2 For an analysis of this literary genre see Hijiya-Kirschner 1987 (English translation, Hijiya-Kirschner 1996).
- 3 See Wöhr 1997 for a short characterization of *Seitō* and a thorough analysis of *Shin shin fujin*.
- 4 For an analysis of this novel, see Gössmann 1996.
- 5 In a survey on the attitudes of young people in Japan, one of the questions asked was what influenced the respondents' thinking most strongly: 43% answered "television and radio," "friends and colleagues" ranked second with 14%, and "newspapers and magazines," "parents and sisters and brothers" trailed in third and fourth places. (Sōmuchō Seishōnen Taisaku Honbu 1992).
- 6 The conference took place at the German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ) in Tokyo. The papers, comments, and discussions were published in German (Gössmann 1998). A selection of these papers were included in a Japanese book (Muramatsu and Gössmann 1998).
- 7 The magazines analyzed were *Orange Page*, *Sutekina okusan*, *Josei seibun*, *Non no, Mi*, *Nikkei Woman*, *Shūkan gendai*, *Shūkan Playboy*, and *POPEYE*.

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