

History Seminar: Gender and Culture in Modern Japan (Fall 2018)

This seminar provides an introduction to Japanese history through the prism of changing gender ideals for both women and men from 1800 to the end of World War II. The social expectations for the ideal samurai gentleman in 1800, for example, are vastly different from the Victorian models for educated young men in the late nineteenth century when the baseball bat replaced the sword as the preeminent emblem of masculinity. The rise of baseball as a stridently gendered activity is central to any discussion of manhood in Meiji Japan. Similarly what gave “femaleness” its social meaning in the 18th century was repudiated by late 19th century scholars who championed a new cult of domesticity under the rubric of “the good wife wise mother.” As in other nations, the gender ideologies in modern Japan have been constantly recreated both from above by government officials and from below by popular voices of discontent. The clash between the official ideologies of entrenched politicians and educators and the subversive expressions of the street will occupy our attention throughout the seminar. Even in the dark era of fascism and total war, when a mass-line ideology for gender was widely promulgated, young men and women defied prescribed expectations for manliness and femininity often at great personal risk.

In this seminar, we will witness firsthand the recreations of gender in modern Japan through an investigation of the most vibrant primary sources which are available in English translation. These include a galaxy of novels and short stories by Japan’s most celebrated male and female writers including Natsume Soseki, Tanizaki Junichiro, Mishima Yukio, and Higuchi Ichiyo. We will also read the autobiography of Fukuzawa Yukichi, modern Japan’s leading spokesperson for the adoption of Victorian standards for male and female deportment everywhere from the classroom to the dining room table. The writings of the radical feminists Kanno Sugako and Kaneko Fumiko, who paid for their gender transgressions with their lives, will also be featured in class discussions along with Tamura Toshiko’s revelatory short story, “A Woman Writer” (1913), which in many ways prefigured Virginia Woolf’s essay “A Room of One’s Own.” (1929). Finally we will discuss the crisis of arranged marriage in early 20th century as reflected in the best-selling novels *And Then* (1909) and *Some Prefer Nettles* (1929).

Students will develop their own paper topics based on the common seminar readings along with related sources in the library. Comparisons between gender ideologies in Japan and other industrializing nations are encouraged. While some background in Japanese history might be helpful, most participants in the seminar will have had no previous courses on East Asia. So everyone is welcome to a seminar which will hopefully be good-humored and intellectually engaging.