

Rediscovering Women in Tokugawa Japan

Yutaka YABUTA, Ph.D.

Professor of Japanese History
Faculty of Letters, Kansai University
35-3-3 Yamate-cho, Suita City, Osaka 564-0073
tintin@msf.biglobe.ne.jp

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Introduction

According to a survey of history textbooks in Japanese high schools, the period in which the fewest women appear is the Edo period. Two women who often appear are Izumo no okuni, the female founder of kabuki, and the princess Kazunomiya (1846-77). One is from the Azuchi-Momoyama era that in fact predates Edo times, and the other from the very end of the Edo period.¹ In fact no women at all appear in the greater part of the Edo period. If we accept as true the Chinese proverb, "Women hold up half the sky," the omission of women from Edo-period history is an abnormal state of affairs. Realizing this, in recent years many researchers have made efforts to rediscover women in the Edo period. As a result, books with titles such as *Women of the Edo Era*, *Women Living in the Edo Period*, and *The Study of Women in Early Modern Japan* have been published one after the other in the 1980s and 1990s.

I believe this trend has been quite unique to the Edo period in comparison with other periods, as women have long been considered a part of the history of the ancient, medieval, and modern eras of Japanese history.

The central question raised in these studies in the past has been, "How should we value women of each period?" However, as research has progressed, our task has expanded. We must now address questions such as, "How and why did women of the Edo period disappear?" and "What do we see as women's role in early modern Japan?"

I would like to begin my paper by discussing some remarkable studies on women in

¹ The disappearance of Edo-period women was not limited to historical studies, as the fields of literature, art, and music also shared a marked bias against women of this period.

Tokugawa Japan. Afterwards I would like to focus on the problem of how and why women of the Edo period disappeared.

Paths to the Rediscovery of Women

As examples of noteworthy studies of Edo-period women in recent years, I would like to discuss the findings of Tadashi Takagi, Keiko Shiba, Akira Hayami, and Patricia Fister; in addition, I would like to introduce my own work.

Professor Takagi's studies centered on the examination of *mikudari han* (*rienjō*), that is, documents related to divorce in the Edo period. In his groundbreaking work he collected about 500 such documents and came up with the following findings (Takagi 1987, 1992):

- The *mikudari han* gave permission for both husband and wife to remarry;
- Divorce proceedings as recorded in these documents included neither the cause for divorce nor any criticism of either party;
- For the divorce to take place, both parties submitted a type of document called the *rienjō kaeri issatu*, or receipt for *mikudari han*.

As a result of his studies we must reevaluate our general understanding of divorce in Tokugawa Japan, which had been understood as initiated only from the side of husband. We now see that divorce occurred, not through the action of the husband, but through the coordinated activity of the families on both sides. Marriage in the Edo period was usually set up within the framework of two families, on roughly equal terms, thus making divorce and remarriage easy for both sides. This was true even among samurai. One study of the shogunal *hatamoto* vassals has shown the divorce rate to be, on average, 10% (Asakura 1990).

Takagi's research further shows that not only men but also women experienced cases of remarriage. An especially surprising case involved a woman called Sui from Jōshū (presently Gunma prefecture), who requested *rienjō* three times on her own initiative.

Ms. Shiba collected over 160 travel diaries written by women throughout Japan. The large number of diaries is astonishing, especially when we consider that the famous 1918 compilation of the complete works by women in Japan, *Joryū bungaku zenshū*, contained merely 20 volumes of travel diaries from the Edo period. Furthermore Shiba found that these diaries were written overwhelmingly by common people. Certain cases she discovered, such as a long term journey for over two years, or the travel of a young girl accompanied by her mother, are beyond the reach of the *Onna daigaku* or Neo-Confucian standards. Her studies direct our attention to travel as a part of the lifestyle of Edo-period women (Shiba 1990, 1997). We must from now on center our research on such questions as what enabled the women to travel, what attracted them to leave their homes, and what was the meaning of the *waka* poetry they composed. Another scholar, Yoshi Maeda, who has also been examining women's travel, pointed out that women from private schools would travel in groups to learn about the well-known places they read and wrote about in poetry, along with famous temples and shrines. These findings are highly provocative (Maeda 1998).

As a pioneer of demographic research in Japan, Professor Akira Hayami contributed to women's studies by investigating peasant-class family histories in Mino (Gifu prefecture) that covered a period of nearly one hundred years. He found that by the 19th century it had become usual for women to postpone their marriages by working outside the family for a few years. As a result, the average marriage age of the middle to lower classes rose to 25, while upper-class women usually married at the age of 21. Of course the relatively late marriage influenced the

number of children, the patterns of inheritance among peasant families, and also the level of population growth.

This work outside the home was seen as a kind of investment for women, not only as a means of earning an income. Textile manufacture in Mino offered employment opportunities, and the *bukeyashiki*, or samurai households in Edo, offered work for many women from the home provinces. Daughters of *gōnō* families, rural entrepreneurs such as the Sekiguchi family in Namamugi village (Kanagawa prefecture) or Yoshino Michi of Ome village (Tokyo prefecture), also took up such employment. For them it was an opportunity for work and education (Oguchi 1995, Masuda 1990).

Scholarly contributions from outside Japan have been valuable to the study of Edo women. Prof. Patricia Fister mounted an important exhibition highlighting the work of one hundred female artists of the Edo period. The illustrated catalogue was published in 1988 by the Lawrence Spencer Museum of Art of the University of Kansas under the title, *Japanese Women Artists 1600-1900*. (This volume was republished in Japan in 1994.) Fister showed us that painting, as well as *waka* poetry composition and playing musical instruments such as koto and shamisen, were all spheres in which women of the Edo era actively expressed themselves. In connection with her study we must also pay attention to female calligraphers: *Kinsei joryū shōdō meika shiden*, published in 1935, records a total of 264 women calligraphers in the Edo and early Meiji periods, many of whom were also noted painters. These studies allow us to conclude that, along with *waka* and haiku, painting and calligraphy were important activities of early modern women.²

² The cover of *Kinyo hyakunin isshū jōhō taizen* depicts women engaged in writing and painting. *Onna shorei aya nishiki* also illustrated the following pastimes: reading and writing for

As for my own research, I focused on a woman named Nishitani Saku, a resident in Kawachi (Osaka prefecture) who wrote revealing diaries. At the start of the diary she was a 19-year-old and then died at the age of 21. However, in this short span she went through the key experiences of marriage, divorce, and then remarriage. As we have few diaries written by women, her records are extremely precious (Yabuta 1998). We have recently discovered new diaries by Ueda Misu (1783 -1857) of Awa (Tokushima prefecture) and Higuchi Tei and Higuchi Ryu, mother and daughter, of Kawachi (Tanahashi 1999). In short, studies of women's handwritten diaries, memoirs, letters, and wills enable us to understand issues such as women's growth and education, their experiences of disease, their literacy and language, as well as their roles in the household, performing arts, and private schools.

As I have mentioned above, these sources reveal remarkable characteristics in the reality of Edo-era women's experiences.

Revising Our Understanding of *Onna daigaku*

Thus, thanks to the research of the last fifteen years, Edo-era women have been rediscovered. We find that their range of activities was large. This is a great change from the picture found in older textbooks where women are hardly present. However, these older textbooks did not neglect women of the Edo period entirely. They rather viewed them through the rigid framework of the *Onna daigaku*, a code of morals for women grounded on Zhu Xi and Neo-Confucian ethics. Some recent researchers have therefore directed their efforts to updating and revising the interpretation of this classic text.

children, moral teaching for women, *waka* poetry composition, scenting incense, and playing the koto.

These studies have centered not on the *Onna daigaku* (Greater Learning for Women) and its 19-point lessons, but on *Onna daigaku takarabako* (Treasure Box of Greater Learning for Women), which was the correct and original title of the *Onna daigaku* (Ishikawa 1977). This *Onna daigaku takarabako*, which was often shortened to *Takarabako* (Treasure Box), contained some special features: first, although published under the name Kaibara Ekken, a popular Confucian scholar of the late 17th century, it was actually written by Kashiwaraya, an up-and-coming publisher in Osaka; second, it was partially based on another work, *Wazoku dōji kun* by Ekken, which dealt with children's education; third, it was wildly popular and went through twelve editions from 1716 to 1863; fourth, although the main body of *Takarabako* comprises only 58 pages, the total length of the book is 104 pages; fifth, the extra pages of this book were appended before and after the main section and above the text on each page, and consisted of elements such as illustrated stories from Japanese and Chinese classical literature, women's works, annual events, a guidebook for old-town Nara, and treatises on childbirth and child rearing, including first-aid treatment. The appendices make the book really worthy of the name "Treasure Box."

As a sixth and final feature, the main body of the text was written in a running style to serve as a textbook that could be used at home, in place of the "scattering style" of the original *Chirashigakki* completed by the female calligrapher Hasegawa Myotei (Nakano 1998).



The title page from *Onna daigaku takarabako*

The *Takarabako* won a wide readership among women of the late Edo period.³ Rather than saying that the *Onna daigaku* became the normative model for female behavior, it would be more correct to say that the book was a popular almanac filled with much valuable information.

Why did the publisher falsely use the name Kaibara Ekken? It may have been due partly to the latter's reputation as the leading and most enlightened reformer of the early Edo period, and also to his success in popularizing Neo-Confucian ideas and adapting them to Japanese culture in a series of books, through which he was able to have a strong hold on the public mind.

³ According to Hino Tatsuo, an anthology of Tang dynasty poetry, the *Tōshi senin*, went through fourteen editions from 1716 to 1864. He estimated the total sum of books to approximate 100,000 copies (Hino 1977).

Yet *Takarabako*, surrounded with "advertisements" along the lines of Glico candy in our times, was completely different from his Neo-Confucian text *Wazoku dōji kun*.⁴



Other pages from *Takarabako*

⁴ Glico candy has long been a favorite candy for Japanese children. It was composed of two parts. On one end it was a candy and on the other was a surprise: sometime a toy and sometime a doll. When I was a child I used to look forward to the prize I would receive.

The *Treasure Box* was created in response to a demand from families with daughters, who wanted a book that could teach correct handwriting and could educate women through a useful dictionary. The book was composed of three different parts: ethics, literature and art, and utilitarian information for women. It was rather inconsistent in content. After *Takarabako*, which was the first of its kind, many other similar works followed in succession. As a result, books for women piled up like a great mountain range. A series of these books compiled under the title of *Edojidai josei bunko* contains one hundred volumes.⁵

Women readers would start with *Takarabako* and then go forward to other genres of books. From my viewpoint, the world of *Onna daigaku* should be understood to contain these many books for women in the *Takarabako*. Early print capitalism of course actively encouraged such growth in the circulation of books.

In my opinion, for such a phenomenon to become widespread there must necessarily be some social preconditions. In the Edo period one factor was that, unlike in the medieval period, most people were able to marry and set up households. As the likelihood of marriage increased, it was deemed necessary for a young woman to study such works in order to prepare for future marriage. Parents would make an investment in order for their daughter to be trained in ethics, acquire literary skills, and understand the daily requirements of running a household. Such an investment was made through books such as *Takarabako*.

⁵ Attempts were made by a number of modern scholars to compile such books. For example, the *Fujin bunko* was published in 1914-15 and the *Kaseigaku bunken shu sei* was edited from 1965 to 1971. In both cases, however, the editors did not show any interest in the works as women's studies but rather as studies in education and home economics. In addition, they examined only the main parts of the books and excluded the vitally important appendices. Recently, Amano Haruko has investigated a series of *Shosoku bon*, or books for handwriting (Amano 1998).

Another social factor was the authority of Neo-Confucian ideas, which replaced Buddhism as the core discourse of civilization in the Edo period. Books that were expected to provide lessons for women had started in the late 17th century as a series of stories written in *kana*, and these *Kana zōshi* were still partly influenced by Buddhism (Aoyama 1982). But there was no influence of Buddhism in the main part of *Takarabako*, since *Takarabako* was actually produced under the influence of Neo-Confucianism. Readers could find the famous five virtues of the gentleman's (Shishi) ethics within its covers: benevolence, justice, etiquette, wisdom, and faithfulness. Even more importantly, *Takarabako* was produced by also absorbing elements of both *Chohoki*, an encyclopedia for women, and *Nyohitsu tehon*, a textbook for handwriting, as well as women's common customs.⁶

In addition, we can argue that a cultural system in the Edo period had been established within two frameworks. One was based on a person's social position, and the other on gender. Under such frameworks *heimin*, or common people, were considered to be inferior to samurai, and women to be second to men in culture. However, this social and cultural structure did not mean at all that women lacked ability and or were illiterate.

The differences between the urban center and the countryside did not disappear through

⁶ The Harvard Yenching Library houses some books that relate to my subject here. For example, the 2-volume *Yamato zokkun* by Ekken in 1708, which became the prototype of the *Takarabako*; the 31-volume text on ethics for women, *Hime kagami*, written by Nakamura Tekisai in 1687; and a 12-volume set of pre-Kamakura-period women's biographies, *Honcho onna kagami*, written in 1661. All these books were published before the *Takarabako*, and all were written in *hiragana* script, intended for the instruction of women. They were, moreover, voluminous texts with very few illustrations. In comparison, *Onna imagawa misao kagami* from the 19th century, which shares a number of characteristics with the *Takarabako*, is contained within a single volume with illustrations. If we examine the *Onna imagawa misao kagami*, we will understand how the *Takarabako* was designed to be convenient and easily used for women. (The name of its previous young owner, Tunako, can be found in this book.)

the publication and distribution of such books, because the parents, not a school system, would teach the daughters from the books. It is uncertain as to whether investing in higher education for women was generally seen as desirable. But it is certain that the number of families who asked for higher education for their daughters increased. For example, parents would send their daughters into service at *buke yashiki*, samurai households in Edo, or *kuge yashiki*, noble households in Kyoto, or to private schools, or to join a poetry group, or to attend lectures by Nativist teachers.⁷ It seems that parents and daughters made the most of the possibilities they had at hand. If more opportunities for higher learning had been available, they would probably have taken advantage of them as well. After all, over 300 women applied for 100 positions when the Tokyo Jyoshi Shihan Gakkō (a training school for female teachers) opened in 1875.

Criticism of *Onna daigaku*

After the Meiji Restoration, *Onna daigaku* was criticized as reflecting the spirit of respect for man and contempt for woman (*danson-johi*). However, as I see it, women, on their own initiative, accepted the culture represented by the *Takarabako* in the Edo period. Thus, for Meiji thinkers to criticize *Onna daigaku* was in effect to deny their own mother's culture, because its culture influenced everyone as they were growing up.

⁷ One such case was that of Tsuda Hatsu, mother of Tsuda Umeko (1864-1929), who went through service at *buke yashiki* for several years. Alice Bacon wrote as follows: "In the old days, the daughters of the samurai were eager for the training in etiquette, and in all that belonged to nice housekeeping, that might be obtained by a few years of apprenticeship in a *daimyo*'s house, and gladly assumed the most menial positions for the sake of the education and reputation to be gained by such training." Cited from *Japanese Girls and Women*, p. 175. Another case was that of Matsuo Taseko (1811-1894). A noteworthy work related to her has been published, titled *The Weak Body of a Useless Woman* by Anne Walthall. Professor Walthall particularly succeeds in

Who were the people who led the criticism against *Onna daigaku*? And how did they repudiate it?

The chief accusers were a group of *minken* or *keimō* thinkers in the democratic movement, among them people like Nakamura Masanao, Fukuzawa Yukichi, Mori Arinori, Baba Tatsui, Doi Koka, and Ueki Emori. They all criticized *Onna daigaku* on the basis of their understanding of norms of Western society and thought. Curiously enough, those who were brought up in a strict Neo-Confucian education tended to criticize it radically and in principle. The critics armed themselves with works by such Western thinkers as Samuel Smiles, John Stuart Mill, and Herbert Spencer – works which were already being translated by the time of the early Meiji period. Also, as became the custom among Western 19th-century feminists such as Alice Bacon and Susan B. Anthony, they often compared the condition of women under the control of men to that of slaves ruled by their masters (Barbara Rose 1992).⁸

Importantly, when they attacked the ethics of *Onna daigaku*, they failed to consider the supplementary material in *Takarabako*. For example, when Doi Koka and Fukuzawa Yukichi criticized the 19 items, they neglected such aspects of the book as its style and its appendices, which were also its vital parts. Yet as we know, women (and of course, men) do not live their lives consuming only ethics. They also pay attention to aspects of daily life such as food, clothing, and shelter. Generally speaking, whereas abstract thought is universal, daily life experiences are peculiar to individuals.

recreating the lives of women in the Ina valley through the investigation of new material sources (Walthall 1998).

⁸ According to the Neo-Confucian texts, the relationship between man and woman was akin to the relationship between the sky and the earth, the *in* and *yō*, or the implicit and the explicit. While both are indispensable to the other, one is placed in a superior position. On the other hand, the likening of the relationship between woman and man to that of slave and master represents a fundamental change of this concept.

According to Doi Koka, kabuki and *jōruri* are harmful to women, as are *nishikie* (woodblock prints) and *ninjō bon* stories such as *Nisemurasaki inaka genji*. He stated that such vulgar pastimes should be avoided, as they will make women crude, while "enlightenment" should remain the greatest goal for women. Therefore, since the women of the early Meiji, just as in late Edo, lived surrounded by woodblock prints, kabuki, and *ninjō bon* stories, their real enemies were not only Neo-Confucian morals, but also popular culture – kabuki played by Kikugoro, actor prints by Toyokuni, and stories by Bakin and Shunsui. Likewise, Fukuzawa blamed women for being overfamiliar with *waka* poetry and classical literature and recommended the study of law and economics.

In regard to the harmful influences of popular culture, we see a progression from Ekken to Koka: Ekken had listed *kouta*, *jōruri*, and *shamisen* as harmful influences. The *Takarabako* then replaced *shamisen* with kabuki, and finally Doi Koka added woodblock prints and *ninjō bon* to the list.

The critics of *Onna daigaku* were faced with two tasks. On the one hand they attacked the ethics of the book, and on the other, they pushed for a change in women's culture. The former attack dealt with the central part of the *Takarabako*, whereas the latter dealt more with the appendices on literature and art also contained in the book. However, the two aspects do not necessarily relate to each other: whereas ethics was universal, the prohibited literary arts varied according to the time and the person. Just as some pointed to *shamisen* and *jōruri*, others blamed kabuki or popular stories and woodblock prints, and yet others attacked classical novels or *waka* poetry.⁹

⁹ It is noteworthy that no one any longer pointed out the abuse of traveling by women.

Such general criticism against *Onna daigaku* tended to erase the multifaceted conditions of actual women: wives crazy about actor's prints, women reading Bakin's novel, women making *waka* with men in the poetry groups, mother and daughter on their journey, girls playing *hyakunin isshu* cards, and so on. The more simple and lucid the criticism of *Onna daigaku*, the less it became connected with the actual realities of lives carried on by women. This was the first stage of forgetting the details about the existences of Edo women.

The arrows hurled from the *minken* thinkers at the *Onna daigaku* had reached only the edge of the target. They had not reached the parts dealing with "utility," one of the three parts of the *Takarabako*. This part, which dealt largely with married life, did not decrease in importance in modern Japan. Indeed the institution of marriage was idealized more so than in the Edo period. Along with ethics, the sections dealing with daily life from the *Takarabako* were revived in educating women for roles as *ryōsai kenbo* (good wife and clever mother).¹⁰

Incidentally, the fact that the *Takarabako* was a tremendous success as a publication reflects the close relation between women and cultural literacy, for which we have two important witnesses. One is the famous 16th-century missionary Luis Frois (1532-97), and the other is Shigeno Yasutsugu (1827-1901), the first professor of Japanese history at Tokyo University. Frois was surprised at the high level of education of women compared with Western women of the same period, and Shigeno, in his exploration of historical documents throughout Japan, discovered that many had been written by women. According to these witnesses, women had

¹⁰ As the Westernization of Japan proceeded, people tried to recall the traditional culture for Japanese women, and in particular that of the Edo period. For example, *Fujin bunko*, published in 1914-15, listed among its contents: precepts, biographies, utilitarian skills, novels, stories, *waka* and haiku poetry, music, painting, and drawing. These are essential spheres of women in the Edo period.

spent their lives surrounded by literary culture. In addition, the development of print capitalism in the Edo period had an important effect on the pervasiveness of literary culture.

Rather than appreciating the fact that the Edo women had considerable cultural literacy, the Meiji-period enlightenment thinkers came to misunderstand women's contribution. Shigeno said in a lecture, "people nowadays think women have recently become educated, and that women were uneducated and illiterate before the Meiji Restoration." In other words, people in the Meiji period tended to deprecate the level of culture prior to the arrival of Westernization in the 1880s. This feeling among the Meiji people was passed down to the 20th century.

The next step, I think, in the disappearance of Edo women from historical, literary, and artistic accounts, was taken through the folklore studies of Yanagida Kunio (1875-1962). Yanagida wrote a famous paragraph in which he stated that we all first learned Japanese from our own mothers. He fought against the policy of standardizing the language into modern Japanese and also fought for recognition of the value of regional dialects. He praised women highly for their role in the field of literary arts and for their role in passing on the Japanese language to us, whereas the male elite and bureaucrats had only competed in their mastery of Chinese characters. Yanagida showed respect for mother's culture, in contrast to the *keimō* thinkers who denied it. But at the same time, he imagined women as the holders of the spoken – not written – language, and moreover, he thought women symbolized the unlettered oral tradition. Not only did Yanagida affirm the mother's culture, but he also misleadingly confined its scope.

Yanagida contributed to women's history by finding evidence of the old style of marriage, *mukoiri kon*, in his folklore. However, Takamura Itsue (1894-1964), while praising this, also criticized the way Yanagida denied any possibility of the occurrence of maternal

society in Japanese history.¹¹ In addition, it seems to me that Yanagida basically looked down on women's cultural literacy in the Edo period, as did the *minken* thinkers. He could not take the vast range of women's literary culture into account. As an example of this culture, according to Yasumaru Yoshio, the poor peasant wife Deguchi Nao (1836-1918) wrote a vast number of *Ofude saki* documents in *hirakana* using her own regional dialect (Yasumaru 1977). The possibility of such a case would have been denied by Yanagida. (The precious sample of Deguchi Nao teaches us that the opportunity for self-expression was more essential for women than the need to write perfectly.)

Conclusion

Ueki Emori pointed out that as the members of the samurai class raised their heads, the position of the women in society fell into slavery, and this trend was encouraged by religions, namely Buddhism, Shintoism, and Neo-Confucianism.¹² According to his view, the Edo period was the darkest of times for women. It seems that the more that people look toward the future, the more monotonous their image of the immediate past becomes. In this way, it seemed satisfactory to equate the position of the Edo women with *Onna daigaku*. This tendency became

¹¹ It is notable that the study of women's history in postwar Japan was developed by scholars supporting Takamura Itsue, such as Ienaga Saburō and Murakami Nobuhiko (Murakami 1977). In comparison, followers of Yanagida folklore studies have not made significant contributions to women's history. But we must take more lessons from the debate between Yanagida and Takamura.

¹² Ueki not only pointed out the general understanding of women, but also paid attention to certain details such as the effects of *Shin gaku*, or moral philosophy as espoused by Ishida Baigan, and differences caused by different social standings and working places such as those of peasants and fishermen. *Japanese Girls and Women*, written by Alice Bacon in 1891, also described such differences among women; also, however, Bacon stressed their high cultural level, saying that Japan differed from most Oriental countries in the fact that her women were considered worthy of a certain amount of the culture that came from the study of books.

popular again after World War II. As a result, the reality lived by women in the Edo period was forgotten until the 1980s. Now, after the recent rediscovery, we will be able to value them anew.

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