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KAREN KUO

EAST IS WEST AND WEST IS EAST

Gender, Culture, and Interwar Encounters between Asia and America

East Is West and West Is East

Facing Two Ways

Baroness Shidzué Ishimoto, who is more commonly known in Japan as Kato Shidzué, was a former member of the Japanese Diet and a leading figure in both the birth control and feminist movements in Japan. Although Ishimoto never settled in the United States, her alliances with American feminists before World War II made her fairly well known to American intellectuals and writers interested in Japan and Asia. After World War II, Ishimoto worked with the Allied occupation in Japan and as one of only a few Japanese citizens involved in the occupation was recruited by the US government to play an important role in the future democratization of her country. The US Office of Strategic Services listed Ishimoto and her future husband, Kato Kanju, under the file titled "Friendly Persons." Intelligence reports collected on Ishimoto from American missionaries who knew her before the war described her as "anti-militaristic, and pro-America."[1] Ruth Benedict's influential 1946 book about Japanese culture, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, drew from parts of Ishimoto's autobiography. After the war, Ishimoto worked to forge stronger relations between Japan and its former colonies (especially Korea) and became the first Japanese woman to run for the House of Representatives.

Ishimoto wrote her autobiography in English for Americans at the urging of her friend and mentor, Mary Beard, who believed that Ishimoto's life would be of great interest to the American public. *Facing Two Ways: The Story of My Life* introduced Americans to a Japanese woman who was radically different from the literary and theatrical constructions of Japanese femininity popularized in the West at that time. Where popular orientalist representations of Japanese women in the West depicted Japanese femininity as passive and subordinate, especially to men, these representations also supported a Western aestheticization and depoliticization of Japanese women, who were seen as merely orientalist exotica for Western pleasure. In contrast, Ishimoto's autobiography would seem to refuse a reading of the exotic and

aestheticized Japanese woman, given the highly politicized nature of Ishimoto's discussions, which cover the effects of capitalist and industrial exploitation, class and racial inequities, and even the dangers of Japanese militarism and imperialism. Situating her life in the midst of the momentous social and political changes in Japan resulting from its rapid industrialization and transformation into a world power, Ishimoto's autobiography shows how she herself underwent a social and personal awakening, making the transformation from traditional Japanese woman, raised to be an obedient wife and mother, to a socialist, feminist, and activist.

The autobiography is divided into three major sections. The first part describes Ishimoto's youth and adolescence, and the second, her marriage to Baron Keikichi Ishimoto, who first introduced her to socialist thought. As Ishimoto describes it, she married because she was raised as a traditional Japanese girl, but the baron's unconventional beliefs, and his interests in socialism, Marxism, and Christian humanism, gave Ishimoto the opportunity to transform herself from mother and wife to a labor activist, an advocate for women's rights, and a leader in the birth control movement in Japan. The third part of the autobiography is a series of essays outlining Ishimoto's views on a variety of subjects including marriage, the geisha problem, religion, socialism, and feminism.

The most compelling part of the autobiography is the second part, in which the baroness describes her growing awareness of the cost of Japan's industrialization. This understanding occurred when, shortly after marrying, she and the baron moved to the mining town of Miike, where the Mitsui Mining Corporation employed the baron as an engineer. Here she witnessed, for the first time in her life, the exploitation of laborers, particularly of female coal mine workers. Around the time of World War I, the Japanese coal mining industry was at its peak, considered the "golden age" of coal mining. The employment of women coal miners increased faster than that of male coal miners partly because coal mining companies could pay

women (and their children) at a far cheaper wage than they paid men.[2] Thus it was in Miike that Ishimoto came to understand the plight of the female worker, who was exploited both by industrialists and by domesticity. Ishimoto saw women with practically no resources bearing the burden of child rearing in the most squalid and exploitative conditions, having more children than they could care for. Ishimoto did not know that birth control could alleviate these women's problems until she went to the United States and met Margaret Sanger. The baroness's experience in Miike created a humanitarian consciousness that she would be unable to fully articulate until she came to the United States for the first time and met Sanger and other feminists, writer and activist Agnes Smedley and feminist historian Mary Beard. Upon her return to Japan, Ishimoto opened a birth control clinic and traveled to various parts of Japan to speak to laborers about birth control and social reform, until the Japanese government confiscated and shut down her clinic and, in 1932, put her under house arrest. By this time, Baron Ishimoto had begun to turn away from both his radical politics and his wife and family, and he became increasingly supportive of Japanese imperialism and militarization. Eventually, he abandoned Ishimoto completely, leaving her to support their two sons on her own. Nevertheless, his wife did not give up the cause of progressivism; on the contrary, particularly inspired by the feminist cause, she retained and championed a vision that went against nationalism and chauvinism.

As Barbara Molony points out in her introduction to Ishimoto's book, Ishimoto originally intended for the autobiography to be a socialist and feminist manifesto in which she used "her life as a metaphor" to show how Japan changed "from feudalism to industrialism."[3] However, Ishimoto decided to change the title from *From Feudalism to Industrialization* to *Facing Two Ways: The Story of My Life*, which was less politicized and more marketable. More interesting and human than the original, the new title reflects a more personal story of Ishimoto's life in this period of transition. Indeed, for Ishimoto, "facing two

ways" was about being trapped by both Japanese feudal traditions and Japan's growing industrialization. Thus in her view, facing backward and forward was not laden with the familiar message that the values of the East were archaic and the values of the West modern and progressive. In fact, her autobiography shows that for Japanese women, facing modernity was equally as exploitative as facing Japanese feudalism. In using her life "as a metaphor" for the changes from feudalism to modernity, Ishimoto depicts how her feminist work and activism in birth control conflicted with her responsibility to her family. Inspired by the Japanese women's movement, which gave women a forum to discuss what it meant to be a "good wife and wise mother" in the modern world, Ishimoto expressed her own personal dilemmas as wife and mother in a changing Japan and globalizing world.[4] In writing her autobiography, Ishimoto extended this conversation to the West and not only referenced the ways Japanese and American feminisms compared to each other but also provided poignant details about her maternal devotion to her sons and her despair over her failing marriage, as her husband, who helped her become a feminist, turned from a radical political activist into a Japanese militarist and imperialist.

The phrase "facing two ways" captures the dilemma of liberal Japanese women at the time: trying to fulfill traditional duties to children, husband, and family and yet also realizing that those vey fulfillments demanded that they abdicate public life and remain cloistered within the privacy of the domestic sphere. In this way Ishimoto's autobiography reflects white European and American women's desires and subsequent struggles to be the New Woman who sought to differentiate herself from the Victorian angel of the house and her responsibilities not toward the development of her own identity but to the service of her husband and children. Yet although some American readers found Ishimoto's personal and political transformation interesting, many were fascinated more by the duality of Ishimoto's life, existing between East and West, Japan and the United States. Instead of seeing Ishimoto's feminist transformation as

occurring within the shift from feudalism to capitalism, American readers tended to depoliticize Ishimoto's writing, reading her as an aestheticized Japanese woman not so different from Madame Butterfly.

Reading Western Female Modernity through Japanese Femininity

Studies of women's middlebrow reading culture in the early twentieth century reveal how the mass production of literature made reading an important part of the formation of American female identity. According to Barbara Sicherman, reading could change the way women thought of themselves:

> A study of women's intense engagement with books suggests that many found in reading a way of apprehending the world that enabled them to overcome some of the confines of gender and class. Reading provided space—physical, temporary, and psychological—that permitted women to exempt themselves from traditional gender expectations, whether imposed by formal society or by family obligation. The freedom of imagination women found in books encouraged new self-definitions and, ultimately, the innovative behavior associated with the Progressive generation.[5]

As Sicherman explains, at the turn of the twentieth century and into the 1930s many American women saw themselves between two cultures, the Victorian and the post-Victorian, the latter viewed as modern. By giving them a glimpse of lives other than their own, the act of reading had potentially radical effects in the Progressive Era for women, who, though raised with Victorian mores, could now imagine female lives that did not adhere to Victorian standards of femininity, potentially leading these women to rethink their culture's gender and class roles. In addition, the empathy these readers developed for the literary characters, despite their own life experiences or goals for reading, allowed them to define themselves either in sympathy with

imagined depictions and understandings of Asian women. That Japanese and white American women are defined through each other here marks a difference from the relation between Chinese and American women seen in chapter 1 of this study. They are obverse sides of the same coin: while the New American Woman was defined as liberated and more independent vis-à-vis her Japanese counterpart, she was also seen as threatening—her sexual autonomy made apparent by the focused surveillance on Chinese women that inevitably transferred to white women as well. These two different and seemingly opposing narratives, however, point to a continuing set of issues that consistently relegates Asian women to a means of making legible and articulating the desires and fears of white female autonomy.

Even progressive American feminists were susceptible to making the kinds of orientalist interpretations of Japan and Japanese women as American readers in general made. In the next section I examine Margaret Sanger's writings about Asia and Japan and her friendship and collaboration with Ishimoto. While Japanese femininity defined American womanhood as liberated and unfettered, Sanger's writings implicitly defined an American feminism in difference to Japanese women and feminists.

The Limits of White Feminisms

Although Margaret Sanger would have preferred to see herself as Ishimoto's mentor and the Japanese feminist as her protégé, an Asian version of herself, in reality their relationship was more equal and more reciprocal. In her biography of Ishimoto, Helen Hopper writes that Sanger took a keen interest in Ishimoto because she saw many of her own theories reflected in Ishimoto's ideas.[18] As I mentioned above, Ishimoto, in turn, became interested in Sanger's work with birth control after her experiences in the Miike mines. In her autobiography, Ishimoto identifies her first glimmerings of activism as occurring when, while living in the Miike mines, she realized that the greatest

tragedy of industrial exploitation was women giving birth to children they could not feed. She began to see birth control, after meeting Sanger, as the remedy to the harshness of working-class women's lives and desired to make birth control a legal and available choice for Japanese women. Although this ambition was partially the result of Ishimoto's friendship with Sanger and of Sanger's mentoring, Ishimoto did not see herself as created in the image of Sanger. In fact, Ishimoto was instrumental in advancing Sanger's career on the international stage. Nonetheless, the American press often referred to Ishimoto as "the Margaret Sanger of Japan," while the Japanese press referred to her as "Madame Control."[19]

When Sanger arrived in Japan in 1922, she was immensely controversial, having been criminalized and barred from speaking or writing about birth control in the United States. Between 1914 and 1915, following the launch of her monthly publication *The Woman Rebel*, Sanger went into exile in Europe. The periodical's support of contraception and abortion violated the Comstock Act of 1873, which made the distribution of contraceptives against the law.[20] When she returned to the United States in 1916, Sanger finally underwent a public trial for *The Woman Rebel*. Baron and Baroness Ishimoto's friendship with Sanger and the Ishimotos' influence in liberal circles in Japan helped spark interest in Sanger's work there. Sanger was invited to Japan by the progressive magazine *Kaizo* (Reconstruction), which had published four of Sanger's essays.[21] However, when Sanger arrived in Japan, her ship was not allowed to dock. According to Ishimoto, the Japanese government feared that Sanger would introduce "dangerous thoughts" to Japan (*Facing Two Ways*, 226). Eventually, the Japanese government allowed Sanger to speak, but only if she agreed not to talk explicitly about birth control.

Ishimoto and Sanger's relationship showed that feminist collaboration across the Pacific was not only possible but also advantageous to both. Ishimoto writes that Sanger's birth control advocacy motivated her to spread information about birth

control in Japan in order to better women's and their children's lives. At the time, the birth control movement in Japan was associated with either socialists or proponents of population control, and Ishimoto found Sanger's focus on women's well-being and ability to be good mothers more attractive. As a result, Ishimoto's birth control activism came to concentrate on motherhood and the health of children and families.

For both women, their friendship and collaboration gave them more exposure, or exposure of a different but equally valuable kind. Because Sanger was already fairly well known among Japanese intellectuals and activists, particularly those focusing on birth control, Ishimoto's relationship with Sanger gave her own birth control activism more exposure. On the other end, Sanger's friendship with Ishimoto helped give her an alternative forum for her activism during a time when she was immensely unpopular in the United States and Europe. Previously, Sanger's activism was based in radicalism; she tried to forward her cause by inciting public outrage and provoking authorities. As Sanger expanded her activism into Asia she began to change her methods; specifically, she felt the need to distance herself from other radical American activists and feminists.[22] Thus Sanger's visit to Asia brought her legitimacy with a global audience, while Ishimoto's relationship with Sanger raised her profile as a feminist activist both within and especially outside of Japan and in the United States. Even as the idea of a universal feminism was not defined at this time, these women's collaborations, particularly in the ways their ideologies formed across the Pacific and in relation to each other's work, influenced their views on birth control activism, nationalism, domesticity, sexuality, and gender. Yet Sanger's writings about Japan and Asia reveal a tension between the desire to forge a transcultural vision of feminism and an underlying national and deeply rooted racialized thinking that compromises such a vision.

Sanger's views about Japanese feminists display some ambivalence about their ability to become *leading* feminists. On the one hand, Sanger draws parallels between Japanese and white

Western women's experiences and celebrates Japanese feminists' different approach to the cause. But on the other hand, Sanger reveals a failure truly to educate herself about Japan and Japanese feminists. Like the American reviewers of Ishimoto's autobiography, Sanger saw Japanese women through the gaze of orientalism and at times did not seem to take Ishimoto very seriously. According to Helen Hopper, Sanger's relationship with Japan and the Japanese was "affectionate, if sometimes condescending," even though the Japanese "accorded her [Sanger] more adoration and respect than she ever received at home."[23]

In Sanger's memoir about her visit to Japan and Asia, "The East Is Blossoming," she reinforces many of the US literary critics' orientalist assumptions about Japanese women, detailed above. In speaking about Japanese feminists during her Japan tour, Sanger claims that the Japanese woman "did not possess in her typical psychology any strong leanings towards rebellion." Sanger attributes the failure of the women's movement in Japan not to a repressive government that was imprisoning women and men for "dangerous thoughts" but to Japanese women's inherent lack of rebelliousness. Conversely, Sanger attributes any assertiveness shown by Japanese women to the influence of the West through Christianity: "Only those who had turned Christian showed any signs of thinking independently. To be a Christian seemed to imply being a rebel or radical of some kind. They told me it with great secret pride."[24] However, this belief is contradicted by the fact that although her friend Baroness Ishimoto was not a Christian, she had been imprisoned for radical activities in 1937, the year before Sanger published her autobiography. While being a Christian during the Meiji era was considered radical, by the Taishô era Christianity was one among many other liberal movements in Japan, although it was often associated more with the West because of Europe and US missionary history.[25]

Sanger's opinions about the failures of Japanese feminism also show her ignorance not only of Ishimoto's work but of current Japanese political issues and events. In the decade leading up

to the Manchurian Incident, the success of Japan's imperialism and militarism depended on the repression of any dissent.[26] By 1938, many of the leading feminists and labor activists were dead, exiled, imprisoned, or forced into silence. After being released, Ishimoto herself was still under house arrest for the following year, and for the duration of World War II she was under government surveillance. Finally, as Hopper notes, a few years after her visit to Japan, Sanger wrote in the *Birth Control Review* that Japanese men were responsible for the creation of the Birth Control League of Japan, even though Ishimoto was one of the most important contributors to its formation.[27] Why this blindness to the positive and pathbreaking work of Japanese women?

I attribute it both to Sanger's racial misconceptions about the Japanese and "Orientals" in general and to her ignorance of actual Japanese politics and history. In her memoir, Sanger's observations about Japan as a culture repeated the familiar Western misconception that "Orientals" valued human life less than whites did. Speaking about the horrors of child labor, Sanger says that "Japanese industrialism had been able to take advantage of an ancient Oriental habit of thought which placed slight value on the . . . child."[28] Sanger seems to believe that the exploitation of children is the result not of capitalism but of a racial and cultural flaw unique to the Japanese and other "Orientals." Sanger ignores the fact that prior to the passing of child labor laws, the United States had a similar "Oriental" habit of exploiting children, as well as women, immigrants, and nonwhite people.

Thus we can see in Sanger's writings an ambivalence about Asia and Japanese women, and while such sentiments may have been commonplace at that time, Sanger's writings reveal some ethnocentric limitations in her feminist visions: at times she shows ignorance of Japan's cultural histories and contemporary movements, and at others, ignorance of her own entrenched orientalist beliefs about Asia and Asians.

In contrast to Sanger, who was probably more of a product of Western Eurocentrism, Ishimoto's worldviews, her critical

insights about Japan's imperialism and racism toward Koreans and Chinese and her comparative thoughts on women in Japan, the United States, Europe, and Korea, reveal her ability to imagine feminism and social and political alliances beyond nation, culture, and race. Ishimoto in her autobiography recounts her turn toward feminism and birth control and self-fashions a Japanese modern woman and feminist who is transcultural and international. Even while American readers tended to read her life's story through an orientalist gaze, one needs to keep in mind that Ishimoto also wrote the autobiography primarily for an English-speaking and American audience. In this respect, she partially gave American audiences what they wanted to read about Japanese women. Indeed, her writing reveals how acutely aware she is of her audience. She is less critical of Americans and laudatory of American culture, especially American women: "American women hold the most enviable position of all women" (*Facing Two Ways*, 268). Ishimoto credits Sanger (and other inspiring American feminists such as Agnes Smedley and Mary Beard) with her spiritual and intellectual awakening in becoming a feminist and a socially conscious individual.[29] Yet Ishimoto does not make such statements to emphasize American women's superiority. This admission and critique should be read as indicating the ways Ishimoto became broader in her thinking, having seen the differences of movements in Europe, the United States, and Japan. Her international understanding of feminisms across cultures certainly gave her the ability to see modernity, feminism, and humanism across racial and cultural boundaries.

Literature and the World in Japan

As mentioned previously, in her autobiography Ishimoto also credits her husband with her turn toward progressive politics and her future identity as a feminist. This turn was not entirely surprising, given the growth of liberal movements in Japan during the 1910s and 1920s. These movements in the Taishô period