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Review Essay

Early Modern Japanese Women through the Lens of Tea, Travel, and Childbirth

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Rebecca Corbett. *Cultivating Femininity: Women and Tea Culture in Edo and Meiji Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018. 202 pages. \$68 (cloth); \$28 (paper).

Yuki Terazawa. *Knowledge, Power, and Women's Reproductive Health in Japan, 1690–1945*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 318 pages. \$100 (cloth); \$80 (e-book).

Shiba Keiko. *Literary Creations on the Road: Women's Travel Diaries in Early Modern Japan*. Translated with notes by Motoko Ezaki. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2012. 156 pages. \$35 (paper); \$33 (e-book).

What do you do when you want to explore a topic pertaining to the history of early modern Japanese women, but, aside from accounts of a few exceptional individuals, the sources either do not exist or are so fragmentary that they are little more than anecdotal? One solution has been to focus on elite women, the members of the ruling class who were more likely to be literate as well as scrutinized and admonished by men. Even for them, the historical record can remain frustratingly opaque. Getting at the life experiences of commoners has been harder. Dealing with this problem has forced historians to draw inferences based on scanty data, analyze visual representations whose meanings are by no means transparent, and mine records left by men while remaining alert to the danger of overstatement.

There are a variety of approaches and solutions to this conundrum within the parameters set by the goals of women's history. The first can be said to document the presence of women in, and their contributions to, fields dominated by men—literacy, travel, tea, and networks. A second approach is to shed light on women's activities and the roles they performed in society, whether as prostitutes, servants, wives, or mothers. A third approach documents how women appeared in the male gaze and as objects of male practice. I am going to leave pornography aside, even though its study is currently enjoying something of a vogue in Japan. Instead, by referring to the male gaze, I am reminding readers that women's history cannot be separated from that of men, even

though the obverse is not true. With a few notable exceptions, men wrote the documents in these studies, whether they were for or about women. Not only were women constrained in dress, education, and aesthetic pursuits, even the process of giving birth to a child could end up under male control.

Rebecca Corbett's encounter with tea culture during her first stay in Japan led her to investigate how and when women started to participate in it. Unlike most historians, who argue that men monopolized tea up to the beginning of the twentieth century when it suddenly became a feminine aesthetic pursuit along with flower arranging, Corbett insists, in *Cultivating Femininity: Women and Tea Culture in Edo and Meiji Japan*, that women started participating in tea culture during the seventeenth century. To ignore women's earlier activities or downplay them because they neither performed in public nor enrolled in tea schools makes it easier for the schools that currently set the standards to exclude women from their higher ranks. Rectifying this historical injustice is one reason that Corbett wrote this book.

Given the limited evidence of women's participation in tea culture, Corbett is forced to read her sources creatively, make suppositions bolstered by assumptions, and widen the definition of what constitutes a tea practitioner. If Sōōn, the second wife of the famous tea master Sen no Rikyū (1522–1591), is known to have participated in tea culture, surely she was not alone. If the *onnagata* (kabuki actor playing a woman) follows the procedures for making tea in preparing a meal, his movements suggest that other women understood what these procedures were. For a man to be considered a tea practitioner, he generally has to have enrolled in a school, but Corbett argues that for women, it is enough that they understood the etiquette for making and drinking tea.

Despite the scanty evidence, I find most of Corbett's argument compelling. She has three reasons for studying women and tea that resonate with the arguments historians Joan Wallach Scott and Gerda Lerner made for studying women's history. First, because the search for women in documents regarding tea culture has to take us beyond formal tea school records, the study of women and tea proves that even for men tea culture had to have been more popular than enrollment in tea schools would suggest. Second, studying women and tea broadens our understanding of how women participated in early modern culture as literate and accomplished actors. Finally, the venues in which tea-drinking women appear suggest that "women had a significant role to play in the blurring of status boundaries in the late Edo period" (15). I have some problems with this last assertion as I will explain later.

How did people learn to drink tea? In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, men acquired this knowledge largely through oral transmission. Written texts remained in manuscript form, the best way to ensure that their contents would remain secret and restricted to initiates. Not surprisingly, elite women were the first to learn the way of tea, or at least to make an occasional appearance in records of tea gatherings. Then, in 1721, an Osaka-based tea master, Ōguchi Shōō (1689–1764), wrote *Toji no tamoto* (*A Woman's Handbook*) to instruct aristocratic and samurai women in the preparation and drinking of tea. Shōō emphasized modesty in his instructions: a

woman was to speak quietly when she spoke at all, not show off her knowledge or skills, and not move around more than necessary. To this end, he recommended that she use a utensil stand where she could place the necessary accoutrements in advance rather than bring them one by one into the tearoom as men did. A woman should prepare tea only within the household; heaven forbid that she perform in public. This text too circulated only in manuscript. Reading about the handbook, I was reminded of *Onna daigaku takara bako* (A treasure chest of great learning for women), first published in 1716 when occupations for women were diversifying. An article by Japanese historian Yokota Fuyuhiko states that one of the text's goals was to teach respectable women how to establish boundaries between themselves and prostitutes (Yokota 1999). As Corbett notes, the high-ranking prostitutes known as courtesans had considerable familiarity with the tea ceremony. Perhaps that is why women were urged to be quiet (unlike the chattering prostitute), not to pass a tea bowl directly into a man's hands (lest she inadvertently touch them), and not to flutter around the tearoom.

Shōō's handbook appeared again during the nineteenth century, when the daimyo (regional warlord) Ii Naosuke made a copy for his family and attendants. He redacted some of Shōō's harshest criticisms of women and entertained the possibility that men and women might sit together in the narrow confines of a tearoom without compromising a woman's virtue. Ii's family records indicate that women and men often drank tea together. These documents list the names of some thirty women, making them the most complete records we have for the participation of specific women in tea culture.

There is thus evidence that women in the ruling class knew how to conduct themselves while participating in tea culture, but what of commoner women? Although the records do not place specific women at specific occasions, plenty of indirect evidence indicates that commoner women were encouraged and aspired to learn the procedures for making and drinking tea. Prime examples are what Corbett calls "guides for cultivating femininity" (98), a variety of texts designed to "civilize" women by teaching them how to conform to the standards of feminine behavior and attitude modeled by their betters, which she deems a process of "kugefication." These guides illustrated elite lifestyles for women curious about their social superiors. They urged women to partake of a number of arts—among them playing the shamisen (an instrument not traditionally associated with ruling-class women), writing poetry, and practicing tea rituals—because it was fashionable to do so, these skills would make them appear more graceful and elegant, and they were necessary if a young woman wanted to go into service in an elite household and then make a good marriage. Thus for women, more than for men, tea had practical benefits. In a similar manner, *sugoroku* (board games) for girls illustrated the aesthetic pursuits essential to making a success of life. At the same time, women were discouraged from learning more than the basics or spending too much money on fancy accoutrements.

Both the guides and the games taught a young woman how to make the most out of the opportunities that came at various stages of her life, but Corbett argues that their

significance does not end there. To expand her argument, she draws on the work of the European sociologists Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu. Corbett states that becoming civilized meant learning a “shared grammar of comportment and etiquette” by acquiring “cultural competence” (107) in these aesthetic pursuits. Learning the way of tea thus became a means to acquire symbolic capital that a young woman could use in making a good marriage and, later, in helping her husband to entertain his guests. It also enabled her to imitate “the appearance of being elite, through [her] clothing and carriage” (115) and hence blur the status boundaries between the ruling and commoner classes.

As other scholars, including myself, have done in our research, Corbett applies Bourdieu’s theory on the accumulation of symbolic and cultural capital based on his study of the haute bourgeoisie in postwar France to her study of early modern Japan. Informal standards for inherited status and custom fixed boundaries in France, not laws and regulations as in Japan. Yes, a commoner woman could internalize the attitudes and deportment of her social superiors and even become friends with members of the ruling class through sharing a common interest in aesthetic pursuits. If she tried to dress like them, however, she might run afoul of Tokugawa sumptuary regulations and risk punishment for herself and her family. For the young women who played *sugoroku*, the board game gave them insight into the elaborate system of ranks and offices that structured the inner quarters. In the course of playing the game, they rose through the ranks, but it was just a game. Service in the inner quarters of the daimyo and shogun promoted social integration; apart from a few exceptions, it did not foster professional advancement or social climbing. What made the mores and practices of the impoverished ruling class attractive to the commoner class was the fact that hereditary status boundaries existed, and continued to exist until the end of the early modern period.

In contrast to Corbett’s use of Elias and Bourdieu, Yuki Terazawa relies on French philosopher Michel Foucault to explain changes in attitudes toward and responses to childbirth, in *Knowledge, Power, and Women’s Reproductive Health in Japan, 1690–1945*. Terazawa’s approach owes a great deal to intellectual history, at least in the first half of the book, in that she places her study within the framework of transformations in how men thought about their world. She addresses when and how early modern conceptions of the body changed, preparing the way for modern (Western) medical practice, who was responsible for these changes, the consequences for women, the role of the state, and what all of this meant for power networks more generally. Although she refers frequently to such terms as “state surveillance” and the “oppression of women,” she insists that neither the state nor women should be seen as undifferentiated. Women might be complicit in the oppression of other women; the state both coopted and subordinated women.

In Japan, the seventeenth-century dominance of metaphysical neo-Confucian thought had a major impact on how men perceived the female body and the process of gestation in the womb. Before that time, medical knowledge consisted of listing symptoms and treatments for them without any attempt to develop an overarching

explanatory framework. Neo-Confucianism was based on a system of correspondences among the macrocosm of the natural world, its seasons and elements, and the microcosm of the human body, plus the notions of yin (female, passive, dark) and yang (male, active, bright) that needed to be kept in balance regardless of whether an individual was a man or a woman, and the imperative to preserve *ki* (Ch. *qi*, essence or vitality). These concepts constituted the basis for a long tradition in Chinese medicine. By studying and referencing these texts, male Japanese physicians acquired a moral and medical authority that enabled them to encroach upon what had previously been the female-dominated field of childbirth.

In 1692, the physician Gyūzan Katsuki (1655–1740) wrote *Fujin kotobukigusa* (A guide for a woman's celebratory event), which encapsulated the neo-Confucian understanding of the body and put it to use in promoting the production of healthy heirs, beginning with conception. Because both men and women needed lots of essence to conceive, it was imperative not to have sex too often lest the *ki* become depleted. Picking the right date and the right weather was also crucial. Just as "both women and men...were thought to have a fundamentally identical reproductive physiology" (40), men also had to take responsibility for a failure to conceive.

Once a woman conceived, she became fragile and vulnerable to a host of illnesses, placing her in need of a doctor's care. Whereas the uterus served to hold the fetus, proper functioning of the other visceral organs was necessary to ensure its proper development from something that looked like a dewdrop to a material body. In order for the fetus to make a success of turning into a healthy, intelligent child, pregnant women needed to control their movements, avoid disturbances, and cultivate their virtue by viewing beautiful objects or reading the Chinese classics. These views on what they needed put them at the mercy of husbands and in-laws. On the one hand, some ended up sequestered, resulting in a new form of oppression for women in elite or wealthy families. On the other hand, sometimes Gyūzan's strictures helped women escape from heavy work during pregnancy and promoted the idea that education for women was a good thing. Just as the earliest text to grant women the privilege of learning how to practice the art of drinking tea was aimed at elite women, so too was Gyūzan's text with its illustrations of women at the imperial court aimed at physicians catering to the military and Kyoto-based aristocracy.

Gyūzan also advocated that both physicians and midwives be present at birth, a practice that was highly unlikely except in elite families. Because the physician possessed specialized knowledge unavailable to midwives, the insertion of male doctors into what had heretofore been female-dominated space ran the risk of subordinating the midwife to a physician's authority. Yet physicians did not intervene in the birthing process. They tended to let nature take its course and confined themselves to prescribing medicines or examining a woman's face for signs of whether the fetus was alive and whether the mother would survive.

During the mid-eighteenth century, Gyūzan's worldview and that of neo-Confucianism more generally faced a major challenge, the result of what Terazawa,

drawing on Foucault, calls an “epistemic change” (78). Just as the Ancient Learning school beginning with Ogyū Sorai (1666–1728) rejected neo-Confucian metaphysics and abstract speculation in favor of studying the natural and human worlds as discrete objects, the Ancient Practice school of medicine also advocated the empirical study of human anatomy. This emphasis led to Japan’s first dissection of a human body, done in 1754, and eventually to Japan’s acceptance of Western medical knowledge (although practitioners of Chinese medicine have never completely disappeared).

In explaining the consequences of this epistemic shift for pregnant women, Terazawa focuses on the Kagawa School and its founder Gen’etsu (1700–1777), to the exclusion of other obstetrical schools that flourished at the same time and may have been more influential. To analyze the symptoms of morning sickness, the shape of the fetus, or its sex, for example, Gen’etsu confined himself to empirical observation, rather than reaching for explanations based on *ki* or the five phases, and he saw more fundamental differences between male and female bodies than was true in Chinese medicine. In contrast to Gyūzan and his ilk, Gen’etsu urged physicians to intervene in the birthing process, handle the woman’s body, and manipulate the fetus—in other words, to base their diagnosis on observation and intervention. As in the West, Gen’etsu downplayed a woman’s labor pains, instead treating the body as a passive object, and thus trivialized “the mother’s active and spontaneous movements during labor” (94). To promote his own skills in medical and surgical techniques, he exaggerated the risk of difficult births, thus rejecting the notion that childbirth is a natural process. Finally, he invented a metal hook for extracting a fetus from the womb in bits and pieces when the mother could not expel it herself. This surgical tool is just one example of how the Kagawa School innovated in childbirth techniques by having physicians use their bodies, chiefly their hands, as instruments working on the mother’s bodies. Later obstetricians developed less drastic implements for separating a fetus from its mother.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the market for male obstetricians spread beyond elite society to commoners. Both doctors and women’s families prioritized the mother’s well-being over that of the child, unlike in medieval Japan with its stories of how dead mothers gave birth to and suckled infants (Glassman 2009, 187, 193). To spread its teachings, the Kagawa School departed from a restrictive tradition that relied on oral transmission from master to disciple, instead opening its doors to students who received a certificate upon the completion of required courses. Obstetric knowledge became a commodity for sale, its purchase disguised as gifts and fees. Even a few women (nine out of 950) enrolled in the Kagawa School’s training program. The chief advance in maternity care after the 1868 Meiji Restoration was the active involvement of the state in providing an overall framework for the introduction and implementation of Western medical practice, including state-certified training for midwives.

Corbett and Terazawa also trace the transformations in the practices of tea and obstetrics during the Meiji period (1868–1912). Corbett shows how the modern educational system taught tea rituals to young women in the schools in order to

promote what it deemed Japan's national identity. Terazawa sees the expansion of state power in the growth of a bureaucracy that used numbers and statistics to enhance its surveillance over women of childbearing age and trained new midwives in the latest Western techniques for protecting the health of expectant mothers and delivering babies. She sees this as exemplary of a larger drive toward health reform designed to deliver strong soldiers to defend the nation. Unfortunately, the author wanders far from her book's topic in her lengthy and overly detailed discussion of the implementation of physical education for girls in schools (lamenting that "it failed as an emancipating force for Japanese women," 185) plus clothing and hairstyle reforms for women, which never led to increased opportunities for women to pursue professional careers or participate in politics. Although the state supported pronatalist policies for respectable women, its policies with regard to prostitutes and the disabled were antinatalist. Terazawa thus chooses topics to bolster her view of the state as oppressive, its policies two-faced as far as women are concerned.

Shiba Keiko takes a different approach in *Literary Creations on the Road: Women's Travel Diaries in Early Modern Japan*. Shiba has devoted her adult life to uncovering and collecting writings by early modern women, has published a number of books and articles describing her finds, and for many years has run a monthly reading group for people interested in learning how to decipher women's handwriting. Her aim is closer to connoisseurship than analysis, and she disclaims any interest in theoretical or methodological innovation. Nonetheless, we are fortunate that Motoko Ezaki translated this sample of Shiba's work in order to make it available to an English-speaking audience.

As is the case for Corbett and Terazawa, most of the diaries that Shiba discusses were written by ruling-class women. When the Tokugawa military regime forced the daimyo to send their wives and mothers to its capital Edo to serve as hostages, some of these women and their attendants wrote accounts of their trip, sometimes lamenting their separation from family, friends, and familiar surroundings, sometimes venting their frustrations when travel documents did not match their appearance and they had to get new ones, sometimes exclaiming at the dangerous river crossings they had to endure. Once habituated to life in Edo, these women discovered that they could travel freely, as long as they remained inside the barriers that blocked the roads leading outside the eight Kanto provinces in the Edo hinterland. The hostages made pilgrimages to famous shrines and temples, they visited hot springs for their health, and everywhere they went, they wrote *waka*, poems in thirty-one syllables that had become the hallmark of educated, refined women.

Diaries written by samurai women show that family circumstances often compelled them to travel. When she was nearly forty years old, Tsuchiya Ayako went from Edo to Sakai near Osaka because her husband had been transferred there. She would have liked to do some sightseeing on the way to visit places made famous in the poetry she had studied all her life, but her male companions called it a waste of time. Other women had to leave familiar surroundings when their daimyo was transferred from one domain

to another. Occasionally marriage meant a long-distance move, as when Tadano Makuzu had to take what she called the road to hell from Edo to Sendai in order to perform her filial duties for her new husband's mother. During the Boshin War of 1868, women whose domains were under attack by imperial forces had few choices. They could commit suicide rather than fall into enemy hands, or they could flee like Numata Kōsetsu, searching for an appropriate place to bury her dead husband's head. After defeat, they followed their families into exile. Shiba also recounts the extraordinary story of Tsuchimikado Fujiko, the Kyoto aristocrat who in 1868 served as a messenger for Kazunomiya, imperial princess and recent widow of the fourteenth shogun. Kazunomiya wrote letters to her Kyoto relatives, begging them to save the Tokugawa house. Fujiko made a second trip west, this time bearing Kazunomiya's plea that the imperial forces not attack Edo lest resistance by Tokugawa-aligned forces be construed as treason to the emperor. It is well known that Katsu Kaishu and Saigō Takamori arranged the bloodless surrender of Edo castle; the efforts by Tokugawa widows to achieve that same end have been ignored.

Commoner women wrote approximately two-thirds of the travel diaries that Shiba has collected. They were more likely to travel because they wanted to, making pilgrimages to temples and shrines, seeing the sights made famous in literature and history, visiting friends and relatives, or seeking to broaden their education. Most were in their fifties after they would have turned the heavy responsibility of running a household over to a daughter-in-law, but some were much younger. Many came from wealthy saké-brewing families, one from a medicine-trading family, and another was the proprietress of an Edo brothel. A few came from wealthy and politically connected families in rural areas. Like their social superiors, they took advantage of travel to write poetry and sketch what they had seen. One young woman from Chōshū, Tagami Kikusha-ni, the daughter of a government purveyor, became a lay nun and hit the road after her husband died when she was twenty-four. She traveled from one *haikai* poetry master to another, receiving lessons in calligraphy as well, and going all the way up to northeastern Japan. She spent two years in Edo where she enjoyed poetry meetings and tea gatherings. On later travels she studied *waka* and Chinese poetry, as well as the koto, a long stringed instrument. Subsequently she carried the koto with her on her travels. Shiba calls her the most traveled women of the Edo period.

Most women had neither the leisure nor the financial resources to travel as widely as Tagami Kikusha-ni did. The Tokugawa military regime discouraged female travelers, going so far as to announce in 1649 that a wife who liked to go on outings should be divorced. It also set up checkpoints where women and their documents were supposed to be inspected. Like so many other early modern restrictions, this one was often honored in the breach with the complicity of government officials and to the enrichment of locals who made a business of guiding women around the barriers. Women were not allowed to enter many famous temples and or visit holy mountains. Instead they stayed in women's halls while their male companions went merrily on their way.

Shiba's short book makes it clear that there was no single pattern to women's travels. Some traveled in same-sex groups; others traveled alone or with a single companion; some traveled with their husbands and the records about their trips reflect their deep conjugal affection. They might travel at a leisurely pace, stopping for days or weeks to imbibe a master's teachings, they might race from one storied site to the next—Nakamura Ito visited more than one hundred sites on an eighty-day pilgrimage to Ise Grand Shrine that also included sites along the Inland Sea. Some women traveled by palanquin, depending on their status and how much money they had; others walked. Along the way they enjoyed sampling local specialties designed to whet their appetite or seize their interest and lighten their pocketbook. Some feasted their eyes on Japan's natural beauty. Others recorded their observations of the people they saw and met, including the servant women, who often doubled as prostitutes, who worked in the inns conveniently stationed among the major roads.

Although Shiba's book lacks the scholarly apparatus of introduction, footnotes, and interpretation, its wealth of insight and the hints it gives for further research make it well worth reading. If Shiba has an underlying argument, it is that early modern women suffered fewer constraints and achieved more than we might think. Not only did they travel, though not to the same extent as men, they also had many and varied opportunities to obtain an education. Samurai women learned from Confucian-inspired texts that taught them their responsibility to obey first their father, then their husband, and then their son, and to avoid the vices such as jealousy that constituted grounds for divorce. Although most of them were educated at home, sometimes with the same tutors hired for their brothers, commoner women might attend temple schools, although never in the same numbers as men. By the middle of the nineteenth century, some women were running temple schools. Private academies were an important component in fostering educational opportunities during this time, and at a few of these, some women pursued the Chinese learning often assumed by historians today to have been out of their reach. I had heard of a few famous Japanese women who wrote *kanshi* (poetry in Chinese); Shiba makes it clear they numbered far more than I had realized, and they studied the Chinese classics as well. But the *haikai* poetry circles provide the clearest evidence that within the status-ridden society of early modern Japan in which women were automatically denigrated as less worthy than men, in some situations men and women participated as social equals.

All three of the books discussed here deal primarily with women from the ruling class or wealthy commoner families. Even when tea culture percolated through schools in the early twentieth century, it never seeped down to the level of the compulsory primary grades where most girls began and ended their education. Today it is an avocation, and an expensive one at that. The Meiji state instituted the training of what were called "new midwives," but well into the twentieth century, farmwomen, especially in remote areas, continued to rely on the expertise of old women. Only in the postwar era did the medicalization of childbirth achieve near universality. Travel became easier with the spread of railroads and the need for travel increased with the

growth of textile mills staffed by women, but travel diaries saturated with classical poetry disappeared.

Getting at the life experiences of illiterate women who constituted the vast majority of the female population in early modern Japan requires different tools and different questions than found in these books. One approach lies in quantitative studies by demographers (Drixler 2013); another combs legal records in which men recorded women's voices (Ooms 1996); a third analyzes various documents kept by men that allow glimpses of women's activities, whether as farmworkers or prostitutes (Walthall 1991; Stanley 2012). Each has its proponents who have uncovered valuable information regarding the choices made by women in living their lives. Whether the focus is on the small minority of literate, wealthy, high-status women or on the voiceless masses, each has merit. In any case, tracking down scarce information, coming up with ways to deal with a paucity of sources, and figuring out how to make sense of it all can be fun. It can also lead to a better appreciation of the obstacles women confronted in the past and the diverse ways in which women dealt with them.

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Restoration (University of Chicago Press, 1998), the editor of *Servants of the Dynasty: Palace Women in World History* (University of California Press, 2008), and co-editor of *Women and Class in Japanese History* (University of Michigan Press, 1999); *Recreating Japanese Men* (University of California Press, 2011); and *Child's Play: Multi-sensory Histories of Children and Childhood in Japan* (University of California Press, 2017).