Panel Title: Politics

Panel Participants:

Elyssa Faison, Associate Professor of History, University of Oklahoma

Paper title:

Abstract:
Yamakawa Kikue is famous for having worked relentlessly to critique Japan’s prewar socialist movement for its lack of attention to women’s issues. Her impassioned argument for the creation of a Women’s Bureau within the leadership organization of the proletarian political organizing committee the Hyogikai reminded her male colleagues that women’s rights were also proletarian rights that male workers would do well to engage with for their own sakes.

In addition to her continual presence as an oppositional figure operating simultaneously at the margins and the center of Japanese socialist political and organizational activities, during the same prewar decades she offered similarly relentless critiques of what she considered “bourgeois” women’s groups and their pursuit of liberal political rights like suffrage that would benefit primarily elite women. But with the end of the war, and thus the end of the authoritarian and militarist state against which she had fought her entire adult life, Yamakawa could embrace the cause and the reality of suffrage without hesitation.

This paper reads Yamakawa’s socialist feminism through her prewar critique and subsequent postwar embrace of the politics of women’s suffrage – an issue with which she is not usually identified. Using suffrage as a starting point allows us to put Yamakawa in dialogue with a wide array of Japanese feminists, and to demonstrate how her view of the state remained consistent even as the form of that state shifted over the 1945 divide.

Barbara Hartley, University of Tasmania

Paper title:
“Ethical Feminism: Narrating the Stories of Two Women in Japan”

Abstract:
In recent decades, feminist scholarship has successfully retrieved the voices of many Japanese girls and women subjugated by conventional academic activity. The narratives of komori – child carers who are mere children themselves – and jokô – young women whose arduous labour funded pre-Japanese state excesses – are two groups whose previously elided stories owe their circulation to feminist activity. Similar work profiling individual women has ensured, for example, that Kanno Suga’s role as a radical activist journalist murdered by the Japanese state is no longer concealed in the shadow of the Shûsui legend.

Even so, other women remain marginalised and their stories untold. This paper will discuss the need for feminist scholarship to renew its efforts to provide inclusive accounts of all women in Japan, even those women whose political position may conflict with feminist principles. Specific attention will be given to the two post-war writers, Ariyoshi Sawako and Sono Ayako, whose activities have been largely overlooked in revisionist feminist scholarship. Sono, particularly, presents the conundrum of the ultra-rightist woman and the degree to which feminist researchers should narrate even stories of contrary political persuasion.

Although regarded as less offensive, Ariyoshi, too, is often (incorrectly) dismissed as a conservative traditionalist lacking feminist significance. This paper will argue that not only is it the responsibility of ethical feminist scholarship to narrate the stories of women who violate – or appear to violate – feminist norms, but that understanding these women and their activities is actually critical for the success of the feminist endeavour.

Akwi Seo, Post-doctoral Research Fellow, Institute for Gender Studies, Ochanomizu University, Tokyo

Paper title:
“Between Nation and Gender: Transition of Activism by Korean Women in Japan”

Abstract:
Korean women’s activism in Japan invokes lives and experiences at the intersection of race, gender, and class. Korean women have been deeply involved in politics for liberation in postwar Japanese society, though their activities had been obscured by the Korean ethnic movement and the Japanese women’s liberation movement.

Korean women were marginalized in androcentric Korean ethnic movements, as well as in Japanese women’s liberation movements stressing homogeneity among women under the term “sisterhood.” This situation changed in the 1980s when Korean women in Japan openly expressed their opposition to the patriarchy of the Korean ethnic community as well as to the ethnocentrism in Japanese feminism. Korean women have appeared as
distinct social actors in the public space since the 1990s by forming autonomous movements.

In this paper, I will explore the multiplicity of Korean women’s collective activities; their struggles and negotiations for liberation. Based on a sociological framework with regard to minority women’s activism, I demonstrate a micro-analysis of the transformation of Korean women’s activism in Japan. I will especially focus on two movements initiated by Korean women in Japan in the 1990s: one dealing with redress for the “comfort women” and the other with the establishment of an evening-hours junior high school. By comparing the two cases, I will examine the process by which the women created their own “subaltern counterpublics,” the characteristics of their new identity as Korean women in Japan, and their contribution to transnational feminism.

Tomomi Yamaguchi, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Montana State University

Paper title:
“The Mainstreaming of Feminism and the Politics of Backlash in 21st Century Japan”

Abstract:
Japan’s national Gender Equality Law was introduced in 1999, followed by the passage of municipal gender equality ordinances throughout the country. A backlash against feminism then occurred as a reaction to the perceived “invasion” of feminism to local political arena, caused by the municipal gender equality ordinances and educational projects. The past decade marked a turbulent time during which people were galvanized by this mainstreaming of feminism.

This paper is based on over seven years of fieldwork since 2005, centering on the conflicts between feminists and conservatives in local communities, particularly concerning Gender Equality Ordinances in Chiba prefecture, Ube City in Yamaguchi prefecture and Miyakonojo City in Miyazaki prefecture. I conducted in-depth interviews with anti-feminists on their version of events connected with this backlash, by meeting with conservative assembly representatives, journalists, and activists. I examine the voices and activist strategies of this grassroots conservatism, whose leaders are the reporters of newspapers affiliated with right-wing religious groups, such as The World Times linked to the Unification Church, and Japan Current Affairs Review, connected to Shinsei Bukkyō, based in Yamaguchi Prefecture. I will also discuss the voices of citizens and feminists who acted in response to, or against, the backlash in local communities.

These concrete cases highlight power relations and tensions between the center (national/urban) and the periphery (local/rural), and the problems facing gender equality policies in local areas. Both feminist and anti-feminist movements were at a crossroads in the changing landscape of the politically charged Japan since the early 2000s.