Book Review

HAYAMI Yoko, TANABE Akio and TOKITA-TANABE Yumiko (eds.)
Gender and Modernity: Perspectives from Asia and the Pacific

Lynne NAKANO
Department of Japanese Studies
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

The book under review is a product of a workshop titled “Gender and Modernity” which took place at the Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies and the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, in June 1999. The volume consists of an introduction by TANABE Akio and TOKITA-TANABE Yumiko, nine chapters that address the topic of gender and modernity in diverse urban and rural settings across Asia and the Pacific region, and an epilogue by HAYAMI Yoko.

The main premise of the volume, expressed in the Introduction, is that modernity consists of dichotomies such as Occident and Orient, self and other, and masculine and feminine and that within these dichotomies, the category of female is “associated with the categories that are seen as ‘other’ for the modern, Western, male subject” (p. 1). TANABE and TOKITA-TANABE explain that by examining questions of gender and modernity in Asia and the Pacific, their book “attempts to escape presupposed andro-Eurocentric categories of modernity” (p. 2). Specifically, they intend to investigate the powers that construct modernity such as the developmentalist state and colonial power, and to analyze the ways in which non-European societies and women negotiate these constructed boundaries and meanings of modernity. The authors suggest that it is valuable to consider non-European women’s agency in reformulating the dichotomies inherent in modernity because these people “experience and suffer from the Western-dominated, patriarchal nature of modernity. They... seem to be in the forefront of deconstructing and reformulating modern frameworks” (p. 9).

This theoretical framework, with its focus on the agency of “non-European societies and women,” thus broadly accommodates the topics discussed in the book’s highly diverse nine chapters. The chapters include, for example, a study of the effects of Christian missions among Australian aborigines, women’s magazines in colonial Kerala in India, Japanese visual rock, and a discussion of sexual harassment in Japan and as a universal concept. The studies take place in Australia, India, Thailand and Japan. This diversity is what makes the book appealing but also puts pressure on the contributors to maintain a common theme. As with many
volumes of this kind, this one has varying degrees and shades of unity. The construction of
gender stands out as an important theme in all of the chapters. State power and colonialism,
which start out as important themes in the introduction and in the early chapters, are
considerably less evident in the later chapters. The main theme of modernity is mentioned in
all of the chapters but works as an analytical theme more convincingly in some chapters than
in others.

KUBOTA Sachiko’s chapter focuses on how colonization and Christian missionaries
influenced Aboriginal women’s role and status. KUBOTA found that although Aboriginal women
maintain the external appearance of orderly nuclear-family homes and gardens as a result of
missionary influence, they also unexpectedly disregard cleanliness inside the home and use the
dwelling intended for a nuclear family to house an extended family. She found that the
missionaries’ attempts to create domestic-oriented women and bread-winning men resulted in
women accepting responsibility for domestic work but also allowed Aboriginal women to find
work outside the home and did not lead to men assuming bread-winning roles.

AWAYA Toshie’s chapter analyzes the contents of Malayalam women’s magazines of the
early twentieth century in colonial India with a focus on how elite, literate Nayar women
attempted to negotiate a positive identity for themselves as Indian women. She concludes that
although the opinions expressed in the magazines were highly diverse, the magazines provided
a forum for women to establish their place in the public arena as female citizens. She finds that
women Malayali writers emphasized their “Indianness” either by reclaiming role models from
the imaginary golden age of Bharat or by creating new myths about the particularity of Indian
femininity even as they demanded new rights in the changing social arena (p. 60).

TANABE Akio considers negotiations over images of masculinity among the Khandayat
people (peasant-militias) in colonial and post-colonial history based on fieldwork in Orissa in
Eastern India. He finds that while the British and other elite nationalist groups attempted to
assert “political masculinity” in the arena of institutional politics, non-elite villagers negated
the value of this masculinity by asserting a “ritual masculinity” of their own in the sphere of
cultural politics. He argues that masculinity always intersects with racial, national, regional
and caste categories, and that multiple categories always work both with and against each
other.

NAKATANI Ayami explores the concept of “domestic” in her chapter on the division of
reproductive labor in a Balinese village. She argues that it is important to reevaluate the
“Western concepts of the modern, particularly its demarcation of the domestic as distinct and
definite” (p. 88) in the context of local cultural frameworks. NAKATANI found that although
household tasks are identified as women’s work, men can also undertake this work without
transgressing cultural expectations. Moreover, women’s identity is derived not from being good
homemakers, but from their economic and religious roles. Further, she finds that women’s
increasing economic productivity generates conflict not with household duties, but with
increased ritual responsibilities. NAKATANI argues that local appreciation of women’s
productive work contradicts national-level attempts to impose a gendered ideology that
associates women with the domestic sphere.

In her analysis of experiences of modernity of the West-Lio speaking people in Central Flores in Indonesia, AOKI Eriko finds that West-Lio people accommodate Indonesian policies and practices to local ideologies. Women take advantage of national programs for their own ends without losing the socio-cosmological authority of “house” and “mother” as the source of life. Men make use of opportunities provided by the state to continue to achieve competence in areas valued by past generations and maintain the view that men are “active peripheries” while women are “immobile centers.” AOKI explains that the “ritual-polity” (nu) defines the worldview among West-Lio people by positioning female ritual leaders at the center of their cosmological framework with male ritual leaders on the periphery. Similarly, they conceptualize West Lio as the center and source of power in contrast to the Indonesian nation state which is seen as belonging to the periphery.

HAYAMI Yoko explores the reorganization of space in the layout of hill Karen houses in Thailand and considers how young Karen women increasingly traverse the rural-urban divide. Hayami discusses how villagers’ preferences in building and arranging the interior spaces of their houses are changing to accommodate consumer choices. She also finds that women who stay in the villages define themselves as “traditional and moral” in contrast to “progressive and amoral” men. She argues that mobile women who leave the villages for the lowlands, in contrast, are under pressure to defend their morality and reformulate their identity. In the process, however, she suggests that they may challenge the symbolic meanings of the rural-urban divide.

TOKITA-TANABE Yumiko explores how urban middle-class women in Orissa, India, negotiate new codes of feminine behavior that attempt to avoid labels of being unsophisticated and backward and the equally undesirable distinction of being overly advanced and indecent. She adopts the phrase “aesthetics of the self” to indicate the “applications of bodily practices which seem right and/or beautiful” (p.168) under particular circumstances and contexts. She explores how women who are able to satisfy the practicalities of modern urban life and its cultural aesthetics are considered “smart” and how these forms of embodied agency trouble the dichotomy of traditional : modern that is mapped onto other dichotomies such as feminine : masculine, village : town, Indian : Western, and inner : outer.

INOUE Takako considers how male visual rock performers in Japan, in wearing make-up and celebrating beauty, violate “conventional masculine aesthetics through appropriating modes of bodily representation which, in recent tradition, have been restricted to the women’s sphere” (p.189). She argues that although visual rock appears to challenge patriarchal society in Japan, it rearticulates existing gender dichotomies in its exclusion of women. She finds that the musicians and fans strategically express their rejection of the modern patriarchal order, yet visual rock rearticulates existing gender dichotomies by allowing men access into the women’s sphere of beauty without allowing women access into the male arena. Women cannot aspire to become visual rock performers but are relegated to becoming admirers and fans.

NUMAZAKI Ichiro examines the issue of sexual harassment and the sexualization and de-
sexualization of gender relationships in Japan. He points out that the sexualization of gender relationships has meant that women were seen more as "sexual objects" than as workers or students yet this sexualization remained hidden because eroticized relationships were deemed appropriate for the "private" domain. He argues that sexual harassment "highlights the coerced nature of sexual engagement in the context of unequal power relationships and thus ruptures the myth of consensual relationships" (p. 225). He concludes that the basic structure of sexual harassment, namely, "the illegal privatization of public power for sexual purposes" (p. 236) is not particularly Japanese but is universal in modern societies.

The Epilogue, written by Hayami Yoko, refers to the themes raised in the Introduction and recaps the contributors' shared interest in "how on-the-ground processes are defined and constituted by modernist categories and conceptualizations and how, in order to cope, those identified as—and thereby rendered—'weaker' in modernist discourses can and do negotiate the layers of power and multiplicities of categories" (p. 250). She also notes that even as the volume's contributors discuss how others are constituted by and challenge modernist categories, the contributors themselves are constituted by "modernist conceptions" and thus cannot imagine a world without such categories. This raises the question about the production of the chapters themselves. The authors largely do not discuss their relationships with the people they studied or their situation as "non-Europeans" conducting fieldwork. This aspect of the fieldwork and writing could arguably have made an interesting statement on the book's main theoretical concern, namely how people considered "other" according to modernist logic negotiate dominant categories of gender and modernity.

As mentioned earlier, the chapters are held together under the general themes of "gender" and "modernity" but the terms, particularly the latter, are interpreted in diverse ways by the contributors. Commentary on and analysis of how to make sense of the contributors' various interpretations and definitions of modernity would have been useful. There is also a tendency in some of the papers to emphasize the complexity of local situations in negotiating with modernist dichotomies set against a simplified "West" or "modernity" assumed to be more easily divided into dichotomous categories. The emphasis on the complexity of the "non-European other" of this volume is important, but need not entail creating a falsely monolithic West. Except for occasional awkward sentence constructions, the writing is basically clear. In general, I found the volume to be satisfying in its detail and conclusions. As the fieldwork and descriptive material are well researched and presented, the chapters will certainly be valued in their respective areas. As a Japan specialist, I was pleased to see the two articles on Japan on areas in which there has yet been little research. I look forward to using these chapters in my teaching and lectures. In all, the book addresses an important area of study and will certainly be welcomed by students of gender and in anthropological area studies.