

## Book Review

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*Women's History and Local Community in Postwar Japan*, by Curtis Anderson Gayle. London: Routledge, 2010, 192 pp., \$130.00 (ISBN 978-0-415-55939-3)

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This is a well-considered study of the emergence of women's history-writing groups during the early postwar period. Gayle builds this study on his substantial knowledge of how postwar Marxist historians attempted to decenter the historical profession by encouraging the writing of history as a local praxis. He finds in part that local women's history-writing groups were one result of the attempt by leftist historians to foster a denationalized 'people's history' (*jūmin no rekishi*). His three case studies of women's history-writing groups in Tokyo, Nagoya and Ehime illustrate the interrelated development of women's history and local history-writing groups. The real contribution of the book is the way in which he has recovered the history of how the 'methodically-broad, socially accessible' People's History Movement (*Kokuminteki Rekishigaku Undō*) encouraged local women's writing groups to record their historical perspective as a means of giving voice to those whom had been voiceless before the period of democratization that followed the Second World War (p. 31).

Importantly, Gayle also finds that women involved with local history-writing groups found their voice in part by breaking from the class-based revolutionary lexicon of their mentors to establish their own praxis for writing history. While the phenomenon is similar to the one experienced by women's groups affiliated with leftist labor unions and farmers' cooperatives, the trajectory of the women's history-writing groups differ in that the resultant local woman-centered narratives briefly shifted the purpose and practice of local history writing by directly challenging the masculine experience as normative—much to the chagrin of the professional historians who had originally conceived the idea that the 'voiceless' should write history.

Though these early postwar women's writing groups were perhaps not feminist in contemporary terms, Gayle makes the important argument that they were writing woman-centered historical narrative nearly two decades prior to the emergence of the women's liberation movement that has thus far received all the credit. He finds that as early as the late 1940s' local history-writing groups 'saw themselves and their work in relation to discourses and positions held by men' that allowed for 'women from various backgrounds and in various locations . . . to create more autonomous forms of history-writing' (p. 39). Women's writing groups challenged the dominance of patriarchal historical narratives from the very start of the postwar era, and Gayle's three case studies establish a significant evidentiary base for the argument that the practice of women's history writing in Japan began much earlier than previously established.

Perhaps counterintuitively, Gayle begins his case studies with an examination of the Tokyo-based Women's History Research Society (*Fujin Mondai Kenkyūkai Tōkyō Josei-shi Kenkyūkai*) as a means to establish a base from which to build his further argument for the multicenteredness of early postwar

attempts to recover the history of women. The Tokyo women's history-writing group, which shared with their male-led counterparts the Marxist interest in showing how 'history at the margins could fit into the patchwork of national narratives', '... took issue with what they saw as the Marxist blind-spot when it came to the importance of uniting Japanese women across class-lines' (p. 40). Despite their early glimpse of what Gayatri Spivak has decried as the 'uneasy marriage' between feminism and Marxism, the Tokyo history-writing groups tended to 'write histories in terms of overarching categories that left little room for rethinking women's history as local or regional' (p. 61). While the Tokyo Women's History Research Society established an important precedent for writing in opposition to patriarchal narratives, it was the establishment of local groups that shifted the narrative and enabled women writers to re-conceive the history of women outside the confines of ideological necessity.

Gayle begins to resolve this issue by turning to the Nagoya Women's Research Society (*Nagoya Josei-shi Kenkyūkai*), which he examines as a means to illustrate the ways in which 'the radical forms of local history (*kyōdo-shi*) could better challenge the dominance of men in history-writing when they actually did come from the voices of women in marginal areas rather than Tokyo' (p. 62). He observes that women's history initially 'had no discursive or historiographical recognition' and consequently women's history-writing groups commonly lacked 'confidence about their own ability to write history' (*ibid.*). Indeed, many women's group members continued to believe well into the 1950s that their legitimacy relied upon the patronage of male academic (read legitimate) historians. Importantly, Gayle details the process by which the Nagoya women's writing group began to break from academic (read male-centered) historical narratives. In so doing, he traces an important transition that marked the emergence of women's history out of the frameworks for local history first envisaged by the men who had sponsored the women's history-writing group.

Gayle also finds that in their attempt to deconstruct the analytical category of 'woman', the Nagoya group located notions of 'femininity' and 'womanhood' within a construct of 'motherhood' similar to the Tokyo group's 'reification [of] Japanese women' (p. 82). This is a fascinating example of the resilience of the postwar discourse on 'good wife, wise mother' (*ryōsai kenbo*), but Gayle takes it one step further by arguing that the Nagoya history-writing group made 'motherhood' the common category of experience at the cost of flattening differences of individual experience more accurately associated with class and ethnicity. The Nagoya group wrote their woman-centered local histories '... without discussing the issue of empire or the postwar reality of multi-cultural residents of Japan who were living in Nagoya' (*ibid.*). Gayle finds that by divesting themselves of national narrative and accepting the leftist assertion that women as oppressed subjects were absolved of responsibility for the actions of the prewar and wartime state, the Nagoya women's writing group 'neglected to relate the development of local capitalism to things happening in China, Manchuria, or Korea' (p. 83).

Gayle's third case study recounts how the Ehime Women's History Circle (*Ehime Josei-shi Sākuru*) recovered a narrative of women's history that established the extent to which notions of the 'good wife, wise mother' played a central role at the local level in the construction of both the prewar and the postwar mythologies of the 'traditional Japanese household'. Alluding to their recovery of a long local tradition of women's activism, Gayle observes that Ehime's 'local temple schools and *juku* often emphasized the grooming of women to become "good wives and wise mothers"' (p. 87). In recovering the narrative of women's history, the Ehime writing group soon realized that neither official prefectural histories (*ken-shi*) nor Marxist local histories (*chihō-shi*) were able to recover the history of 'modern traditions of local activism by women in educational enterprises and in labor unions' (p. 86). Indeed, writing women's history would 'require an alternative method of making local subject positions for women in Matsuyama and Ehime' (*ibid.*). In locating the local origins of women's subjectivity, Gayle argues, the Ehime writing group also developed the 'metaphor of "motherhood" as

a pre-condition to the category of woman' that claimed an ontological privilege and undermined their ability to fully encompass the multilayered contexts of the subject position of women (p. 124).

Despite the rather high cover price and editorial concerns that too often interfere with the flow of the narrative, this book goes a long way toward decentering, or perhaps multicentering, the contemporary historiography of women's history in Japan. Gayle's study shows that although local women's writing groups of the immediate postwar era established important precedents for women's history writing, they were not the direct forebears of the women's historians who emerged from among the feminist movement of the 1970s. While local history-writing groups were an important part of the postwar women's movement, Gayle has shown conclusively that the rich narratives of the lives of local women were gleaned at the cost of relocating women's subjectivity within the patrilocal Japanese household. Gayle might have gone further by expanding his observations on the feminist scholars who overlooked these local histories when constructing their own historiographies of the field. It seems that their failure to seriously consider local women's history writing begs the question as to what else might yet lie undiscovered at the margins of Japanese society.