

# Introduction: *Onna daigaku takara-bako* (A Treasure Chest of Great Learning for Women)

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The author is thought to be Kashiwaya Sei'emon, the Osaka publisher of the book, based on the writings of Kaibara Ekiken, who is listed as the author. Initially published in 1716, it was reissued on average every twenty years till the late 19th century. It is considered to be the single most influential Japanese educational tract for women. The scholar Basil Hall Chamberlain translated a portion of the text in 1878 as a source for the outside world to understand Japan.<sup>1</sup>

Its core text *Onna daigaku* (Great Learning for Women) is a relatively strict moral treatise for women, stressing obedience to parents and in-laws, and self-control with the aim of service to others. The following sentence gives a sense of the import: 'The great life-long duty of a woman is obedience.' Along with this core treatise, we also find a vast array of illustrations showing women in all sorts of work, from ploughing fields to basket-making, sewing, divers, prostitutes and packhorse drivers. Further, there are sections that introduce *The Tale of Genji* and famous classical poems. There are sections on pregnancy, food and child-rearing, and even a section about Chinese history. In total, the book offers much about the lives and expectations of women at the time.

It is clear, however, from this book that a woman's life was to be in service to her married family and the continuation of this household. Sexual matters or pleasure are not mentioned except as a matter of restraint, in that a woman is expected to remain chaste and keep her distance from men and entertainments; sex is mentioned briefly in reference to pregnancy.

Of tea and wine she must not drink overmuch, nor must she feed her eyes and ears with theatrical performances (*kabuki, jōruri*), ditties, and ballads. To temples (whether Shinto or Buddhist) and other like places, where there is great concourse of people, she should go but sparingly till she reaches the age of forty.

In the important section, 'Yotsugi-gusa' (On producing heirs), the text straightforwardly dictates against sexual pleasure: 'If you have too much sexual desire (*shikiyoku*), you won't get pregnant; if you are too wildly passionate (*inran*), you won't get pregnant.' Sex is to be a duty for procreation not for pleasure. *Onna dairaku takara-beki* (Great Pleasures for Women and Their Treasure Boxes) was created as a parody of this book.

## Literature

Ishikawa Matsutarō 石川松太郎, *Onna daigakushū* 女大学集. Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1977.

*Onna dairaku takara-beki, Onna daigaku takara-bako* 女大楽宝開・女大学宝箱. Tokyo: Taihei Sho'oku 太平書屋, 1998.

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<sup>1</sup> Basil Hall Chamberlain, "Educational Literature for Japanese Women," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Great Britain*, vol. 10, part 3, 1878, pp. 332–40, and also included in his book *Things Japanese* (1890), still in print.