

Book Reviews

Ryōsai Kenbo: The Educational Ideal of “Good Wife, Wise Mother” in Modern Japan. By Koyama Shizuko. Translated by Stephen Filler. Leiden: Brill, 2013, 216 pp., ISBN 978-90-04-23061-3.

KOYAMA SHIZUKO ADMITS THAT the *ryōsai kenbo* (“good wife, wise mother”) ideal still pervades her life and the lives of women in Japan. It is this thought that spurred her to look for answers to the following questions: “What exactly does *ryōsai kenbo* mean? What do these adjectives ‘good’ and ‘wise’ refer to? And in what historical circumstances did this phrase come to be used?” (xi). She specifically looked for the *ryōsai kenbo* in sources and studies from the mid-eighteenth century to the late 1920s.

In the preface to the English edition of her book (1991), Koyama mentions that previous studies on *ryōsai kenbo* treated the concept negatively and thought it “unique to pre-war Japan” and “based on feudal or Confucian ideas” (vii). Koyama, however, looks at *ryōsai kenbo* as a “modern view of women” (vii). Instead of being truly “Confucian,” it actually spread from Japan to Korea and China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (4–5). Koyama uses the phrase “*ryōsai kenbo* thought” (*ryōsai kenbo shiso*) instead of “*ryōsai kenbo* ideology” (*ryōsai kenbo shugi*). She asserts that the “*ryōsai kenbo* thought” is more appropriate because it underscores *ryōsai kenbo*’s nature as a modern set of ideas that are attuned to the views of womanhood of modern nations in the West and that penetrated post-World War II Japan, while the “*ryōsai kenbo* ideology” refers to a pre-World War II view of women. For Koyama, *ryōsai kenbo* developed alongside the creation of the “modern family” and the “modern citizen-state” (7–8). And it is a product of the “modern concept of the sexual division of labor” (viii).

Chapter one is concerned with the formation of *ryōsai kenbo* thought. In the early years of the Meiji Period, it was deemed important to train *kenbo* (wise mother) by educating women. The partiality towards *kenbo* resulted from the near-silence of Edo-Period texts on the virtues of a mother (15). Thus, the *ōraimono* (texts for studying handwriting and reading) for girls in the Meiji Period started mentioning the virtues mothers should possess (28). Policy makers underscored the role of the *kenbo* because “wise mothers” would raise citizens of “good quality” (33). But it was only during the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 that discussions on girls’ education started mentioning *ryōsai kenbo* thought (35). The *ryōsai* was in charge of manual tasks at home while her husband was at work (39). Koyama also highlights that although *ryōsai kenbo* became the framework of women’s education, it actually constricted the content of that education (42). *Ryōsai kenbo* thought, as crafted then, had the following characteristics: 1) it assumed that women and men are vastly different, 2) equality was only “equality between abstract persons,” and 3) women had a subordinate position to men (44–48).

The relationship between *ryōsai kenbo* thought and the public education system is the topic of chapter two. The *ryōsai kenbo* were tasked with their children’s home education; they were the partner of the newly created public education system (53). Women’s magazines, education experts and psychologists and others discussed the role of women in home education. Girls’ middle schools even offered electives such as educational studies, physiology, and psychology (63). The father’s role in the education of his children was hardly mentioned; it was considered the mother’s realm (73).

Chapter three discusses the factors that led to the recalibration of *ryōsai kenbo* thought. Koyama mentions two causes: 1) the “woman problem” (*fujin mondai*); and 2) World War I. The “woman problem” resulted from changes in women’s situation and the ideas of Women’s Liberation that Yosano Akiko and Hiratsuka Raichō espoused (76–87). Exposure to Western women’s participation in the war effort also prompted discussions on how to harness Japanese women’s abilities other than using *ryōsai kenbo* thought (92, 95).

Chapter four focuses on the reconfigurations of *ryōsai kenbo* thought. Women's higher education, physical education, and training in domestic science were policies that aimed to make Japanese women on par with their Western counterparts. Women were now expected to have at least some work experience or work at home. This new expectation placed more pressure on women as they were supposed to balance their responsibilities towards home and work (125). Another change was that women had to use their supposed "unique nature" not only for the home but also for the nation (126). The home was also now seen as a "woman's kingdom" (130). These changes resulted in the modification of the Girls' Middle School Act in 1920 (137).

In chapter five, Koyama looks at morality textbooks used in girls' schools to examine the evolution of *ryōsai kenbo*. In these texts, *ryōsai kenbo* were variously seen as obedient wives and daughters-in-law, exemplary mothers, and wives who gently reprimanded their husbands and could readily work in case of dire circumstances. They were also expected to see their contribution as *ryōsai kenbo* as the bedrock of Japanese society (161–66).

Koyama's work systematically shows that *ryōsai kenbo* was not a static notion and that it was a product of the times in which it was conceptualized and taught. Her book should make a wider impact, given that *ryōsai kenbo* is still seen as "a traditional Japanese pattern.... This is the splendid woman that guarded the Japanese household (*ie*) over the years" (Goldstein-Gidoni 2005, 163). And it is allegedly "an amalgamation of Confucian teaching on womanhood and the Western cult of domesticity" (Matsumoto 2004, 241). Koyama, as she mentions on the epilogue, hopes to publish a sequel that focuses on the impact of *ryōsai kenbo* from the 1960s to the present. The reviewer wishes that Koyama look into the reformulation of *ryōsai kenbo* in the wake of increasing international marriages, since apparently, even the Filipino wives of Japanese men employ the terms "good girls" (wife/mother) and "good wife, good mother" (Suzuki 2008, 71, 73). Koyama, as a pioneer in the

rethinking of *ryōsai kenbo*, is more than qualified to look into the transnational impact and reconfiguration of a system of thought that originally influenced Japan and other Northeast Asian countries.

References

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