Historical Research on the Promotion of Women’s Physical Education in Prewar Japan: With a Focus on the Taisho Era*

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The purpose of this study was to clarify how women’s physical education was promoted in Japan, particularly around the Taisho era (1912-1926). Before commencing the main discussion, the circumstances leading up to the promotion of women’s physical education around the turn of the twentieth century are reviewed, along with the status of women’s physical education at that time. Then, the following three points are considered as specific topics for the present study: First, critical opinions on women’s physical education are reviewed to examine the details underlying the problematic nature of its promotion, hitherto assumed. Second, measures for promoting women’s physical education in view of these difficulties are examined through arguments for promoting measures put forward by leading figures in physical education. Third, the tendencies and problems surrounding proposed measures for promoting women’s physical education in the Taisho era are clarified through an examination of critical opinions on these promotion measures.

The study found that, against a backdrop of problematic conditions caused by various factors, measures for promoting physical education for women in the Taisho era placed greater emphasis on effectively advertising physical education than on improving its quality. Conducted in this way, the promotion was also criticized by some leading figures in women’s physical education and can be regarded as one of the reasons why the quality of women’s physical education remained low.

Keywords: women’s physical education, concept of beauty, health, history

1. Introduction

Since the 1900s, when women’s physical education was officially introduced in Japanese school education, its promotion was extremely problematic due to a variety of factors, such as its incongruity with views of women of the time and the lack of appropriate women’s clothing (Imamura, 1959; Takanashi et al., 2005, pp.97-99). Much of the previous research finds that women’s physical education finally gained general acceptance based on promoting the need for women to be “healthy mothers” (Kaminuma, 1968). However, existing research has not adequately examined people’s views on problems such as the “lack of femininity in the movements of gymnastics according to the conventional view of women” (Tsunoda, 2000; Takenaka, 2004) —one of the greatest obstacles to the promotion of women’s physical education at that time—or what those involved in women’s physical education, particularly its proponents, did to address these issues.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to clarify how women’s physical education was promoted during the Taisho era by reviewing the discourse on the topic from that period. Before commencing the main discussion, this article reviews the introduction and context of women’s physical education in Japan around the 1900s. Then, the following three
issues are considered. First, critical opinions on women’s physical education are reviewed to understand the problematic nature of its promotion, which has defined discussions to date. Second, measures used to promote women’s physical education are examined through arguments put forward by proponents of physical education. Third, criticism of these promotion measures are examined.

Although the term “women’s physical education” is not officially used in Japanese school education, since the Education Order of 1877 that provided for gender-segregated learning after elementary education, the physical education system within girls’ high schools (i.e., secondary education) has generally been regarded as the system for women’s physical education. Therefore, in this study, the term “women’s physical education” refers to the gymnastics classes that were part of the girls’ secondary school curriculum.

2. Institutionalization of women’s physical education

Women’s physical education was officially introduced in Japanese school education around 1900. In 1895, compulsory gymnastics classes were introduced in the Girls’ High School Regulations. The 1901 Ordinance for Enforcement of the Girl’s High School Order stated the objectives of women’s physical education: “to develop and strengthen the various parts of the body in good proportion, develop agile limb movements, develop a well-tuned figure, maintain a cheerful spirit and keep discipline, and foster the custom of respecting cooperation” (Article 13, Paragraph 1). Then, in 1903, a gymnastics curriculum was established with the release of the Girls’ High School Teaching Guidelines, one year after the teaching guidelines for junior high schools. This curriculum consisted of activities called normal gymnastics and yugi (cooperative play involving music), which were to be conducted for three hours every week. Moreover, the guidelines emphasized the need for the classes to be taught by female teachers: “Wherever possible, gymnastics should be taught by female teachers”. In response to these developments, since 1905, a number of schools for training female gymnastics teachers have been established, including the Tokyo Women’s School of Gymnastics and Music.

One factor that led to the institutionalization of women’s physical education was the influence of the wars that Japan experienced during the modern period. Around this time, Japan experienced two great wars, the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). Many intellectuals of the Meiji era (1868-1912) had studied in Europe and America, where they became conscious of the diminutive Japanese stature. For the Japanese upper classes, who had closer relationships with Westerners, and as Japanese continued to interact with Westerners and Japan built its modern nation, the problem of the body, a visible feature, was unavoidable and required attention more than anything else (Majima, 2004). However, before and after the Russo-Japanese War, there were no significant improvements in the physical stature of Japanese people as measured by physical examinations. As a result, and just when Japan recognized the need to educate women and expanded girls’ secondary education, gymnastics was adopted as an official subject based on a perceived need to improve Japanese bodies. At that point, women’s health also came under the spotlight. It was considered that the health of women, as mothers, impacted the health of their children, and steps were taken to promote women’s physical education (Tsunoda, 2000). However, although it seemed that the need for women’s physical education had been fully recognized, research has shown that its promotion was extremely problematic. The unsuitability of kimonos—the preferred attire for women at the time—for gymnastics and the fact that the movements of gymnastics violated traditional norms*1 are considered to have contributed to these difficulties; however, the relationships between these individual factors have not been adequately examined. What follows is a consideration of the specific problems surrounding the promotion of women’s physical education, as well as their relationships, based on a review of discourse of women’s physical education.

3. Obstacles to the promotion of women’s physical education as seen in discourse on women’s physical education

3.1. Contempt for physical activity and “frailty”

Previous research has shown that in the Taisho
era, despite increases in the number of secondary schools and female students, only a small number of women could attend girls’ high schools, and these girls were from high-class families (Amano, 1986; Kikuchi, 1967). Thus, in the Meiji and Taisho eras, the primary targets of women’s physical education were women from middle- and upper-class families who could progress to the next stage of education—the very same women who were required by the nation to improve their bodies through physical education.*2 A relatively large number of women, who were going to girl’s high schools, had “unhealthy” physical condition at that time.*3 The poor health of women at that time was partly due to a chronic lack of exercise. Many intellectuals of that time saw a need to improve the bodies of women of the middle and upper classes. Mishima Michiyoshi (1866-1925), a medical scientist credited as the founding father of school hygiene, argued that the problem of physical education for girls concerned girls of middle- and upper-class families because they did not do much work at home and lower-class girls always worked hard out of necessity (Mishima, 1902).

Such arguments were not uncommon at the time (Saiga, 1924, p.62). One reason for this prevalence of “frailty” was the spirit of contempt for the body among the upper classes. The hierarchy system, which means placing high value on universal things with a high degree of abstraction apart from the concrete lifestyle, can be observed in “culturalism”, which was elite student culture in Japan. Although culturalism is the origin of the old-style high school of the Taisho era, its foundation already existed in Japan prior to the Taisho era. With disdain for the body, exercise and physical education was considered vulgar and shameful (i.e., bad) and having a frail body was considered virtuous (i.e., good) (Takeuchi, 2003). Supported by this ideological background, frailty attained a dominant position in Meiji Japan.*4

Another matter that beset the proponents of physical education was the Japanese aesthetic ideal in which unhealthy looking women with white skin and a slim built were considered beautiful (Inoue, 1995, pp.164-168). This was not an issue of individual preferences, but rather there was a general consensus that this type was beautiful. As seen in the trends in beauty that developed throughout history, research has shown that health was not considered an aspect of beauty until the Meiji era (Ono, 1997). Before this time, the typical features of a beautiful Japanese woman were white skin, a slim built, and a fragile appearance.

What fueled this preference was the prevalence of tuberculosis in the Meiji era. In prewar Japan, tuberculosis was a dreadful, deadly disease. Yet, contrary to reality, the fragility of tuberculosis sufferers, as often depicted in literature and otherwise, left a profound impression on people’s minds. Because tuberculosis always played an important role in literature—where beautiful women wasted away in a winsome, pallid manner—ideas such as “romance” and “beauties die young” became inseparable from tuberculosis. At the same time, tuberculosis was also considered the disease of geniuses in artistic and academic fields. Beautified in such a way, the image of tuberculosis supported the idea that “unhealthy looking” women were beautiful (Fukuda, 1995). “Frailty” posed problems when promoting women’s physical education not only because of its prevalence, but also because of its preference.

3.2. Incongruity with conventional views of women

Much of the criticism directed at women’s physical education argued that the act of exercising and gymnastics movements were “unwomanly”. In her discussion of the situation surrounding women’s physical education, Miwada Masako (1843-1927), a key female educator of the Meiji era, pointed out that because most parents were not fond of gymnastics—because it was thought that it could compromise “women’s virtue”—and because women themselves also tended to dislike it, gymnastics had become a subject “in name only” (Miwada, 1897, pp.109-110). Akuri Inokuchi, who returned from study in the United States, said she was severely criticized at a lecture she held after returning to Japan for “doing something different from before”. She was told as “the behavior of gymnastics is not feminine if looked from the other side” or “looks very girlish on the contrary” (Inokuchi, 1903). Many historical materials contain the opinion that performing gymnastics, which contradicts conventional views of women, may even harm a woman’s character, and it is easy to surmise that the branding of gymnastics as “unwomanly” created a spirit of resistance that was greater than the mean-
ing that such a word implies today. Inokuchi herself was labeled as “an ugly woman in the world” among “one hundred people of the world” (1905) by Gingetsu Ito, who commented on the Meiji celebrities. Inokuchi also said, “Because I am doing this despite being a woman, there is no sympathy of the public. Anyway, I heard that something has also appeared in the newspaper of this place” (Akita: author’s note). She faced much criticism based on her involvement in women’s physical education, such that she even left behind the following words: “I do not think anything, I wore an iron mask” (Akita Sakigake shinpō, 1908). Nevertheless, the criticism of Inokuchi shows that there was great interest, albeit mostly negative, in gymnastics. Moreover, the criticism of exercising women was directed not only at students, but also teachers. As explained before, the 1903 Girls’ High School Teaching Guidelines warned, “Wherever possible, gymnastics should be taught by female teachers”, which led to the establishment of training schools for female gymnastics teachers. Although the effort to place women in charge of teaching served to promote women’s physical education, criticism such as, “The female teachers have worse etiquette than the students”, made the practice of supporting female teachers difficult (Kakemizu, 1985).

Of course, the women who aspired to become gymnastics teachers were also aware of such criticism. Nikaido Tokuyo (1880-1941), who taught at Tokyo Women’s Normal School after studying in England as a Ministry of Education exchange student and later founded Nikaido Taisojuku Gymnastics School, described her feelings after being appointed as a gymnastics teacher: “I do not care if people speak ill or make fun of female gymnastics teachers, I intend to devote my energy to doing this job” (Nikaido, 1917).

Though it is not clear whether the women who became gymnastics teachers actually lacked etiquette, one of the factors that helped create such an impression was the clothing worn during exercise. In terms of both functionality and appearance, clothing is an extremely important issue for women’s physical education, and many proponents of women’s physical education called for the approval of gym clothes. Furthermore, the issue of attire was closely related to the issue of femininity, and research has shown that the promotion of women’s physical education was hindered because “Girls’ gym clothes did not consider their characteristics as women and lacked femininity” (Furuya, 1929). It can be argued that the conventional view of women, which emphasized the qualities of “femininity” and “modesty”, —qualities that were required of women in their subordinate position to men—was also closely related to women’s etiquette, clothing, and body image, and that such views were resistant to change. Koyama highlighted problems stemming from the conventional view of women that affected the promotion of women’s education:

On one hand, people recognized that they could no longer adapt to the changing times if current ways of viewing women remained unchanged, yet women’s education also faced a dilemma in that the “masculinization” of women through their encroachment into “men’s society” had to be avoided. (Koyama, 1991, p. 100)

Such an understanding is likely to have existed among the chief figures in women’s physical education as well. The desire to promote women’s physical education while eschewing the “masculinization” of women is reflected in the measures to promote women’s physical education discussed below. The emphasis on “femininity” and “norms” in women’s physical education up to this point is related to the fact that its targets were girls from middle- and upper-class families. As discussed below, the fact that gymnastics was considered unwomanly and at odds with conventional etiquette and norms made it difficult to promote women’s physical education.

### 3.3. Lack of theoretical research on physical education

Women’s physical education contradicted conventional views of women and female beauty, but another reason why its promotion was problematic was the lack of progress in theoretical research on physical education at the time. Various historical materials indicate that, as a consequence of this research delay, “gymnastics” was treated as a technical subject in schools and was not regarded as an “academic” discipline (Fujimura, 1930; Omura, 1996). Many physical education researchers also
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pointed to a lack of theoretical research on physical education. In 1904, Heizaburo Takashima published *Principles of Physical Education*, in which he commented on the lack of specialized theoretical research on physical education: “It is my sincere hope that this book will serve as a catalyst to encourage theoretical research on physical education, and that experts will produce books on the subject as soon as possible” (Takashima, 1904). Then, *Lectures on Gymnastics and Yugi*, a compilation of lecture content taken from a lecture meeting on gymnastics and yugi (cooperative play involving music) at Tokyo Imperial University, published in 1910, stated in its introduction, “The most urgent challenge for gymnastics teaching at present is to establish research and teaching policies for gymnastics from theoretical perspectives. The lecture meeting was borne out of this necessity, and this book was compiled for the same purpose” (Taiiku Kenkyu kai, 1910). Thus, proponents of physical education had recognized the need for theoretical research on physical education.

However, subsequent theoretical research on physical education hardly accomplished anything. Nikaido repeatedly argued for the need to establish a national research institute for physical education, citing that as a reason that physical education research in Japan was lagging behind:

> Today there are only a few studies on the principle of physical education in our country and it is difficult to get it through to ordinary people. What do you think about the state of Physical Education Theory research per higher normal school, which is the highest graduate school in this field? Is it not really miserable? The institution, its facility, its personnel, no one can be relied upon. Same is true about the nerve center. Is it not sorry to think about other private schools, etc.? (Nikaido, 1922c)

Against this backdrop, physical education sought to build a theoretical foundation, and thereby gain social approval, by using the latest medical and scientific knowledge. Physical education, which was grounded in sciences such as anatomy and physiology, had adopted a health and hygiene approach, and its academic value had been obscured by the objective of developing healthy bodies. Commenting on this situation, Nikaido expressed the following opinion:

> When we look at the current trends observed in each direction nowadays, we can say it is the fiasco of physical education research which causes the tendency when educators who actually handle physical education, i.e. technicians of physical education method, tend to be caught merely by anatomical research. Since educators in charge of physical education research must correlatively possess the conceptual knowledge necessary to perform the complete physical education together with polishing their technique in various fields as anatomy, physiology, hygienics, physics, philosophy, eugenics, or the rise and fall of nations, what kind of advantage do we have in the performance of the duties with only one anatomical expertise? Also, what kind of advantage do you have in advancing the study of physical education? (Nikaido, 1922b, p.53)

Moreover, the opinion that this situation was caused by problems in the quality of physical education leaders and gymnastics teachers was extremely common. Toyo Fujimura (1887-1955), principal of the Tokyo Women’s School of Gymnastics and Music, pointed out, “It is regrettable that although almost 50 years have passed since the inception of physical education in Japan, no genuine physical educators have emerged in our country, and instead we only produce imitation physical educators from imitation physical education overseas” (Fujimura, 1930). The need for improvement in this area was also noted by Obara (1925). Specifically, he argued that teachers ought to improve their character, develop common sense, and learn English: “The mockery directed at gymnastics teachers from students and society was, as mentioned above, mostly brought on by the teachers themselves. It stems from their poor character and lack of ability” (Obara, 1925). Such opinions were also common among other proponents of physical education at that time.⁹ Although many leaders of the physical education movement emphasized the need to improve the “character” of gymnastics teachers, they did not specify how this should be done and continued to reiterate the same opinions thereafter.

In addition, the lack of research on gymnastics as a form of women’s physical education also thwart-
ed the promotion of the subject. *Women's Physical Education*, the second book in the School Hygiene series compiled by the Ministry of Education in 1923, stated that although recent calls to promote women's physical education were a step in the right direction, "still few opinions have been offered by educational practitioners and scholars on how best to conduct the women's physical education movement" (Monbusho, 1923), pointing to the lack of progress in actual research. Moreover, in terms of the content of women's physical education, Nikaido criticized the treatment of the subject as a simplified version of men's physical education materials: "I feel uneasy about educating these girls, the mothers of our nation, using teaching materials that are inferior to those for the boys, and giving the job of teaching girls to those who are no longer any use for teaching boys" (Nikaido, 1922d). Similarly, Fujimura criticized the use of materials similar to those used for boys in women's physical education without any consideration for the characteristics of the female body, as well as the lack of theoretical research on physical education: "This is not genuine research" (Fujimura, 1936).

4. Trends and problems of measures for promoting women's physical education

4.1. Reasons for the lack of theoretical research

One reason why theoretical research on physical education did not improve, even though it was considered necessary and many leading figures in physical education had recognized this challenge, was the problem of gymnastics "ideology" among these leaders. Research has shown that Genkuro Kawase, Akuri Inokuchi, Tokuyo Nikaido, and Michiaki Nagai, who all studied a form of gymnastics known as "Swedish gymnastics", each held different views on how the subject should be taught in schools (Takeda, 2010). As Nagai explained, "Though it is called the Swedish Gymnastics ring system, its styles are different in the United States, the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Sweden itself, and even the original Swedish style is different depending on the period and people involved" (Nagai, 1940). Thus, in addition to arguments over the form of gymnastics to adopt—normal gymnastics, military gymnastics, Swedish gymnastics, and so on—even within the same form of gymnastics, the different ideologies held by the leading figures created difficulties in establishing a common philosophy of instruction. Describing the situation in which different forms of gymnastics were adopted depending on the ideology of the leader, Oze pointed out:

Existing teaching materials were repeatedly replaced in pursuit of something new, without investigating the nature of each material scientifically. Those that simply imitated other materials with similar content under a different name, e.g. dumbbell gymnastics, club gymnastics, bar-ball exercise, calisthenics, posture correction methods, cosmetology, cooperative play involving music, German gymnastic exercises without using apparatus, Swedish gymnastics, sports, [...] etc., are proof that such materials had not been subject to close investigation regarding the true nature of the teaching materials. (Oze, 1934, p. 33)

Courses of gymnastics with different content were sometimes taught under the same name, and at the same time, courses of gymnastics with similar content were also taught under different names. This stems from the fact that certain "factions" existed in the physical education world.*10* Much research has been conducted on the suitability of normal gymnastics and Swedish gymnastics for use in schools (Kinoshita, 2008; Takeda, 2010), an issue that unfolded precisely at the time when women's physical education became officially established.

Toyo Fujimura, an advocate of normal gymnastics who had learned from Tsuboi Gendo, the chief exponent of normal gymnastics in Japan, continued to teach normal gymnastics at Tokyo Women's School of Gymnastics and Music, where she was principal, even after Swedish gymnastics was adopted in schools. When presenting her opinion to the Ministry of Education, Toyo stated that Tsuboi had "warned me to stop presenting because it would mislead the public to believe that, even though it is my research, Tsuboi might be using me to say those things" (Fujimura, 1953). Moreover, Tokuyo Nikaido, who had studied Swedish gymnastics in the United Kingdom as a Ministry of Education exchange student, gave the following opinion on the state of the physical education in Japan:

In addition, although the association of "doing
anything” is arranging names quite a lot and seeming like unanimous consensual cooperation, originally it is a gathering of people like dogs and monkeys, the place which makes you feel bad just by looking at it. The unity of only the name that was brutal is not a real business at all. (Nikaido, 1922b, p.56)

Thus, physical education faced the problem that it was difficult to establish a theoretical framework due to the conflicting ideologies of its leaders.*11 It is also worth noting that although the need to establish a “national institute of physical education” was proposed to promote theoretical research (Inokuchi et al., 1906; Yuhara, 1915), it was not until 1924 that the National Institute of Physical Education was established. This delayed the progress of theoretical research on physical education and contributed to society’s low opinion of physical education and gymnastics teachers.*12

4.2. Attempts to change views of women as a means of promoting physical education

Although women’s physical education was institutionalized and emphasized as a means of improving bodies, recognition of the scholarly value of physical education could not be gained by simply improving the system and providing a theoretical grounding based on the latest medical and scientific knowledge. Additionally, it was difficult to promote physical education while it was not valued by society. For as long as theoretical research failed to progress, the movement lacked the persuasive force necessary to promote the subject because of its incongruity with conventional views of womanhood. Therefore, proponents of women’s physical education needed to build systematic and theoretical foundations in promoting women’s physical education, while at the same time altering conventional views. The notion of “healthy beautiful women”*13 seems to have been employed to this end. The founder of Japan Women’s University Jinzo Naruse (1858-1919) argued, in his book Women’s Education (1896), for the need to change the prevailing views on beauty as a “way of promoting women’s physical education in Japan” (Naruse, 1896). In the same book, Naruse states that “being healthy” should be the standard by which a woman’s beauty is defined. Akuri Inokuchi also noted that a woman was not truly beautiful unless she was healthy in body and mind (Inokuchi, 1907). Moreover, the need for health was often discussed in connection with makeup, which had become standard at the time. Michiaki Nagai, a key researcher in physical education in prewar Japan, explained the relationship between health and beauty as follows: “Unless the body has developed in harmony, there is no use wearing a beautiful kimono. And to apply makeup, the skin must be good. This is not possible without a healthy body and good circulation” (Nagai, 1913). In addition, it was important to make men, as well as women, recognize the need to place health at the core of beauty ideals:

At least we can say the future Japanese men are big sinners who will not only fail as entrepreneurs, but rather cause the death of country as they are considered to misunderstand girls hiding all of disease poisons in pale skin as beauties. (Shinsen-dojin, 1908)

The discussion of beauty ideals in the prewar period was not limited to the kind of arguments presented here; many discussions placed importance on spirituality or affirmed conventional beauty ideals. However, in terms of women’s physical education, arguments that emphasized “healthy beauty” and “physical beauty” took center stage. Nevertheless, this development was also criticized. Magazines, for example, began to assert that, no matter how unhealthy they looked, slim women with white skin were more beautiful (Inoue, 1995, p. 165). This, an effort to reassert the traditional view of beauty, shows how active the movement to spread the value of “healthy beauty” was at the time.

In late Meiji Japan, there are some examples that aptly demonstrate the important connection that had been established between beauty and health. The connection of “health” and “beauty” was an important strategy in promoting women’s physical education as an activity that was not at odds with “femininity” however, at the same time, it was also a measure in opposition to the trend that viewed “poor health” in a favorable light. The new concept of “healthy beauty” was employed as a means of overcoming the conventional concept of “unhealthy beauty”, and a response to concurrent changes in conventional views of womanhood that
accompanied improvements in the position of women in society, as exemplified by changes in the educational ideology of “good wife, wise mother”\footnote{14} and the “problem of working women”. It is reasonable to assume that as views of women changed in each sphere of life, these new ideals influenced one another, coalescing into a set of values that recast women as more active participants in society.

However, because arguments on “healthy beauty” emphasized “femininity”, they ultimately diluted the discourse promoting women’s physical education. Takahashi pointed out that “the spread of [women’s] physical education was held back when it was connected with feminine images and promoted when it was connected with masculine images” (Takahashi et al, 2005, p. 134). The limitation of the “healthy beauty” concept, as employed as a means of affirming health and promoting women’s physical education, was that it did not improve physical education itself—which lacked a theoretical base—and watered down the promotion of women’s physical education by tying it to the feminine image.

Emphasis on the importance of the bodies of women as “mothers of the nation” was found in the majority of discourse on physical education. This concept was based on the idea that the health of women as mothers influenced the health of their children, as pointed out by Miwada, a women’s educator in the Meiji era who questioned, “The physical condition of mother’s body is transmitted to offspring. Can we really hope to have strong citizens if our girls’ bodies are weak?” (Miwada, 1897, p. 101).

These ideas were influenced by a theory of education that was grounded in eugenic philosophy. According to Fujikawa, “Unlike eugenics, which—according to my understanding—is a form of ‘science,’ [eugenic philosophy] ventured beyond the boundaries of ‘science’ and assumed the characteristics of an ideology that directly or indirectly supports practices and policies”. In this way, it can be argued that eugenic philosophy played a significant role as an ideology that supported actual physical education practices.

4.3. Problematic aspects of measures to promote women’s physical education

Efforts were made to alter traditional values as a way of promoting women’s physical education, and the efficacy of physical education was asserted through various mediums, including newspapers and magazines. However, some of the leading figures in physical education held critical views on these developments. Nikaido expressed the follow-
ing opinion on the state of publicity for promoting women’s physical education:

Making pupils practice gymnastics based on the advantages it offers—in making the body strong or invigorating the spirit—is, to the contrary, a foolish idea. Looking at the general way, it seems to be devised to make it predict the effect too much. To preach the benefits of gymnastics, to find the effect, and to make it an incentive for gymnastics... This is an immensely dangerous teaching method, and it is not an approach that any sensible person should follow. (Nikaido, 1922e)

This also indicates that, during this period, promotion measures for women’s physical education showed an instrumentalist tendency, centered on arguments concerning the value associated with physical education. Because theoretical research on physical education had not produced sufficient results despite demands, measures to promote physical education inevitably strengthened the tendency to assert its value. The case for “health and beauty” can be considered an example of this.

Nikaido also commented on the tendency for arguments for women’s physical education to emphasize the role of women as “mothers of the nation”:

I have something to say to you again. I have declared myself as a righteous person all the time, for the sake of the people to do, for the sake of a fateful state. I will only eagerly tell the world what it seems to be. I am trying to put on myself on my own favorite task, for the 80 million ethnic groups, for the Great Japanese Empire I feel a bluff. Now I think it wasn’t so funny. (Nikaido, 1922a)

These comments, which Nikaido wrote when she opened her gymnastics school after leaving Tokyo Women’s Normal School, presumably had a massive impact, given that, during the same period, the significance of women’s physical education was typically discussed from a national perspective. Her words provide a glimpse of the situation at that time, which called for a theoretical foundation in order to promote women’s physical education. Although it has been pointed out that Nikaido’s narrative was inconsistent and seemingly contradictory (Anamizu, 1995), it is highly significant insofar as it indicates how physical education leaders viewed certain problems at certain times.

In addition, Oze criticized the way in which physical education was conducted in schools amid these conditions:

In the past, physical education was impure, in terms of its objectives, its methods, and its teaching materials. It had gone completely astray. And the essence of physical education was hardly considered. Then it was utilized, justified and subordinated for various needs—teachers’ preferences; narrow-minded, dogmatic views on physical education; school honor; circumstances, and so on—so it was impossible to observe the unique, brilliant glory inherent in physical education. (Oze, 1934, p. 75)

Viewed from the critical perspectives of Nikaido and Oze, the chief figures in women’s physical education selected certain theoretical support based on the times and circumstances and conducted activities to achieve the goal of “spreading women’s physical education”. The greatest obstacles to this endeavor were the conventional view of womanhood and the imperative to raise awareness about women’s physical education, while at the same time conducting theoretical research. This was done based on an approach in which positive value was actively attached to women’s physical education. Similar to the process of “enlightenment”, which is “seemingly neutral or advancing while taking exclusively positive features such as the promotion of comfort or welfare”, women’s physical education is thought to have changed social values by actively providing values from the instructors. However, such developments led to a strengthening of the tendency to neglect theoretical research on physical education, and as a result, the quality of women’s physical education remained low.*15

5. Conclusion

Following previous research showing that the promotion of women’s physical education in prewar Japan was problematic, this study examined the conventional values and circumstances that caused these problems. The discussion has shown that the criticism of women’s physical education was fueled,
in part, by the fact that its main targets were secondary school girls from more privileged social backgrounds. In addition, conventional views of beauty and a tendency to view “frailty” in a positive light based on ideas such as “beauties die young”, hampered the promotion of women’s physical education, creating a need for leaders in the field to resolve these problems.

However, because multiple styles of gymnastics—normal gymnastics, Swedish gymnastics, and so forth—were brought to Japan from overseas, ideological conflicts developed among leaders, which made it difficult to instate a common theoretical framework for physical education. As a consequence, theoretical research on physical education failed to progress, and this, in conjunction with problems concerning the system for training gymnastics teachers, is likely one reason why social opinion of gymnastics as a school subject remained low. Therefore, it was difficult to resolve the problems that were impeding the promotion of women’s physical education, and for this reason, physical education leaders sought to promote physical education by emphasizing its instrumental benefits. Against a backdrop of problematic conditions caused by various factors, measures for promoting physical education for women in the Taisho era placed greater emphasis on effectively advertising physical education than improving its quality. Conducted in this way, the promotion was criticized by some leading figures of women’s physical education and can be regarded as one of the reasons why the quality of women’s physical education remained low in the Taisho era.

Notes

*1 As Imamura used to say, “For example, we avoided to raise our feet gymnastically or to straddle a bar or a jump box. Moreover, exercises in the open leg posture with manual gymnastics were omitted from girls’ teaching materials until World War II”. (Imamura, 1959)

*2 Because ordinary girls who did not progress to the next stage of education were almost all laborers, the effort to promote women’s physical education focused primarily on schools.

*3 Toyo Fujimura quit Women’s Higher Normal School (now Ochanomizu University) on an account of illness, and Tokuyo Nikaido was in jeopardy of dropping out of the same school. In the Meiji and Taisho periods where competition rates such as entrance examinations were very high, children and students often deteriorated their physical conditions by lack of sleep and exercise due to studying long hours. (Ninomiya, 1926)

*4 This understanding of “frailty” was common to both men and women. In terms of problems specific to women’s physical education, the concept of “robust health”, as sought in boys, was believed to be too “masculine” to be applied to girls. Moreover, as indicated below, the very concept of health was opposed to dominant beauty ideals of the times. Measures to promote women’s physical education, by invoking the concept of “healthy beauty”, were used to resolve this problem.

*5 The word, “otenba”, or “tomboyish”, was once frequently used to describe women’s physical education. Although it can be read as being “active and lacking in femininity”, by its present meaning, it is thought that “otenba” was a word with a stronger meaning in earlier times. According to Takahashi and Matsui (2004), “otenba” expresses deviation from the old established norm, and the associated temperament and behavior tended to strongly suggest a negative image that was regarded as “inferior to what a natural woman should be”. In subscribing to this line of thought, not only did women’s physical education being presented as “otenba” simply portray women’s physical education as lacking in femininity, but it also may have created an inferior image of women, one that conflicts with the appearance of an ideal woman.

*6 By confirming Ito’s work, it is clear that Inokuchi’s talk was somewhat exaggerated (Ito, 1905). Given that Inokuchi had received various criticisms for her women’s physical education, it is highly likely the content of her talk to the reporter did not only include Ito’s writings but also other criticisms that she received.

*7 The person who introduced bloomers to Japan from the United States was Akuri Iuchi. Tokuyo Nikaido, principal of Nikaido Taisojuuku Gymnastics School (now Japan Women’s College of Physical Education), also voiced the need to improve exercise attire, and when her school adopted the western-style uniform in 1919, it was introduced in a magazine (Fujin Gahō, November 1919, frontispiece). Moreover, Toyo Fujimura, principal of Tokyo Women’s School of Gymnastics (now Tokyo Women’s College of Physical Education), earned an honorable mention in “Improved Girls’ Gym Clothes and School Uniforms for Scholarship Girls”, exhibited at the 1914 Tokyo Taisho Exhibition (Taiiku kenkyu kai, 1916). At the same time, the movement to improve attire by eliminating the hygienic disadvantages of Japanese-style clothes—led by the women’s magazines—aimed to not only remove impediments to exercise, but also the posture formed by pressure from the belts of Japanese garments (Fuma, 2007).

*8 Maruyama M. (1859-1914), a Japanese National Philologist, described as follows; ‘Even for a person like me who proclaims the necessity of physical education, it is impossible to force my mother, wife and sisters to try gymnastics, not to mention to other women’ (Maruyama, 1902). The diffusion of women’s physical education in Japan stood significantly difficult, for there was a conflict between the assumed nature of gymnastics and the conventional concept of values of women.

*9 See Kasuga et al. (2010) for a detailed discussion of the problems of quality among physical education leaders and gymnastics teachers.

*10 Regarding the origins of physical exercises in pre-war physical education and the associated focus of confrontation,
Shimizu (1996) identified that “it can be said that the experience (including studying overseas) of the individual in the center of authority in those days was based upon the struggle of the individual (their body) versus another individual (their body), that is, the battling history of habitus and habitus”.

*11 Because of this situation, Sasaki—he had a close relationship with Fujimura—wrote the following in *Women's and Children's Physical Education*: “The Society is nothing but a wish to truly improve girls' physical education from a national standpoint. I wish you could understand that it absolutely has nothing to do with excluding someone, making any clique, or any color” (Sasaki, 1936).

*12 Although this causal relationship requires a more detailed verification, because this is beyond the scope of the present study and the limited word count, this task is left for future studies.

*13 The first attempt to connect beauty with women's health was probably the campaign of “hygienic beauty” developed by the Japan Association of Hygiene in the early years of the Meiji era to improve conditions to prevent the spread of cholera. Proposed in 1884, “hygienic beauty” was an effort to define women with healthy bodies as beautiful to rectify the tendency for conventionally beautiful women to suffer poor health (Inoue, 1995, pp.147-158). Although this movement failed, it raised the idea that rather than defining healthy women as beautiful, it would be more logical to improve the health of conventionally beautiful women. This development can be regarded as the first step in properly addressing “health” and “beauty” in the promotion of women’s physical education.

*14 After the institutionalization of women’s physical education in 1898, an idea developed that increasing women’s education will lead to assistance in the family, raise the national consciousness, and lead to the wealth of the nation. Women were asked to take on “an active role as a good wife”. (Koyama, 1991, p.142)

*15 When accounts of measures to promote women’s physical education given by scholars such as Naruse (1896), Inokuchi et al. (1906), and Fujimura (1930) are considered as a whole, the following three themes emerge as being important in promoting women’s physical education: (1) improving the gymnastics teachers and its training system; (2) theoretical research on physical education; and (3) reconciling physical education with “conventional views of women”.

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Historical Research on the Promotion of Women’s Physical Education in Prewar Japan: With a Focus on the Taisho Era


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