

Edo-Era Women's History: A Review of Recent Work in English

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This essay reviews recent trends in the study of Edo-era women's history by English-language scholars. It focuses in particular on four recent biographies of Edo-era women. While three of the four women portrayed in these books gained some fame in Japan for their notable acts, the English-language biographers are more interested in the broader questions of class and gender revealed by these women's lives. All four biographies emphasize the agency of their subjects despite limitations imposed by class and gender expectations. Using the details of these women's lives, the authors shine a critical light on assumptions that might go unquestioned in more traditional historical approaches.

Keywords: Japanese history, women's history, Edo era, early modern age, historiography

Women's history has been an established subfield in Japanese studies in English for at least the past four decades. While much of the work has been on the modern era, there has always been a small group of scholars working on Edo-period women's history. In the 1990s, a series of important edited volumes combined the work of English-language scholars with translations of seminal Japanese articles to throw new light on a wide variety of topics related to Japanese women's history, including the history of the Edo era. Many of these essays also offer avenues for the reinterpretation

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of Edo-period history more broadly. Gail Bernstein's *Recreating Japanese Women* (1991) includes six essays on the Edo era by Kathleen Uno, Anne Walthall, Laurel Cornell, Jennifer Robertson, Patricia Fister, and Joyce Chapman Lebra.¹ In 1999, Hitomi Tonomura, Anne Walthall, and Wakita Haruko published *Women and Class in Japanese History*, which contains three Edo-related articles by scholars working in English (Tonomura, Ochiai Emiko, and Walthall), and translations of articles by three prominent Japanese scholars.² Wakita Haruko, Ueno Chizuko, and Anne Bouchy's two-volume *Gender and Japanese History* (1999) contains essays covering themes such as childbearing, shamanism, and women's labor across multiple eras of Japanese history.³ And a forthcoming volume edited by Bettina Gramlich-Oka, Anne Walthall, Miyazaki Fumiko, and Sugano Noriko, *Women and Networks in Nineteenth-Century Japan* aims to "reconstruct the familial, neighborhood, religious, political, work, and travel networks that women maintained, constructed, or found themselves

1 Gail Lee Bernstein, ed., *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600–1945*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. Essays include: Kathleen S. Uno, "Women and Changes in the Household Division of Labor"; Anne Walthall, "The Life Cycle of Farm Women in Tokugawa Japan"; Laurel L. Cornell, "The Deaths of Old Women: Folklore and Differential Mortality in Nineteenth-Century Japan"; Jennifer Robertson, "The Shingaku Woman: Straight from the Heart"; Patricia Fister, "Female Bunjin: The Life of Poet-Painter Ema Saikō"; and Joyce Chapman Lebra, "Women in an All-Male Industry: The Case of Sake Brewer Tatsu'uma Kiyō."

2 Hitomi Tonomura, Anne Walthall, and Wakita Haruko, eds., *Women and Class in Japanese History*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Japanese Studies, 1999. Essays include: Hitomi Tonomura, "Sexual Violence Against Women: Legal and Extralegal Treatment in Premodern Warrior Societies"; Yokota Fuyuhiko (trans. by Mariko Asano Tamanoi), "Imagining Working Women in Early Modern Japan"; Sone Hiromi (trans. by Akiko Terashima and Anne Walthall), "Prostitution and Public Authority in Early Modern Japan"; Ochiai Emiko, "The Reproductive Revolution at the End of the Tokugawa Period"; Anne Walthall, "Matsuo Taseko and the Meiji Restoration: Texts of Self and Gender"; and Nishikawa Yūko (trans. by Anne Walthall), "Diaries as Gendered Texts."

3 Wakita Haruko, Ueno Chizuko, and Anne Bouchy, eds., *Gender and Japanese History. Vol. 1: Religion and Customs/The Body and Sexuality; Vol. 2: The Self and Expression/Work and Life*, Osaka: Osaka University Press, 1999. Essays include: Jugaku Akiko, "Nyōbō kotoba: A Focus Point for Women's Language and Women's History"; Hirata Yumi, "The Story of the Woman, the Woman in the Story"; and Takie S. Lebra, "Fractioned Motherhood: Gender and the Elite Status in Japan."

in, sometimes against their will.”⁴ There have also been edited volumes on specific themes in Japanese women’s history. Examples include Barbara Ruch’s *Engendering Faith: Women and Buddhism in Premodern Japan*; Peter Kornicki, Mara Patessio, and G. G. Rowley’s *The Female as Subject: Reading and Writing in Early Modern Japan*; Sabine Fruhstuck and Anne Walthall’s *Child’s Play: Multi-Sensory Histories of Children and Childhood in Japan*; and Mary Berry and Marcia Yonemoto’s *What is a Family? Answers from Early Modern Japan*.⁵

These volumes cover a wide variety of topics in women’s history, and between them they have charted new possibilities for the study of Edo-period society with their focus on women, who, with the exception of a few prominent aristocrats, have been almost invisible in previous historical writing. However, Edo-period women’s history is still very much an emerging field among historians working in English, with only a handful of monographs published to date.

Several of those are concerned with issues of sex and the body. Amy Stanley’s *Selling Women: Prostitution, Markets, and the Household in Early Modern Japan* is an ambitious work that chronicles the transformation of Japan’s sex trade over a period of two centuries, examining its effects on urban and rural communities across Japan, and on families, with a particular focus on the emerging economic power of women.⁶ William Lindsey’s *Fertility and Pleasure: Ritual and Sexual Values in Tokugawa Japan* focuses on rituals and symbols of sexual availability employed by women in the context of family life, comparing them to the professional women of the entertainment districts.⁷ By comparing wives and prostitutes, Lindsey points to the commonalities

4 Bettina Gramlich-Oka, Anne Walthall, Miyazaki Fumiko, and Sugano Noriko, eds., *Women and Networks in Nineteenth-Century Japan*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020. Quote taken from the publisher’s website: https://www.press.umich.edu/11595612/women_and_networks_in_nineteenth_century_japan.

5 Barbara Ruch, ed., *Engendering Faith: Women and Buddhism in Premodern Japan*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003; Peter Kornicki, Mara Patessio, and G. G. Rowley, eds., *The Female as Subject: Reading and Writing in Early Modern Japan*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010; Sabine Fruhstuck and Anne Walthall, eds., *Child’s Play: Multi-Sensory Histories of Children and Childhood in Japan*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2017; Mary Berry and Marcia Yonemoto, eds., *What is a Family? Answers from Early Modern Japan*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2019.

6 Amy Stanley, *Selling Women: Prostitution, Markets, and the Household in Early Modern Japan*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

7 William R. Lindsey, *Fertility and Pleasure: Ritual and Sexual Values in Tokugawa Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006.

between women whose roles included sexual availability and loyal service. And Cecilia Segawa Seigle and Linda Chance's *Ōoku: The Secret World of the Shogun's Women* focuses on the inner quarters of the shogun's private household, occupied by the Tokugawa shoguns' wives, concubines, mothers, daughters, and their female servants.⁸

There is also a small cluster of monographs focusing on women in the arts. Rebecca Corbett's *Cultivating Femininity: Women and Tea Culture in Edo and Meiji Japan* focuses on female tea practitioners, their influence in creating modern understandings of femininity in Japan, and the light they cast on increasing female economic power and social mobility in the Edo period.⁹ And Patricia Fister's *Japanese Women Artists, 1600–1900*, originally published as an exhibition catalogue, offers a comprehensive overview of several dozen female artists working in different genres across the span of the Edo era.¹⁰

Two books focus on the role of writing and print culture in the navigation of gender and class boundaries, particularly among women of the emerging middle class. Laura Nenzi's *Excursions in Identity: Travel and the Intersection of Place, Gender, and Status in Edo Japan* examines the world of women's travel during the Edo era, as recorded in numerous travel diaries of middle-class women, as well as in extensive visual and written commentary in the world of commercial publications.¹¹ Nenzi examines the role these travel experiences—and their commercialization—played in the social aspiration of commoner women, who used travel and travel writing to stake a claim to the refined culture of the samurai and aristocratic elites. And Marcia Yonemoto's *The Problem of Women in Early Modern Japan* focuses on writing produced by and for women—instructional manuals, diaries, memoirs, and letters—and considers how these rich fields of commercial and cultural production disrupt our established preconceptions of women's lives as bounded by the ideologies and control systems of patriarchy.¹²

8 Cecilia Segawa Seigle, Linda H. Chance, *Ōoku: The Secret World of the Shogun's Women*, Amherst: Cambria Press, 2014.

9 Rebecca Corbett, *Cultivating Femininity: Women and Tea Culture in Edo and Meiji Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014.

10 Patricia Fister, *Japanese Women Artists, 1600–1900*, Lawrence: Spencer Museum of Art, 1988.

11 Laura Nenzi, *Excursions in Identity: Travel and the Intersection of Place, Gender, and Status in Edo Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008.

12 Marcia Yonemoto, *The Problem of Women in Early Modern Japan*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2016.

Into this active and growing field of English-language research and publication, several monographs have been published over the past few decades on the lives of individual women. It is on these that I focus for the rest of this essay.

It is curious that biographies of little-known female historical figures should have emerged as a prominent genre in English-language women's history of the Edo era, especially since in other areas of Japanese historical writing, biographical writing is a marginal subfield. The trend, however, mirrors that in other regions, where women's voices have often been reclaimed through the telling of life stories. Perhaps one cause is the relative paucity of public documents relating to women. Since, with the exception of some aristocrats and literary figures, women seldom operated in the public sphere (other than to transgress, as in the case of European witchcraft trials), the surviving documents pertaining to women tend to be domestic and intimate: diaries, letters, and handbooks of domestic management. Such sources lend themselves to personal storytelling. However, diaries and letters usually represent an incomplete record, and they seldom add up to a coherent narrative. One of the challenges faced by biographers of unknown women is how to derive meaning from the mundanity of daily life expressed in these domestic documents. As Donald Keene lamented in his notes on the diary of Kawai Koume (a nineteenth-century housewife from Kishū domain): "The preparation of meals, heating the bath, and similar tasks of Japanese women of the time... are unlikely to retain the attention of a modern reader for very long."¹³

In Japanese, many historians have focused on the small population of famous women of the Edo era: imperial princesses and shogunal consorts such as Kazunomiya and Atsuhime; artists such as Katsushika Ōi and Ema Saikō; and courageous female warriors like Nakano Takeko and Niijima Yae. Some of these women have also become well-known in popular culture as their stories have been adapted to TV dramas. By contrast, English-language biographers have tended to focus on less well-known women who nevertheless have made their historical mark through some remarkable act—what one might call "mid-level" actors on the historical stage.

Two well-known Japanese works on such mid-level actors have been translated into English, with extensive editing and annotation by the translators. Kate Wildman Nakai translated Yamakawa Kikue's *Buke no josei (Women of the Samurai Class)*, with

13 Donald Keene, *Modern Japanese Diaries: The Japanese at Home and Abroad as Revealed Through Their Diaries*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995, p. 270.

the addition of some of Yamakawa's later writing.¹⁴ Based on the life of Yamakawa's mother, this vivid account of women's lives during Mito's bitter civil war in the mid-1860s and through the Meiji Restoration was published in English in 1992. Edwin McClellan's *Woman in the Crested Kimono: The Life of Shibue Io and Her Family Drawn from Mori Ōgai's Shibue Chūsai* narrates the life of Shibue Io, who was the wife of Shibue Chūsai, a prominent doctor in the late Edo era.¹⁵ As McClellan notes in the title, this work is primarily a translation of the sections of Mori Ōgai's biography of Chūsai that are about Io, with the addition of McClellan's commentary.

Anne Walthall's *The Weak Body of a Useless Woman: Matsuo Taseko and the Meiji Restoration* was the first biography in English explicitly to address the larger issues of women and gender in the Edo era.¹⁶ Matsuo Taseko (1811–1894), also a mid-level actor, was the wife of an affluent farmer. She became a noted poet, a follower of nativist thinker Hirata Atsutane, and, later in her life, a political activist for the overthrow of the Tokugawa shogunate. Taseko is by no means unknown in Japan: her role in the revolutionary movement has assured her a place in the history of the Meiji Restoration. But there has been little interest in the rest of her life. Walthall aims to connect the fifty years of Taseko's life in which she worked as a farmer's wife, mother of seven children, and regional poet, with the dramatic year in Kyoto that has made her famous.

As Walthall points out, local historians have idealized Taseko as a “good wife and wise mother,” while ignoring much that was unconventional or subversive even in the earlier period of her life. First, Taseko was a significant contributor to her family's economy—perhaps, even, its savior through her silk entrepreneurship. Second, although she was a woman from the oppressed farmer class, she was equipped with a remarkable array of educational tools. She was a fluent reader of Chinese as well as classical Japanese; she was widely read, and able to discuss matters of philosophy as well as politics. She was a committed follower of the school of Hirata Atsutane, and a registered member of his circle (one of twenty-nine women members). She was widely traveled, having been on several pilgrimages, some to distant parts of Japan. And she

14 Yamakawa Kikue (trans. by Kate Wildman Nakai), *Women of the Mito Domain: Recollections of Samurai Family Life*, Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1992.

15 Edwin McClellan, *Woman in the Crested Kimono: The Life of Shibue Io and Her Family Drawn from Mori Ōgai's Shibue Chūsai*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

16 Anne Walthall, *The Weak Body of a Useless Woman: Matsuo Taseko and the Meiji Restoration*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

was a noted poet, with a rich and flourishing cultural circle that was largely independent of her husband and his social milieu. Walthall uses Taseko's poetry, moreover, as a window into her radical soul: the poetry often says more about the power of her political and social ideas than she was able to express in other ways. Taseko was, in other words, a fully rounded human being with a wide array of opportunities and a good deal of agency that allowed her to make unconventional choices. And that was even before she took the extraordinary step of going to Kyoto to support the anti-Tokugawa cause.

Once in Kyoto (where she went apparently with her husband's blessing), the scope of her activities was even more surprising. Although she was from a farm family and, one would have thought, of far too low a social status to be accepted by aristocratic courtiers, she was welcomed by leading members of the court faction, including their leader Iwakura Tomomi, even becoming his personal houseguest for a while. After the Meiji Restoration, she was able to use her close connections with the leading members of the anti-Tokugawa alliance to promote some of her own circle into government posts.

Walthall argues that, quoting Judith Butler, "To become a woman is a process in no sense fixed."¹⁷ While this may be more obvious for women in the feminist era, it is still tempting to assume that the trajectories of premodern women's lives were "much more rigid, much less open to deviations either chosen by the woman herself or forced upon her by circumstance." The story of Taseko teaches us that no such assumptions should be made. "If we begin with the assumption that Taseko 'lived in a world as complex, fluid, and riddled with ambivalence as the world of today,' then her life becomes much more interesting and believable."¹⁸

Walthall emphasizes that while Taseko's life story prompts us to reevaluate the boundaries of class and gender in the Tokugawa era, her afterlife also throws revealing light on the gender ideologies of modern Japan. After her death, local historians extolled her as a famous historical figure. But they downplayed or ignored her radicalism, her activism, her powerful agency, and her defiance of gender expectations, emphasizing instead her loyalty and service to her family; her elegant feminine

17 Ibid., p. 59, quoting Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1990, p. 127.

18 Walthall, *The Weak Body of a Useless Woman*, p. 59, quoting Patricia Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, p. 9.

accomplishments, particularly her poetry; and (with regard to her political activism) her patriotism. She was reconstructed, in other words, as a model Japanese wife, mother, and patriot.

Laura Nenzi's *The Chaos and Cosmos of Kurosawa Tokiko: One Woman's Transit from Tokugawa to Meiji Japan* in many ways charts a similar path to Walthall's main character.¹⁹ Like Taseko, Tokiko (1806–1890) was a commoner: she was the daughter of a village schoolteacher, and herself a teacher and eventual owner of the school. Like Taseko, she was energized by the political passions of the 1860s, and like Taseko, she traveled to Kyoto to make a political statement. Like Taseko, Tokiko had a long afterlife in the accounts written by local historians, which Nenzi treats as a key part of Tokiko's story. If this implies a criticism of Nenzi for writing about a life with so many similarities to one already chronicled, Nenzi herself provides the response: "By the same token, one must assume that the publication of a study on Yoshida Shoin would have made subsequent monographs on Sakamoto Ryōma or Saigō Takamori repetitive and unnecessary, for the history of male loyalism had already been written." Nenzi goes on to argue: "While gender and a devotion to the loyalist cause may have put Tokiko... and Taseko in the same general category, their cultural and economic backgrounds, their motivations, their cosmologies, and the ways in which they articulated and enacted their participation in the political debate of their times were vastly different, and each deserves due attention."²⁰

Unlike Taseko, Tokiko was not wealthy, and her economic marginality influenced many of her actions. For example, she spent part of her life as a traveling peddler of hair ornaments, and she also practiced divination and healing as a mountain ascetic. She was an independent entrepreneur, responsible for the efficient management of a private village school; and later, she was an accredited elementary school teacher. She was also deeply involved in Shinto practice, and she had an abiding interest in celestial phenomena and what we might broadly term today as astrology. Her experience in Kyoto was also very different from that of Taseko. While Taseko moved easily in restorationist circles, and was even able to work as an intermediary between the various groups fighting for the overthrow of the Tokugawa, Tokiko's concern was more narrowly focused on the purge of Mito loyalists being undertaken

19 Laura Nenzi, *The Chaos and Cosmos of Kurosawa Tokiko: One Woman's Transit from Tokugawa to Meiji Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

by the shogunal government in Edo. She wanted to present a petition to the emperor requesting the release of her daimyō, Tokugawa Nariaki, from house arrest. It is not clear if she succeeded in submitting the petition (Nariaki died shortly after, making Tokiko's intervention moot); but she was arrested, sent to Edo, and imprisoned in the notorious Tenmachō jail. After her release from prison, Tokiko played no further role in national affairs.

Despite the differences between their respective subjects, Nenzi and Walthall embrace a similar approach to connecting the totality of their subjects' lives to the broader political and ideological structures of the era. Nenzi focuses not only on Tokiko's political activism, but also on the diverse interests and activities of her life, and the ways in which they intersected with the great events of the day. For example, Tokiko's lifelong interest in divination, and her self-identification as a *shugendō* practitioner, gave her a sense of personal destiny as an intermediary between the harmonious powers of the cosmos and the broken politics of the era. The event that persuaded Tokiko to leave her schoolhouse behind and embark on the long walk to Tokyo was the appearance of Donati's comet in the last quarter of 1858.²¹ This and other signs "functioned either as an inspiration or as an endorsement, making it not only possible, but in fact unavoidable for a baseborn nobody to step out of her microcosm and cross over into a much larger historical stage."²² Her lifelong involvement in poetry also influenced her involvement in great historical events. Recognizing that argumentative prose was considered the prerogative of men, she submitted her petition to the emperor in the form of a long poem. Poetry, she believed, gave her an authoritative voice that could hold its own against the elites of the hierarchical and patriarchal social order. Nenzi also points out that Tokiko's relatively light punishment after her imprisonment in Edo—she was banished from Kyoto and Edo—reflects the authorities' bewilderment at a woman taking such direct action. Her gender helped her get away with political action that might have cost a man his life.

Tokiko's life was messy, lacking in clear direction, and not representative of any significant trend in Japanese history. This makes it hard for Nenzi to develop an argument based on a clear narrative, and indeed it leads her to disavow any suggestion

21 This exceptionally bright comet, first observed and identified by Giovanni Battista Donati, was visible globally in the second half of 1858. It is estimated to pass within sight of Earth only once every 2,000 years.

22 Ibid., p. 53.

that Tokiko's life is "exemplary of the way in which 'women' experienced the collapse of the Tokugawa and the rise of the modern state";²³ instead, Nenzi creatively structures the book around Tokiko's own world and its concerns—the classroom, the cosmos, poetry, and politics—and uses them to shine light on otherwise invisible aspects of commoners' experiences of the restoration era.

Like Walthall, Nenzi devotes a section of the book to Tokiko's afterlife in local histories and biographies. In most of these, Tokiko is neatly packaged as a patriot (of Mito or of Japan), and as a restorationist hero. But in the very messiness of Tokiko's lived experience, Nenzi calls into question long-standing assumptions about the structure and ideology of Japanese society, both in the Tokugawa period and after. Yes, there were ideologies of class, hierarchy, and gender: of masculinity and femininity, and the boundaries controlling women's behavior. But those ideologies did not define Tokiko's life, and indeed, her life offers an alternative reality that is much less clearly defined, and which was much more open to individual agency and choice.

Bettina Gramlich-Oka's *Thinking Like a Man: Tadano Makuzu 1763–1825* takes as its subject another woman who refused to allow her life to be bounded by the gendered ideologies of her era.²⁴ *Thinking Like a Man* is an intellectual biography of the writer Tadano Makuzu (1763–1825). The book focuses especially on Makuzu's extraordinary essay, *Solitary Thoughts (Hitori Kangae)*, published in 1818.

Makuzu grew up in an affluent and well-read family. Her father was a physician in the Edo mansion of Sendai domain, an intellectual with a passionate interest in Russia. He was one of the early advocates for the colonization of Ezo (Hokkaido) to check Russia's expanding power in the region. Makuzu served for ten years as lady in waiting to the daimyo's daughter, before marrying Tadano Tsurayoshi, a senior retainer of Sendai domain and a widower with three sons. Makuzu's husband, who remained in Edo and seldom visited her in Sendai, encouraged her to write. Makuzu wrote an autobiography in 1811, and, after the death of her husband, she embarked on her extensive philosophical and political treatise, *Solitary Thoughts*.

This radical essay took issue with the neo-Confucian world order embraced by the Tokugawa establishment. Makuzu argued that the only "phenomena that never change, are the revolutions of the sun and moon, the number of days and nights, and

23 Ibid., p. 3.

24 Gramlich-Oka, *Thinking Like a Man: Tadano Makuzu 1763–1825*, Leiden: Brill, 2006, p. 177.

the rhythm that floats through them all.”²⁵ By contrast, the moral and social structures created by Confucianism were manmade, and hence subject to change. Rather than a strict social order, the essay emphasized the need for harmony with the natural rhythms of the world. In an argument that anticipated the feminist movements of the following century, Makuzu argued that although women were forced to accept a position of inferiority and subjection in Japanese society, this did not reflect any absolute morality or social structure; nor did it reflect any intellectual inferiority on the part of women. Rather, it was the result of their physical weakness. As Gramlich-Oka puts it, “It was her physical lack of a penis that put the woman in a subordinate position.”²⁶ The essay also expressed strong opinions on politics, arguing that daimyo rulers should not depend on an abstract moral order for their supremacy, but rather should engage in trade and mercantilism in order to build their economic and political power.

Tadano Makuzu’s ideas were shocking for a woman to express. Takizawa Bakin, whom she consulted about her manuscript, was deeply impressed by her “astonishing ideas” and her “manly spirit,” but he was also repelled by her boldness and her disregard of correct etiquette.²⁷

Gramlich-Oka argues that Makuzu’s work was radically subversive to, but also revealing of, “the gender discourse deeply embedded in the academic discourse of Tokugawa Japan as well as in our modern interpretations of that discourse.”²⁸ Female writers have generally been herded into a gendered literary category of “women’s literature” (*joryū bungaku*). But Gramlich-Oka argues that Makuzu’s work defies such conventions and demands to be placed on an equal footing with the political and philosophical work of male intellectuals. She was never able to participate directly in their world (even Bakin, in spite of his admiration of her work, refused to correspond with her); but she used her position as a wealthy widow to challenge the gendered orthodoxies of the Tokugawa era.

Matsuo Taseko, Kurosawa Tokiko, and Tadano Makuzu are all women who, while far from being household names, are known by Japanese historians for remarkable (in the context of their gender) political actions or statements. By contrast,

25 Bettina Gramlich-Oka, “Tadano Makuzu and Her Hitori Kangae,” *Monumenta Nipponica* vol. 56, no. 1, Spring 2001, p. 14.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 11–12. See also Gramlich-Oka, *Thinking Like a Man: Tadano Makuzu 1763–1825*.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 177.

Tsuneno, the subject of Amy Stanley's *Stranger in the Shogun's City: A Japanese Woman and Her World* is mostly unknown.²⁹ Tsuneno (1805–1853) was the daughter of a priest from Echigo Province who, in 1839, after three failed marriages, ran away from home and made her way to Edo. She pawned all her clothes for the journey and arrived in Edo penniless. When they learned what she had done, her family disowned her, but Tsuneno was determined to get a job in an aristocratic mansion so that she could “learn the conduct and manners of the upper class.”³⁰

Luckily, the labor market for domestic workers was strong, and Tsuneno was quickly hired as a maid in the household of a *hatamoto* retainer.³¹ Probably Tsuneno's education and social background may have helped her get hired, but “The work is hard, and my hands and feet go numb [from the cold].”³² Over the next several years, she went on to work as a servant in a townsman's household, a maid at a temple, an acupunctureist's assistant, and a waitress in a restaurant. During these years, Tsuneno also remarried, to Hanzō, a masterless samurai. Hanzō was down on his luck, and for years the couple remained mired in poverty. But eventually Hanzō landed an excellent job, and in an extraordinary illustration of the social mobility enabled by the melting pot of Edo, Tsuneno became a middle-class samurai housewife.

In Tsuneno, Stanley has unearthed a vibrant character with a fascinating story, and *Stranger in the Shogun's City* is first and foremost a riveting narrative. Despite her fragmentary and incomplete sources (primarily a collection of letters from Tsuneno to her family), Stanley has succeeded in developing Tsuneno's story and imbuing it with meaning and emotional power. The city of Edo is also a major character. As much an urban history as it is a life story, the book examines the ways in which Tsuneno both was shaped by and helped shape this vibrant city inhabited mostly by migrants like her. *Stranger in the Shogun's City* has been widely and favorably reviewed by the mainstream media, and it has achieved a visibility seldom matched in the field of Japanese historical writing.

29 Amy Stanley, *Stranger in the Shogun's City: A Japanese Woman and Her World*, New York: Scribner, 2020. Tsuneno's archive, containing 130 letters, is housed in the Niigata Prefectural Archives, which has transcribed and published them with commentary.

30 Amy Stanley, “Maid-servants' Tales: Narrating Domestic and Global History in Eurasia, 1600–1900,” *The American Historical Review* vol. 121, issue 2, April 2016, p. 437.

31 The *hatamoto* were direct retainers of the Tokugawa shogun. They enjoyed a high status in Edo's samurai society.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 446.

One of the strengths of the book is Stanley's exploration of Tsuneno's agency: her desire to shape her own life, even if the choices she made had uncertain and difficult consequences. Not all urban migrants had Tsuneno's freedom to choose. Some were sold by their families into servitude; others were refugees from extreme poverty, who aspired only to survive. Stanley emphasizes the need to contextualize the problem of agency: to be aware of which opportunities for resistance were imaginable at a given place and time. The city lured rural women with the promise of freedom from harsh family servitude, and from the cruel poverty of cold northern villages. It lured them with the promise of ample rice, of entertainment and showy display, and of the prospect of making a good marriage or starting a business, to improve their social and economic position.

Stanley concludes that Tsuneno and others like her played a role in shaping the modern world that she would not live to see. It was women like her, willing to take enormous personal risks to try their luck in the capital, who populated the crowded spaces of the growing city, who provided the essential services, and who used their earnings to help expand the city's vibrant consumer economy. Stanley emphasizes the universality of Tsuneno's experience, which challenges notions of "premodern" versus "modern." Women like Tsuneno have provided much of the energy and motive force for the growth of the world's megacities, right down to the present day.

The subjects of these four biographies are very different people in terms of wealth and social status, region of origin, and activities and achievements. But the authors' treatments have much in common. All of them deal with women who, while they might for much of their lives have seemed "ordinary," were driven to engage with their society, to step outside their boundaries and try and change things, whether for their own economic betterment or for the political transformation of the nation. While they acknowledge the rigid ideologies of class and gender that prevailed in Edo-era Japan, the authors refuse to allow their subjects to be defined or bounded by their gender. All the authors, explicitly or implicitly, highlight the agency their subjects were able to exert as they sought out their differing paths in life. Indeed, these books call into question the very categories of class, gender, and periodization that have structured so much historical writing on Edo-era Japan. In that sense, these biographies of four unique, idiosyncratic women and their sometimes chaotic lives shine a critical light on assumptions that might go unquestioned in more traditional historical approaches.

江戸時代の女性史——最近の英文研究

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本稿では、最近出版された伝記4冊に焦点を当て、英語圏における江戸時代の女性に関する歴史研究の動向を振り返る。伝記で描かれている4人のうち3人はいくつかの重要な活動を行ったことで日本でもある程度有名であるが、英語の伝記作家はむしろ、彼女たちの人生によって明らかにされる階級とジェンダーについてのより広い問題に関心を寄せている。4冊の伝記が強調するのは、階級とジェンダーによる制限にもかかわらず、これらの女性が持っていた主体性である。人生の細部を描くことで、伝統的な歴史学的手法では問題視されることのない前提に対し批判的な光を当てている。

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