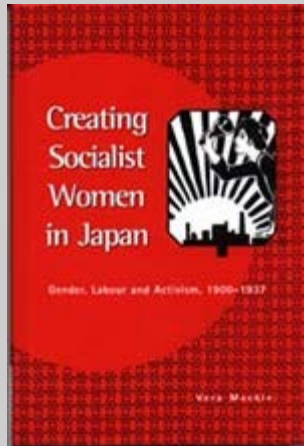


Vera Mackie



Creating Socialist Women in Japan: Gender, Labour and Activism, 1900-1937

Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, 252 pp, hard cover, \$59.95

review by

[Sandra Wilson \[1\]](#)

1. The story of the pre-war socialist movement in Japan was long dominated by famous men: Kotoku Shusui, Osugi Sakae, Sakai Toshihiko, Arahata Kanson and so on. In recent years, however, the socialist movement's women activists have begun to emerge from the shadows. For English-language readers, the intriguing lives of Fukuda Hideko, Kanno Suga, Kaneko Fumiko, Tanno Setsu, Yamakawa Kikue and others have been made more accessible by such writers and translators as Sharon Sievers, Mikiso Hane, Jean Inglis and, most recently, Helene Bowen Raddeker.[\[2\]](#)
2. *Creating Socialist Women* takes a different tack. Vera Mackie is less interested in the lives, activism and deaths of such women than in exploring - 'mapping out' (p. 169) - the organisational and theoretical nexus between feminism and socialism in Japan between 1900 and 1937. She is concerned with the 'intellectual process of creating a theoretical conjunction of socialism and feminism' (p. 162), the organisational structures through which socialist women were mobilised, and the publications through which women 'imagined' themselves and were imagined by others in new ways - as independent workers and activists, for example, rather than solely as family members.
3. On one level, the book can be read as a narrative of the socialist women's movement. After examining the dominant Meiji discourses about women, Mackle traces the concerns of socialist women through involvement in the Heiminsha [Commoners' Society], an organisation of male and female socialists well known for its opposition to the Russo-Japanese War: the campaign for the repeal of Article Five of the Public Peace Police Law (1900), under which women, amongst other groups, were prohibited from engaging in political activity; the formation of Women's Divisions within trade union federations and, later, the increase in strikes involving women workers; the debate in the Taisho period about state financial assistance to working mothers and, in 1937, the passage of the Mother and Child Protection Act; the formation of Women's Leagues associated with the legal social democratic political parties formed after 1925; and cooperation with liberal women fighting for female suffrage.
4. Superimposed on this chronological framework is a second, thematic, narrative in which

Mackie identifies in the socialist women's movement 'a trajectory from subjection to activism' (p. 169). Thus her initial chapters, covering roughly the period up to the 1920s, are structured around the chief roles ascribed to women in dominant discourses: 'Imperial Subjects', 'Wives', 'Mothers'. Later chapters, dealing mostly with the 1920s and the first seven years of the 1930s, focus on the emergence of other images of women within the left ('Workers', 'Activists'). A final chapter summarises the themes of the whole book.

5. Mackie's narrative of the socialist women's movement and its dominant concerns provides a welcome synthesis of material which otherwise tends to be scattered among a number of works. Her efforts, too, to disentangle the complex array of organisations and publications representing socialist women, and to outline the major disagreements among them, will be greatly appreciated by all who try to pick their way through this confusing field. The thematic organisation of the study, however, while certainly interesting and provocative, is more open to question. The labels around which Mackie's chapters are structured are very useful in clearly indicating the constructed nature of women's identities. At the same time, the weakness of such an approach within a chronological framework lies in its inability to show the overlapping nature of constructions of women's identities. Women could be variously portrayed as subjects, wives, mothers, workers and activists in the same period, perhaps even in the same publications. Even within the left, did the image of women as workers really overwhelm that of women as mothers in the 1920s? Was there no significant portrayal of women as workers or activists in earlier periods? Though Mackie is obviously aware of the complexity inherent in the multiple discourses about women, her approach inevitably privileges a linear narrative of progression. The author acknowledges that she has

constructed a narrative of this movement of socialist women around a series of speaking positions, ... in a discussion which culminates in representations of strong women engaged in militant labour activism, structuring a narrative around ... [her] own desire for images of political transformation which can replace the imagery of feminine passivity. (pp. 169-70)

This political point is one of the defining features of the book. On the other hand, it deprives the author of the opportunity to present the issue of women's identities as a constantly contested terrain, as it surely was.

6. A further reservation relates to the delineation of the context within which socialist women were active. Mackie's whole concern in her book is, of course, with women as subjects forging their own accommodation with socialism, rather than with women as objects of someone else's policy. Their struggles only make sense, however, in a wider context. The most obvious 'Other', looming over the whole book but rarely explicitly discussed, is the state, which clearly posed very complex problems for women activists. Though the relationship between socialist women and the State was fundamentally oppositional, some women ultimately decided that co-operation with the authorities was the best way to achieve their goals, or at least the only reasonable option available to them. Nor was the state anything like monolithic in its approach to women, as is shown by the fact that by the mid-1930s, two different parts of the bureaucracy, the Home Ministry and the Army Ministry, were sponsoring rival women's associations. Mackie recognises that the repressive power of the state was a fact of life for all socialists and briefly acknowledges, too, that socialist women responded to the state in a variety of ways (pp. 129-30). However, the sense of socialist women challenging the state (or male socialists, or conservative women), rather than relatively amorphous 'dominant discourses', is not strong in this book. Specifically, the book would have benefited from a much more nuanced appreciation of socialist women's views of the state and interaction with it. Co-operation by feminists with the state, it is true,

reached its apogee after 1937, when Mackie's book ends, but her analysis provides few pointers to suggest why it should have happened at all.

7. These criticisms do not detract from a book which adds significantly to our understanding of how publicly active women in pre-war Japan perceived themselves and their aspirations, what they considered to be important in different periods, and how constructions of women changed. In particular, the book adds to the growing body of literature documenting the existence of active, critical and resisting women whose lives can no longer be ignored by historians.

Endnotes

[1] This review also appears in *Asian Studies Review*, 22, 3, September 1998.

[2] Sharon L. Sievers, *Flowers in Salt: The Beginnings of Feminist Consciousness in Modern Japan*, Stanford, 1983, Ch. 6, 7; Mikiso Hane (ed.), *Reflections on the Way to the Gallows: Voices of Japanese Rebel Women*, Berkeley, 1988; Jean Inglis (trans.), *Kaneko Fumiko: The Prison Memoirs of a Japanese Woman*, New York and London, 1991; H el ene Bowen-Raddeker, *Treacherous Women of Imperial Japan: Patriarchal Fictions, Patricidal Fantasies*, London and New York, 1997.

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