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A Message From 1870s Japan: The Education of Women Is Important

Starting points

Regional elections on 23 January 2022 were the first Finnish national elections in which most of those elected were women, 53%. Although the elections differed in many respects from previous ones, the result shows a significant change regarding equality in Finnish society since the first parliamentary elections in 1907, when 19 (9.5%) of the 200 elected MPs were women. There were 62 female candidates, of whom 30.6% were elected, and 762 male candidates, of whom 25.9% were elected. At the end of 2021 was a lively media debate about the social status of Afghan women and its deterioration, especially regarding education after the rise of the Taliban. The Finnish elections and the difficulties experienced by Afghan women seemed to represent the extremes of equality issue in today's world.

Assessing the situation from a broader time perspective by using of the discussions on the historical status of women particularly concerning their education, is possible so that today's view is not overemphasised. So what kind of guidelines and future prospects might be found in the past for this situation between extremists? One example can be found in Japan in the 1860s and 1870s, where the local Western press looked at the Japanese woman and her social status from an educational perspective when discussing the changes in Japanese society. In a previous and more extensive study based on the same data and time, considering the Japanese woman's status was included as one of the non-systematic features.¹

The present work attempts to study the interpretation of the papers regarding the reforms occurring in Japan. These papers, dated 1861 to 1881, were by the Westerners living in Japan. The material to be studied comprises the English-language newspapers and magazines published in Yokohama and Tokyo – largely the editorials and corresponding commentary columns. In general and above all, the appearance of English-language newspapers² in Asia is seen as a part of building the

¹ See Olavi K. Fält, *The Clash of Interests. The transformation of Japan in 1861–1881 in the eyes of the local Anglo-Saxon press*. *Studia Historica Septentrionalia* 18. Pohjois-Suomen Historiallinen Yhdistys, Rovaniemi 1990.

² For more about the English-language press in Japan in general, see Fält 1990, 11–25.

British Empire and Christian mission work.³ English-language newspapers in Asia functioned as a link between the East and the West, joining these worlds.⁴ Moreover, English-language newspapers are thought to have played a significant role in shaping Western readers' conceptions of the East.⁵

Among the first English-language newspapers in East Asia were the *Canton Register*⁶ established in China in 1827, the *Pinang Gazette* established in Malaysia in 1833, the *Observer* established in Ceylon in 1834, the *Times of India* established in India in 1838 and the *China Mail*⁷ established in Hong Kong in 1845. In other words, the establishment of newspapers very closely followed the spread of Great Britain's political and economic influence in the East. Moreover, the world's leading British newspaper, *The Times*, had a correspondent in Shanghai, China, from 1857 on.⁸

The "father" of the English-language press⁹ in Japan was Albert W. Hansard, who had moved from England to New Zealand, where he had acquired newspaper experience by publishing a paper called the *Southern Cross*. Furthermore, he had also bought a printing press while there, which he brought to Japan.¹⁰ Initially he established a newspaper in Nagasaki called *The Nagasaki Shipping List and Advertiser*, which came out twice a week in 22.6.–1.10.1861. However, he was unsatisfied with the low readership in Nagasaki. Also, Yokohama – open to foreigners in 1859 – had already displaced Nagasaki as a commercial centre and was much closer to Edo (Tokyo), the seat of the Tokugawa government. So, Hansard moved the newspaper to Yokohama and began publishing the weekly paper as *The Japan Herald*.¹¹ It was the beginning of the Western press in Japan, followed by the rapid establishment of competing newspapers and magazines.

³ John Lee, "English-Language Press of Asia". *The Asian Newspapers' Reluctant Revolution*. Edited by John A. Lent. Ames, Iowa 1971, 13.

⁴ Harry Emerson Wildes, *Social Currents in Japan – With Special Reference to the Press*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1927, 253.

⁵ Peter O'Connor, *The English-language Press Networks of East Asia, 1918–1945*. Global Oriental, Folkestone 2010, 1.

⁶ O'Connor 2010, 32.

⁷ Lee 1971, 15–16.

⁸ Toshio Yokoyama, *Japan in the Victorian Mind, 1850–1880. A Study of Stereotyped Images of a Nation*. Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Oxford. St. Anthony's College, Michaelmas Term 1982, 43.

⁹ The first non-English newspaper in Japan was *L'Echo du Japon*, which appeared in 1870–1885. J. E. Hoare, *Japan's Treaty Ports and Foreign Settlements. The Uninvited Guests, 1858–1899*. Japan Library, Folkestone 1994, 145.

¹⁰ Grace Fox, *Britain and Japan*. University Press, Oxford 1969, 416.

¹¹ Fox 1969, 416–417; Fält 1990, 14; Wildes 1927, 260–261.

Praise for a Japanese woman

The starting point for examining the position of the Japanese woman was initially quite traditional for Japan Punch's first issue in May 1862 under the headline "First Impression of Japan", with a picture of a traditional Japanese woman with a child on her back.¹²

When evaluating Japanese society and its transformation, views on the peculiarities of a Japanese woman came to the fore. In 1873, the Japan Weekly Mail regarded the status of women in Japanese society to be good compared to other Asian peoples. Japanese women were better educated and allowed more freedom, meaning they had greater dignity and self-confidence. The paper regarded them as on par with their sisters concerning bearing and etiquette, as well as quite unrivalled in their awareness of the duties and decorum appropriate to their sex and the devotion they lavished on their children. Particular attention was drawn to their obedience they showed to their parents, husbands, and elder sons. As such, the Japanese women could be set up as the ideal:

*If unvarying obedience, acquiescence, submission, the utter absorption of her personality into that of her husband, constitute the ideal of the perfect, then the Japanese married woman approaches so near that ideal as to be practically perfect, and in this respect is, as foreign women will cheerfully grant, unquestionably superior to the women of Western nations.*¹³

Western women were held to be supreme regarding intelligence, while on the moral level was little to choose between them.¹⁴

The importance of education

Although the education women received in Japan was much better in Japan than in other Asian countries, the Japan Weekly Mail still hoped for improvement, believing the new civilisation would never truly take root until it has been planted and nurtured in people's homes, which required advances in the education of women of the same kind as were being planned for men.¹⁵

¹² *Japan Punch* 5/1862.

¹³ "Education in Japan IV. Female Education". *The Japan Weekly Mail* 7.2.1874.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Although the article said much in praise of Japanese women, it did not set out to describe only the ideal as was so often the case then.¹⁶ Emphasis was placed on their obedience. However, that quality was not inevitably seen as a good point. Note that “foreign women will cheerfully grant” that the Japanese women’s obedience was superior.¹⁷ However, there were also positive signs in this regard when the Far East referred to the measures making marriage more binding upon the husband.¹⁸

Combining the past and the new may have given rise to very conflicting views in the press. For example, the Weekly Mail was horrified at the prospect of Japanese women adopting Western dress, regarding it as thoroughly unsuited to the Japanese figure, whereas the traditional style of dress blended with it excellently.¹⁹

The education policy for women was explicitly called for and encouraged in general education policy. According to newspapers, central aspect of the government’s new educational policy was educating women,²⁰ which The Japan Gazette, as an admirer of Japanese women, took as an excellent example of the nature of the country’s development drive²¹. The Tokei Journal demanded this should be taken even further, for it believed that it was only through a liberal educational system that Japanese women could be elevated in position, and with them, the whole country.²²

M. Georges Bousquet’s series of articles on education in the Tokei Journal constantly emphasised the importance of educating women from the perspective of the whole country’s development, despite that their position in Japanese society was good compared to elsewhere in Asia. By western standards, however, they were on a par with commercial goods and commodities rather than human beings:

*She herself aids this without resistance, the dogma of passive obedience, with a docility of temperament, a handiness, and a good humour that I would venture to offer a new model to my charming compatriots, if I did not fear to draw upon myself their reproaches.*²³

Everything should be done to improve women’s education, Bousquet claimed, for it was shameful that half of the nation should study and follow Western civilisation with enthusiasm while the other half should remain in complete ignorance. The writer praised the government’s initiative in this matter, for they had understood

¹⁶ See for example Jean-Pierre Lehmann, *The Image of Japan: From Feudal Isolation to World Power 1850–1905*. Allen & Unwin, London 1978, 87; Yokoyama 1982, 47–48.

¹⁷ “Education in Japan IV. Female Education”. *The Japan Weekly Mail* 7.2.1874.

¹⁸ *The Far East* 4.1.1873, 176.

¹⁹ “Notes of the Week”. *The Japan Weekly Mail*, 20.12.1873.

²⁰ *The Japan Gazette* 16.5.1874.

²¹ *The Japan Gazette* 6.11.1874.

²² “Woman in Japan”. *The Tokei Journal* 16.5.1874.

²³ “Public Instruction in Japan”. *The Tokei Journal* 30.1.1875.

its importance before the people had. Bousquet admired the government's bold approach to developing the educational system in general.²⁴

In 1878, the Japan Weekly Mail looked on the country's achievements in the education field as quite astounding, bearing in mind this was an Asian country ruled by a native government. Although this view again reflected a highly Western-centred outlook, the sentiment behind it was evidently quite genuine, for it acknowledged that Japan's educational standards were comparable to those in the advanced countries of Europe. According to the Weekly Mail, the government should nevertheless not rest on its laurels, for there was still much to be done, especially in primary schooling and girls' education. The paper foresaw Japan becoming "the home of high learning" accounting for Japan's low educational costs and reminding its readers that education was the key to all forms of welfare and affluence:

*At the same time, nothing more surely than the education of the whole people can lead to its gaining more and more of respectful esteem of other countries, to strengthening the Government's financial credit and to the lasting and through political independence of the empire.*²⁵

The role of women in the development of society

The status of women served as one of the principal measures of civilisation throughout the period studied here, and the Japanese were praised on this score compared to other Asian peoples. However, the situation was still not as equitable as it should be. The Japan Weekly Mail, when considering the possibility of Japan granting citizenship to foreigners who applied for it, drew particular attention to the status of foreign women, calling on the foreign powers to ensure that these women were not placed on the same subservient position as Japanese wives.²⁶

The Japan Weekly Mail expressed hope for improvement in educational opportunities for Japanese women to improve their status, recommending fields such as nursing and teaching; it did not believe there was much chance of their being allowed to study subjects such as law or medicine in the near future. The paper regarded Japanese women as less knowledgeable and more dependent than their Western counterparts but better endowed with patience, discretion and philosophy.²⁷ It then went on in a favourable vein to praise the chastity of the Japanese wives,

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ "Education in Japan". *The Japan Weekly Mail* 9.3.1878.

²⁶ "The Status and Naturalization of Foreigners in Japan". *The Japan Weekly Mail* 23.3.1878.

²⁷ "Women in Japan". *The Japan Weekly Mail* 24.1.1880.

stating they excelled over their Western counterparts on this so that not even the unmarried women could be said to fall short by western standards.²⁸

The Tokio Times was particularly interested in women's status in Japan, which is quite plausible, given the American background of the editor Edward H. House, which would fit in nicely with interest in the women's emancipation movement. The feminist movement in the United States around 1880 was older and stronger than that Europe's as the United States was held as an example to all in this sphere. One sign of American women's improved position was the opening of many universities and colleges to women after the Civil War; 40 000 female students accounted for about a third of the student population. Consequently, many professional positions opened up for women.²⁹

The Tokio Times accordingly placed great value on Japanese women's intellectual capabilities, regarding them as more intelligent in relation to men than their western counterparts, simultaneously expressing amazement at the unwillingness of Japanese men, even those in high positions, to improve women's access to education merely because they feared that women would lose some of their value as "menial drudges".³⁰

The paper's general outlook was that equality for women was one essential for achieving real cultural standards:

*No nation in the world can approach, far less attain, that perfection of civilization to which Japan aspires, so long as its women are afforded privileges of culture inferior to those enjoyed by their brothers so long as they are denied admission to every equality of learning, as of family and social intercourse, with their male relations.*³¹

Regarding the poor status of women in every country, the paper expressed the hope that, just as Japan had made rapid advances in other aspects of civilisation, Japan would also become the first to break down the last, worst and meanest remnant of human barbarism. The paper believed the most profound lesson of Western culture would remain unlearned unless the younger generation could realise that the women, who the paper regarded as "tender, patient, humble and loving" creatures merited equality with men.³²

²⁸ *The Japan Weekly Mail* 12.2.1881.

²⁹ Richard J. Evans, *The Feminists. Women's Emancipation Movements in Europe, America and Australia 1840–1920*. London 1977, 44–58. See also Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrag. The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America 1848–1869*. Second Printing. Ithaca and London 1980, passim.

³⁰ "Education of Women in Japan". *The Tokio Times* 2.3.1878.

³¹ "The New Educational Code". *The Tokio Times* 25.10.1879.

³² "The Women of Japan". *The Tokio Times* 22.11.1879.

The Tokio Times put forward a dual-phase programme of social and educational reform designed to improve women's status. Socially, this programme meant the remedying their degrading social position, and educationally opening many new schools and colleges for them.³³

Conclusions

Despite the questions of economic and political advantage dominated the papers' writing in the late 1870s and early 1880s, there were also many philosophical and cultural trends, such as the feminist movement and universal education, on which the papers' opinions differed very little. Emphasising the Western culture's perspective, the newspapers and magazines considered the education of Japanese women to be absolutely central or even the most important factor in developing Japanese society or any other society. Therefore, the ideas and wishes the Western press expressed in Japan in the 1870s are still very relevant, regardless of culture – both in Afghanistan and also partly in Finland, i.e. the constant emphasis on equal educational opportunities.

³³ "The Women of Japan". *The Tokio Times* 29.11.1879.

