

The Patriotic Aspects within the ‘Good Wife, Wise Mother’ Ideology: An Analysis of War Widows during Wartime Japan

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Introduction

This paper explores the patriotic dimensions of the good wife, wise mother ideals (良妻賢母) during the late 1930s, through an analysis of articles on war widows published in the wartime women’s *Fujin Kōron* magazine. The findings clarify that the Japanese wartime government was unable to give these groups of bereaved women a clear role within the wartime narrative, and were in fact excluded from making any real contributions to the war effort on the Home Front. In addition, the paper uncovers that the exclusion and controlling of the widow’s lives was deeply influenced by the sexual moral component present within the good wife, wise mother ideology (henceforth gwwm). The childless war widows were the biggest victims of the gendered exclusion of widows into the wartime narrative, through a constant policing of their loyalty towards their deceased husbands, by questioning their purity and chastity. The wartime state’s depiction and treatment of war widows should be understood in the context and the development of the feminine ideals, and the extreme patriotic form it developed into after Japan plunged into a 15-year war (starting with the Mukden incident). Therefore, this paper firstly explains how the Japanese state came to gender both men and women throughout the decades leading up to World War II. This paper devotes special attention to the alterations within the gwwm ideals throughout this period to better understand wartime society’s attitude towards widows.

Gendering the nation-state-education

The creation of a new set of masculine and feminine ideals for society was directly linked to the building of a modern state with a capitalist economy. Under the banner of ‘civilization and enlightenment’ (*bunmei kaika*), Meiji intellectuals borrowed western concepts of modernity and combined them with Japanese thoughts, to create a ‘unique’ Japanese understanding of modernity, and coined a new word for the nation-state, named ‘*kokka*’ (nation-family). The term ‘family’ (*ka*) in Japanese not only included the modern understanding of shared ethnicity but also alluded to gender and community. Thus, from the very beginning, gender was ingrained into the Japanese nation-building project.¹ The state first and foremost gendered society through the creation of mass education. The curriculum at schools conveyed the new ideals of masculinity and femininity to mold each citizen into a loyal imperial subject. Middle schools and secondary schools were sex-segregated, and higher education such as universities was only accessible for boys. Girls were mostly pre-occupied with sewing classes, while the boys enjoyed a richer curriculum that included sciences, history, and language classes. An educated, literate population increased productivity, and the state could easily convey propaganda.²

¹ Barbara Molony, “Gender and Modernity,” in *Gender in Modern East Asia: An integrated History*, ed. Barbara Molony, Janet Theiss, and Hyaewool Choi, (Routledge, 2011), p.139

The formation of Masculinity and the role of militarism

Besides educational institutions, the modern military institutions also heavily contributed to the construction of manhood and the inclusion of male commoners into the nation. Though military conscription was met with protests and riots in the early Meiji period, Japanese commentators noted the growth of the Japanese soldiers' commitment to the nation and the will to become citizens after the First Sino-Japanese war (1894-1895). Simultaneously, western commentators praised Japan for abandoning effeminacy through their modern militarization.³ Thus the state understood modern masculinity to be deeply connected to modern militarization and this understanding of masculinity was depicted in art or mass media.⁴ Already since the First Sino-Japanese war, militarist culture was an important part of the school's curriculum. Boys were taught that Japanese men were the strongest in the world and that singing military songs would turn boys into proper men.⁵ As Japan became more patriotic throughout the 1930s, the military institutions gained more influence in society, and the already extreme glorification of militarism intensified. The examination for military conscription came to define what a 'healthy' man was in society. Newspaper underlined this thought by frequently reporting on the tragic suicides of young men who had failed the military examination.⁶ The decades-long process of shaping masculinity eventually led to the gendered wartime belief that the ideal man is a war front combatant who righteously fights to protect the Japanese women and children at home. The state conducted a similar process of gendering for women that would eventually lead to the idea during the World War II that women contributed to the war effort in the Home Front.

The formation of femininity and the 'good wife, wise mother' ideals

Although basic education became mandatory for all Japanese citizens during the Meiji period, the ministry of education used a special logic to argue for the girls' education. Intellectuals considered women to be responsible for the upbringing of the next generation of citizens. The best way to raise good national subjects was if women were to become 'wise mothers', who were put in charge of their children's upbringing. Meiji intellectuals now argued that women should be responsible for 'home education' (*katei kyōiku*) because mothers could fill the gaps of the public education system.

Furthermore, education for girls was also justified on the grounds that educated wives would be best at assisting their husbands in their needs. A knowledgeable woman would logically understand the needs of her husband and be aware of her responsibility within the household. Such educated women created better households and thus contributed to a prosperous nation.⁷ Thus, the 'good wife, wise mother' ideals were partially created for the justification of women's education. The 'good wife, wise mother' doctrine was further strengthened through so-called 'scientific' explanations on the physical and psychological differences between men and women. The 'scientific'

³ Ibid. pp.141-142

⁴ Ibid. p.141

⁵ Many of the Meiji woodblock prints' depictions of the Sino-Japanese war conveyed the notion of tradition being linked to femininity on the one hand, and modernity being connected to masculinity on the other (see appendix).

⁶ Sabine Frühstück, "The spirit to take up a gun" in *Gender, Nation and State in Modern Japan*. ed. Wöhr, Ulrike; Germer, Andrea; Mackie, Vera. (Routledge, 2014), p.166.

⁷ Ibid. pp.166-167

⁸ Ibid. pp.88-90

proof or ‘objective’ facts that originated from the European 19th century studies of sexology added weight to the argument that it was only ‘natural’ for women to become engaged in housework and child nurturing, and for men to actively work outside the household.⁸

The relationship between the nation-state and Japanese women was constantly questioned, renegotiated, and altered according to worldly social and political events. The emergence of political women’s organizations that demanded more inclusivity into the nation and improvement of their status within modern society, challenged the feminine ideals set by the state. In Japan, political topics related to women’s rights were widely debated in what was known as the ‘woman problem’ (*fujin mondai*). Furthermore, the social and political implications of World War I were equally important to the altering of the ‘good wife, wise mother’ ideals. News of the useful participation of European women in a so-called ‘Home Front’ for the war efforts had reached Japan. This gave rise to the question of whether Japanese women could make similar contributions in a war, and the Japanese military deemed a war situation likely in the future.⁹ The costs of World War I triggered the governments to implement austerity measures, and, as a direct result, the standard of living declined in Japan as elsewhere. State bureaucrats argued that a lack of ‘scientific knowledge’ and a tendency to cling to old traditions stood in the way of a ‘healthy’ development of the household. The government officials believed women should develop such ‘scientific’ thinking in order to function in harmony with the state, which in this context meant economizing on their household expenses to cushion the economic blow of World War I.¹⁰

One of the easiest ways for women to fulfill new activities outside the household whilst upholding feminine ideals, was by joining a women’s organization. Due to the regressive nature of the state towards leftists and liberal movements, the patriotic women’s organizations became dominant.¹¹ In 1931, the Manchurian incident plunged Japan into a 15-year war. From 1931 onwards the patriotic dimensions within the ‘good wife, wise mother’ ideals rapidly developed and the patriotic women’s organization came to play a key role in the projection of these patriotic femininities in relation to the national defense of Japan.¹² The government passed the National Mobilization Law (*Kokka Sōdōinhō*) in 1938, which envisioned that war was to be waged on the premise of mobilization of the entire Japanese population. This altered the ideal roles for both women and men further to fit within a society at war. Men were supposed to contribute to the war effort as soldiers who fight at the war front outside Japan, while women were to perform duties at the so-called Home Front.¹³ The Home Front activities forged a bond between the soldiers and the mothers (and surrogate mothers). Such activities were meant to protect the women’s feminine qualities as ‘good wives’ during wartime and consisted of bidding soldiers farewell at train stations and sending care packages (*imonbukuro*) to the war front. The Home Front activities were meant to project a unique Japanese trait in the relationship between men and women that tried

⁸ Ibid. p.90

⁹ Ibid. p.92

¹⁰ Ibid. p.93

¹¹ Vera Mackie, “The Homefront” in *Feminism in Modern Japan*, p.101.

¹² Sabine Frühstück, “The spirit to take up a gun” in *Gender, Nation and State in Modern Japan*. ed. Wöhr, Ulrike ; Germer, Andrea ; Mackie, Vera. (Routledge, 2014), p.168.

¹³ Ibid.

to distance itself from the ‘loose’ behavior often associated with Western women. The patriotic women’s organizations campaigned against ‘western’ values of femininity and beautification. They emphasized ‘unique’ characteristics of Japanese women, such as purity and fidelity. Such highlights went hand in hand with the policing of women on inappropriate sexual behavior. Upholding this chaste image of women was key to the gendered division of labor since men fought as soldiers on the grounds of protecting the faithful women on the Home Front.¹⁴ How this morality played out in reality and affected women, becomes clear by analyzing discussions on war widows.

War widows and the wartime feminine ideals

From 1931 onwards, the state aimed to gain and maintain support in favor of the war effort, and to promote total war mobilization of society. This paper carefully analyzes articles on war widows and attempts to clarify how the government included (and excluded) widows from participating in wartime society. Such an analysis takes the ‘good wife, wise mother’ ideals into account to specifically focus on the relation between the nation–state and war widows, in order to understand the ideal images, the state produced of them vis-à-vis the reality these women faced.

An analysis of the ‘ideal war widow’ not only shows what characteristics were included in such portrayals but also what the propaganda excluded. One article published in 1939 under the title “visiting the widows of the warriors who died in battle that bravely overcame their sadness”, depicts such ‘ideal widow’ figure, and this propaganda exemplifies how the state tried to channel the war widow figure through the ‘good wife, wise mother ideals’ in an attempt to position her in the wartime narrative.¹⁵ The article consists of three portrayals, and in order to measure up to the patriotic feminine ideals, all portrayals were limited to well-to-do urbanite mothers with two or three children who mostly lived (and are supported by) in their parental family house. This version of the widow corresponds the best with the ‘good wife, wise mother’ ideals, thus making her fit within a wartime narrative on total war mobilization. The first portrayal of an ideal war widow is that of Chisako Okuda (奥田千沙子), who had lost her husband at the fierce battle of Wuhan in 1938.¹⁶ After she became a widow Okuda started to work in the Miwada women’s college cooking department, while also trying to take care of her three children. The magazine portrayed her as a mother who had become healthy again after finally deciding to go outside the household to be an educator:

‘For a long time, I (Okuda) thought going outside is against the will of the deceased (遺志), because my children will be neglected, but after thinking a long time about it, I made up my mind and plunged into (the new life) “ [...] Working makes me feel excited, and being with young, lively students makes me very happy. Previously I looked very weak (萎れていて見る), but now my friends told me I look young and healthy again.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Vera Mackie, “The Homefront,” p.110.

¹⁵ *Fujin Kōron*, “Kanashimi wo koete ooshiku tachiagaru gunekiyuushi no miboujin wo tazunete” July, 1939, page 262–269 from Leiden university library collection. p.262. The article was published in July, under the title “visiting the widows of the warriors who died in battle that bravely overcame their sadness”

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Through this portrayal, the magazine emphasized that a widow does have a place in society, and it is only 'healthy' for them to go outside the household to live such a life, as opposed to staying inside the house grieving. Although the magazine's tone seems sympathetic and encouraging towards widows, the article reveals the concern that a lamenting widow gives an 'unhealthy' impression. In this sense, the magazine was concerned that the widow figure might come off as a sick, or mentally unhealthy woman, thus being a threat to the image of a 'healthy' strong nation.¹⁸ In Okuda's case, the widow is portrayed as a person who overcame this unhealthy lifestyle. She perfectly fitted within the gwmm ideology as a good (loyal) wife who took her deceased husband's will into consideration. She was also portrayed as an educated woman who cultivated the 'motherly' qualities of the next generation of female imperial subjects. However, the fact that she could allow herself to do this work was also because of her sister and maid who took care of her children.¹⁹ Such support indicates that Okuda could financially and time-wise afford to have a job as an educator whilst having children; a comfortable living situation that did not correspond with the reality of most widows.

Another reason why the magazine in the article seemed to encourage widows to become proactive outside the household is that all portrayed widows had children. Consequently, they were allowed to live a more active life outside the household since outside activities could be justified as activities by mothers who studied or worked for the sake of the children's upbringing. The impression that one of the key features of propagated widows was having children is confirmed in another article on war widows, written by a woman named Kikuchiyo Kuranaga who claimed to be a war widow herself. This particular article made a clear distinction between childless widows and those with children. Kuranaga stated that a widow's most important task was to nurture their children because these were "the treasure of the important country" (大切な国の御宝). Childrearing was "the important mission (残された大きな使命) that was left for the widows with children."²⁰ Kuranaga continued that the real problem existed for young, childless widows, because they could not obtain the mission of raising 'the nation's treasure.' Similar to Okuda's worries over the will of the dead, Kuranaga underlined the characteristic of fidelity, since she believed that the ideal young childless widow was a Yamato Nadeshiko (perfect beautiful Japanese woman) who mourns the dead (husband) for the rest of her life.²¹ So, in the case of a childless widow, mourning for her husband was not deemed unhealthy, which was contrary to widows with children. Mourning was in fact seen as a sign of her fidelity towards her dead husband, and fidelity was one of the key traits of being a 'good wife'.

Evidently, widows with children were most likely more often portrayed as wise mothers, whereas childless widows were described as good wives, and the communicating loyalty became proof of the widow's role as a good wife.

The way then this loyalty was proven or surveilled, becomes clear in the next section of Kuranaga's article, in which she stressed that widows should live life without causing any suspicion (瓜田に踏み入れないで) .:

¹⁸ Sabine Frühstück makes a similar observation in her research. Men who failed the physical examination for the military, in which these men reflect an unhealthy body of the nation. Frühstück, 165-6

¹⁹ *Fujin Kōron*, July, 1939 p. 263

²⁰ *Fujin Kōron*, "Gunyakusha no tsuma no ikiru michi." Juli. 1939, page 260-261 from Leiden university library collection. p. 261 一面から見ますと、妻として夫を失うという事はどんなにか不幸な事がしれません。

²¹ *Ibid.*

“The most important thing is to live life vigorously without having an unguarded moment... The widow (referring to childless widow) tends to receive public attention (世間の注目を受けがち), and even if she behaves like a normal person, she will be viewed by society with prejudice (色眼鏡で見られがちなものです). People gossip around (世間の口はうるさい), and the neighborhood watches the people going in and coming out of single households of young widows. Therefore, I think it would be better to settle down in one’s parent’s house or one’s in-law’s house.”²²

This ‘attention’ and ‘prejudice’ that Mrs. Kuranaga was alluding to was put in more blunt words by one of the government-led patriotic women’s associations (*Dai Nippon Rengō Fujinkai*). The organization’s magazine published an article that stated that for a section of the women active on the Home Front there was the possibility to engage in a ‘slutty lifestyle’ (ふしだらな生活) that disappoints the soldiers on the frontline.²³ This is because the women who carry the burden of the home front duties such as sending off soldiers and welcoming home the war spirits have more opportunities to go outside (of the house).²⁴ The magazine’s article further states that it would be a grave problem if there were women who do this impure-kind of lifestyle under the banner of ‘home front duty.’ This tone is in direct contrast with the narrative on propagated widow figure with children who was encouraged to work outside the house.

By the end of the 1930s, the government forced a ‘nationalization’ of the war widow figures in order for the state to give them a function within the total war mobilization narrative. This function/ title came to be ‘the wives of the Yasukuni shrine’.²⁵ The war dead who had served their purpose as front combatants were also nationalized by the state. They received the title of ‘war spirit’ (英霊) or war gods who reside in the Yasukuni shrine. In this sense, the state could keep the men alive as spirits and use their ‘will’ (遺志), as a tool for the government to impose the will of the state. Thus, one can understand the Yasukuni shrine literally as the kokka, where both the war spirits and the wives of the nation belonged too. The surveillance over chastity and fidelity of widows became stronger in this context, because widows were now perceived as national wives who upheld their purity by remaining loyal to their godly husbands. And exerting this function as ‘national wife’ trumped any other roles that could have contributed to the war economy.

Conclusion

There were two contradictive narratives on war widows, the first narrative portrayed these women in ways that corresponded with the gwwm ideals. The second narrative was far more antagonistic and excluded these women from a wartime narrative. This narrative of exclusion became stronger when widows stood further away from the gwwm ideals. Widows with children for instance might have had more leeway to act freer from the limitations of the gwwm ideals because they could act

²² Ibid.

²³ Kawaguchi Emiko, 川口恵美子. “Senji kara sengo e kakete no ‘sensō mibōjin’ no seikatsu to ishiki” 生活学論叢 1 (1996) : pp.41-53. https://doi.org/10.24528/lifology.1.0_41

²⁴ Ibid. p.45

²⁵ Ibid. p.41

as wise mothers and could argue their actions were to better the lives of their children. Although widowed mothers might, in reality, have also been heavily excluded through acts of policing, the fact that the propaganda described the behavior of widowed mothers who actively pursue work or study outside the household as 'healthy', suggests that society was more lenient towards these widows. The childless widows however became the true target of this exclusion. Childless widows fell back into the role of a 'good wife' that they had to demonstrate through their acts of fidelity and purity. Contrary to the attitude towards widows with children, it was deemed healthy for childless widows to keep insight the house and continue to lament for the dead. The actions of childless widows were under more societal surveillance (as opposed to widows with children), by giving them warnings and 'suggestions', for instance, not to cause suspicion and to move in with the in-law family. Furthermore, this societal surveillance on widows exemplifies that sexual morality was a driving force within the gwmm ideals to control the lives of individual women, effectively immobilizing them from participating in wartime society. Or, to put it in Foucauldian terms, the scientific-based sexual mores were key elements within the gwmm ideology to transform the feminine ideals into an oppressive, normalizing power to control women. The final attempt by the regime to gender the nation into 'war spirits' and 'wives of the nation' can also be understood as a means to masquerade the 'weakened' and 'unhealthy' national body that came to be constituted of an increasing number of dead soldiers and mourning widows.

As the war intensified, the number of last-minute marriages (駆け込み結婚) rapidly increased.²⁶ Presumably, a significant group of young women became widowed and could not spend enough time with their husbands to conceive a baby, thus becoming childless widows. Further exploration of wartime articles related to war widows is necessary to clarify this forgotten history of such women, and to deepen our understanding of the mechanisms of the gwmm ideals.

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²⁶ Ibid.

Appendix



'There Stands No Enemy Where We Go: Surrender of Pyongyang'
by Migita Toshihide, a scene from the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-95)