

Japanese Feminism in East-Asian Networking

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I. Feminism as a method and the fragmentation of Asian women

Feminism in Japan needs more methodological self-awareness. It is becoming an indispensable part of social consciousness, serving to promote social justice. Yet feminism is still interpreted as a women's social movement, and especially as a women's empowerment movement: it has not yet been properly acknowledged as a method of analysis. One unfortunate result is the fact that feminist discussions are almost ignored in "mainstream" Japanese philosophy.¹ Many philosophers still think that feminist theories are aimed only at concrete empowerment for women and have no basically philosophical character. Although Butler's *Gender Trouble* is well known, there is very little advanced discussion about her anti-essentialist critique. So it was a step forward when we organized a plenary panel on gender this year at the annual conference of the Japanese Association for Philosophy.² But after I organized this panel, I realized that feminism needs to be redefined as a method that enables us to analyze phenomena better.

Japanese feminist philosophy has in the last 15 years focused on the theme of "sexual slavery," especially the issue of "comfort women."³ This discussion forces us to think about the moral implications of historical understanding. The feminist perspective has shaped the need to understand our own history in relation to other Asian countries, and especially in relation to the victims' perspective. Through this feminist discussion, the category of the other or otherness has become a vividly real conceptual framework for Japanese philosophy. The point is that abstract philosophical discussion of the other was suddenly confronted with the concrete otherness embodied in real people from other Asian countries.⁴

Although the problem of justice in any historical understanding is not at all fully discussed, at least within Japanese feminist philosophy, the highly charged issue of the "comfort women" was the turning point in rethinking the feminine solidarity of Asian women. Prior to the emergence of this issue, feminist philosophy in Japan had mostly been engaged with the national dimensions of women's issues, and especially with the conceptual framework underlying the self-understanding

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of Japanese women. It concentrated on critical re-readings from a Japanese perspective of texts from the Buddhist and Confucian traditions. But the voice of “the other” has forced Japanese feminist philosophy to look beyond domestic problems. Japanese feminist philosophy has begun to advance toward a global feminism and to think about the problems of global justice.

At the same time, Japanese feminist philosophers who have been trying to analyze the “comfort women” problem philosophically recognize the difficulty of building a trans-national Asian feminism. This difficulty is not caused by insufficient networking among Asian feminists; it lies rather in the essence of feminist method. I believe there are two reasons why it is so difficult to conceive a trans-national Asian feminism.

First, feminism is concerned mainly with the problem of social discrimination against women and an essential aim is to reveal the hidden gender hierarchy in an apparently neutral or equal system. Feminist criticism is bound to the participant internal perspective, and thus tends to work best when it targets oppressive structures in the critic’s own society. A Japanese feminist philosopher, Igeta Midori, warns of the potential affinity of feminist criticism with “the national.” She claims Japanese feminism should be necessarily connected with other Asian feminist theories in order to contextualize the national in a critical way (Aiko and Midori 2005: 272).

On the other hand, networking with other Asian feminists has brought up a basic methodological problem for Japanese feminism, namely the fragmentation of the category of “Japanese women.” Insofar as feminist criticism thematizes women’s issues within a national context, Asian women are easily identified as the visible object of discrimination and oppression. The consciousness that Asian women are suffering from the same structures of a male-dominated oppressive society could become the driving motif for trans-national feminist solidarity. Common issues like the patriarchal family tradition, Confucian ethics of obedience, and the general social subordination of women create a shared identity. However, as soon as the problem of the Japanese colonial past is brought into consideration, it becomes impossible to speak of “Asian women” as a coherent subject of feminist philosophy. Japanese women are split into the victimized and the accomplices in Japan’s colonial and militaristic past. This fragmentation is a serious problem not only for Japanese feminist philosophy, but also for Asian feminism as a larger movement. As Prof. Kim Heisook’s analysis (2007) makes clear, Korean women’s self-understanding is also split into the emancipated modern self and the postcolonial self coping with nationalism and traditionalism. But especially in Japan, where there is a general conflation between victim consciousness and guilty consciousness – forced modernization as westernization, the adoption of western colonialism, the victim of atomic bombing – this fragmentation makes the place of women very ambiguous. The “comfort women” issue has no doubt created a reflected relation of the Japanese people to their own history and historical understanding.⁵ However, ironically enough it has also resulted to an extent in the reinforcement of an anti-feminist mode of Japanese society, its so-called “gender-bashing” mode.

2. The need for a postmodernized feminism

Fragmentation occurs factually as well as methodologically. It separates Japanese women from other Asian women and isolates them. It also makes it very difficult for the Japanese feminist critique of domestic discrimination and violence against women to cohere with a trans-national Asian feminism in which we cooperate with each other and work constructively together. We need more methodological self-awareness to link Japanese feminism to a trans-national Asian feminism successfully and in so doing contribute to global feminism as well.

I would now like to consider some related philosophical problems.

- (1) Fragmentation depends partly on the notion of Asia – which is an ambiguous notion however. It is a kind of conglomeration of geometrical, cultural and historical elements and thus becomes meaningfully definable only in relation to the notion of Europe or the west. Undermined by this conceptual ambiguity, Asia as a feminist idea can all too easily become preoccupied by the conceptual framework of western feminism. Being an Asian woman means, from a western feminist perspective, being a victim of a traditional oppressive culture and a male-dominated society. It leaves no space for spontaneous critical reflection on what it is to be an Asian woman. Even a multicultural feminism is probably not capable of productive inclusion of Asian women into global feminism so long as its methodological tools are bound to the social perception of western women. Arisaka Yoko (2000), a Japanese female philosopher who teaches in the US, speaks of an alienated Asian female self that is produced by academic orientalism and the unreflective Eurocentrism of mainstream feminist discourse. An Asian woman in general, but especially a woman with a Confucian background, may be labelled by American feminist discourse as the victim of “false consciousness” or “anti-feminism,” if she adheres to the Confucian virtues: “she may thus come to feel condemned and ashamed in the eyes of ‘liberated women’” (Arisaka 2000: 225).
- (2) Gender is also a “preoccupied” concept. In mainstream feminist discussion, it is laden with negative connotations and used as a critical category as part of accusations of discriminations and injustice. Gender as a social construction distorts personal sexual identity and forces individuals to adopt “the normal pattern” of sexuality or sexual life. Needless to say, its contribution to feminist critiques of social injustice is immense. Yet it is bound to the modernist paradigm of western feminist philosophy. In the modernist paradigm, female sexuality is always construed as the second sexuality and femininity as passivity and conformity, because the modern subject is conceived as an autonomous independent and active subject deriving from the model of men in power. The negative burden of the concept of gender determines the whole range of feminine issues and forces us to ignore the role of femininity for culture.

Because of this alienation of Asian women from mainstream feminist discourse, the voice of Asian female scholars seeking an Asian feminism as a method is becoming stronger and stronger. They feel more and more keenly the limitations of the methodological tools of feminism as it has been developed by European and American women. As things now stand, the predominant methodological tools of feminist critique are actually in many cases bound to the concrete social and sexual experiences of American women, thus to their meta-narratives of discrimination, color consciousness, or the norm of heterosexuality. Although the effort to establish an Asian feminism as a method should not lead to Asian regionalism, there are for Asian feminism themes that are prior to heterosexuality and the empowerment of women. In my view, gender in the Asian context is concerned much more with the national and the historical than the social. We should relativize the received stress on the political meaning of feminism and pay more attention to the methodology of feminism. Feminism as a method of analysis seems to me the most important basis for a global feminism.

In order to avoid the alienation of the Asian female self in applying the method of feminism, it seems helpful to separate Asian feminism from two main missions of western feminism. One is the mission of political empowerment of women. The global market and the global adoption of the American model have created many social groups similar in some respects to the group of discriminated women. The feminist critique should be expanded into a detailed critical theory of similar forms of discrimination in today's society.

The other mission of western feminism is the mission of enlightenment. Needless to say, the ideas of modern western social philosophy, like autonomy, independence, or justice, are indispensable as political concepts, but as feminist ideas they lead to an inevitable alienation of Asian people who live in a society in which self-effacement, harmony with others, and thus conformity and adaptation, function as personal values.

3. Cultural self-understanding and Japanese postmodern feminism

In this context, I would like to suggest a kind of postmodern perspective on feminism, namely to start from the concept of manifold subjectivity. There is neither a simple female subject nor a coherent “essence of the female.” What is given is a variety of female experiences and gender as locally contextualized. There is no general context of gender.

Feminism should be the method for understanding this contextualized gender. There are obviously many possibilities of defining the resulting method of feminism. It is probably inappropriate to force the wide range of feminist theories into one clear methodological direction – an effort which would in any case be incompatible with a postmodern standpoint. But one promising possibility is to grasp it as a method of intersectionality, namely a method that enables us to analyze apparently separate phenomena as a complex interconnectedness.⁶ The set of gender, race, social class, and sexual orientation is the most impressive example of this intersectional connectedness, but certainly not the only one.

One of the strategies of Japanese feminism is an attempt to redefine the concept of gender and to make a precise observation of the plurality of its roles in the process of modernization. We want to see how differently gender issues are interconnected with nationalism and nation-building. Japanese modernization was an adopted modernization. Adopting western modernity meant adopting its comprehension of Asia. Asia was determined as manifesting a primitive stage of history, as Hegel identifies Asian social structures with the despotic ruling system where only one person, the ruler, is free. For Hegel Asia signifies the first stage of world history in the process of realizing the idea of freedom. The Asian stage must necessarily be overcome by the European stage as the final and perfect stage of history.

It is almost a surprising fact that many philosophers of early Japanese modernization thematized gender issues from a liberalist perspective. The need for women’s liberation from oppressive tradition based on Confucian elements was a main topic of official political and moral discourse. On close examination, even many nationalist philosophers who contributed to the introduction of nationalistic moral education emphasized the significance of women’s liberation in the modern sense.⁷ This adopted perspective on female enlightenment resulted in the nationalization of gender and the repression of Japanese erotic culture. Women’s liberation was a kind of taming of femininity. Critical studies of gender in this historical Japanese context make clear that any generalizing and simplifying perspective on gender is very dangerous. Gender issues can be used in various ways to mark the historical development of a society. Gender is not only a problem of social and cultural modernization. From the perspective of gender, Japanese women as well as men were engaged with concrete problems of modernization, especially the problem of modernization of the world of daily life. While in official political discourse femininity was identified with tradition, in the intense debate about modern fashion femininity was identified with radical modernity.

The notion of gender was an important conceptual framework that enabled the adopted modernization of Japan to be understood as a kind of substantial historical consciousness. The rest of Japanese national history in the prewar period was totally determined by the Hegelian schema of

history as a primitive early stage. Nationalists were thus eager to invent fictional superiorities for the Japanese nation, creating in the process a mythology of the nation.

Gender is therefore an essential category and should not be reduced to a mere social construction. At least in the context of Japanese modernization, it has played a central role of concrete historicity, contesting an invented national history.

Gender is a chimerical notion. It evokes a dynamic conceptual linkage between the official institutional world and the world of private life. By referring to gender issues, we are forced to rethink the relationship between the public and the private. But this does not mean that they are the same. Feminism as a method is well aware of the intersectional relationship between gender, race, class, and sexual orientation. Yet we should also be aware of the fact that it does not necessarily lead to the modern colonization of women. As previously mentioned, gender represents the perspective of the world of our private life, thus it is not social construction that assigns women to social obedience. It can be comprehended as the alternative social sphere that creates an order other than the given social hegemony.

4. The feminizing tendency of philosophy and Asian contribution to philosophy

As the closing part of my paper, I would like to discuss today's feminizing tendency of philosophy.

Contrary to the radical tone of today's feminist philosophy and its attempt to deconstruct the whole of logo-centric philosophy, there is a kind of assimilation between the male-dominated culture of philosophy and feminist approaches. Care ethics has meanwhile become one of the central issues of moral philosophy and the concept of multiple and labile subjectivity is replacing the traditional concept of the autonomous independent subject. Benhabib modifies Habermas's discourse ethics in resonance with feminist concepts such as the concern for difference, particularity, situatedness. This tendency to feminize is also related to the new valuation of Asian philosophies, because Asian cultures have been characterized as feminine cultures, thus Asian philosophies have been marginalized. Confucian philosophy is attracting more and more attention, not as an Asian philosophy but as a social philosophy of interconnectedness and Taoist ontology is a fashionable theme in Heideggerian research. People want to see in Taoism the same ontological comprehension as Heidegger's *Gelassenheit*.

This feminizing tendency means partly the inclusion of female and Asian philosophers into mainstream philosophy. Yet, as Arisaka warns, multiculturalism in philosophy easily tends to work in the schema of assimilating integration and to consider feminist approaches and Asian philosophical traditions as supplementary contributions to western philosophy. In being integrated into mainstream philosophical discourse, women as well as Asians become thus invisible. The best chance for a real multiculturalism in philosophy would open philosophical thinking to a variety of philosophical cultures. And philosophy should hold the productive tensions between various philosophical cultures.

For this purpose, much conceptual work is necessary. For example, a precise study on the structure of Asian identities would discover a conceptual core other than the modern western core of identity constituted of autonomy, consistency, and activity. From an Asian point of view, values and virtues like care, obedience, or self-restraint that are labelled feminine, and thus stigmatized as assignments to social subordination, can be revealed as having a controlling and determining power. It would be the same genealogical task that Nietzsche undertook in relation to Christian morality. In this sense, we need to en-gender the feminizing tendency in philosophy, which means to examine it critically from our concrete experience of the world of everyday life.

Notes

1. I must say not only feminist theories are widely ignored, but in general Japanese philosophers take it for granted that western philosophical discussions would be directly available for Japanese problems.
2. This panel is documented in 哲学 (Philosophy) 58 (2007), the journal of the Japanese Association for Philosophy.
3. To name some representative female philosophers on this issue, Ogoshi Aiko and Shimizu Kiyoko have been very active and founded a philosophical society.
4. As is well known, the political significance of the discussion on the issue of “comfort women” was enormous. It is very interesting that a relatively small group of Korean women could influence Japanese political culture so much.
5. Ueno Chizuko (1998), a representative feminist of Japan, is skeptical about the possibility of Asian trans-national feminism. She argues that it is the essence of the notion of gender to be indefinable. She sees the trans-national meaning of the issue of “comfort women” in the claim of Korean women against the Japanese government. But I think her argument is a rhetoric that veils the whole problem of Japanese colonialism.
6. Intersectionality is not only a method for social and cultural studies, but can also be grasped in its philosophical meaning. With regard to the philosophical meaning of intersectionality, I refer to Garry (2007). See also Bilge (2010).
7. There is a detailed analysis of this issue in Kitagawa (2007).

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