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Thinking like a man

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In 1817 Tadano Makuzu, the 55 year old widow of a retainer to the domain of Sendai in northeastern Japan, began a political treatise. Early in 1819 she sent her manuscript to the famous author Takizawa Bakin (1767-1848) with a request for assistance in getting it published. All of this was completely out of the ordinary. There were plenty of learned women around in early modern Japan, but so far no woman had ever sought recognition as a scholar through publication. Moreover, contemporary socio-political conditions were considered a hazardous subject even for male intellectuals.

Bakin initially sent her a sharp critique of her treatise and subsequently put an end to their correspondence, but the thought of her did not leave him. Six years later he wrote a laudatory essay about her. It was Bakin who claimed that she was "thinking like a man". Apart from her political treatise *Hitori kangae* (Solitary Thoughts), Makuzu left poetry and essays (often of an autobiographical nature), stories and ethnographical observations, as well as a number of letters. These writings, together with Bakin's critique and later re-appraisal, are the basis for Bettina Gramlich-Oka's thoughtful book on Makuzu.

As Gramlich-Oka rightly points out, Bakin's heart-felt statement "illustrates well the deep-seated correlation between gender and intellectual discourse" (p.4). In the Tokugawa period (1600-1868) scholarship was a male prerogative: 'to be a scholar' meant 'to (have to) think like a man'. In this book Gramlich-Oka shows us with care, erudition and a thorough understanding of early-modern Japanese society how Tadano Makuzu legitimised and defined her position as a thinking woman.

The invention of a past

Chapters one to four deal with Makuzu's "path through life" (p.13) but they do not present a straightforward life-history. Instead we have a many-layered story of identity and self-representation, image and image-building, self-aggrandisement and self-deception. Gramlich-Oka handles her sources with great acumen and manages to keep track of all the different layers. Using Makuzu's own reflections Gramlich-Oka shows how Makuzu reinvented her own past and that of her family in order to craft "her identity as the heiress of the family legacy" (p.22). She convincingly demonstrates that it is through this position of heiress to her father's intellectual legacy that Makuzu wishes to legitimise her authorship.

Makuzu was the eldest daughter of Kud Heisuke (1734-1800), physician and political advisor to the lord of the domain of Sendai, which activities he combined with a thriving private medical practice. Heisuke belonged to an active network of intellectuals who had an interest in Western sciences and the foreign world. He was the author of *Akaezo fūsetsu kō* (Thoughts on Rumours about Kamchatka, 1781-83) in which he advocated the colonisation of Kamchatka and the setting-up of trade links with Russia. Heisuke submitted this work to the all-powerful senior councilor Tanuma Okitsugu, an act that reveals political ambitions that went beyond the boundaries of his domain. After it was favourably received, he began to think that he might be assigned to the new office he had himself proposed to run the development of the colony (p.79). Things were not to be. In 1786 Tanuma fell from power and that same year saw the beginning of a series of events that led to the decline of the Kud family. Their beautiful house burnt down, their financial situation deteriorated and they were struck by disease and death. Makuzu's lonely marriage of convenience arranged in order to promote her brother's career, proved useless when this brother died in 1807 without leaving an heir. The headship of the Kud family was taken over by a nephew. Gramlich-Oka not only shows how her grief and frustration "stimulated the writer in Makuzu" (p.127), but also how her position allowed her to assume the role of "active agent of her family, despite being a daughter, not a son" (p.64). As Gramlich-Oka explains Makuzu's choice of persona is an extremely clever one: "Women were supposed to be filial to sustain the family structure. Makuzu's construction of her powerless position as a mere daughter who cannot do what a son is legitimately entitled to do bolsters her justification for becoming an unconventional type of heir. At the same time it readily conforms to official policy that promoted filial deeds" (p.148).

It is from this position of filial daughter that Makuzu approaches Bakin, who is both baffled and embarrassed. His narrative "provides an opportunity to examine how Makuzu was seen in the eyes of a contemporary" (p.143).

"Manly" matters

Chapters five to eight deal with Makuzu's treatise *Hitori kangae*. Analysing how Makuzu took on "manly" matters (p.169) is not an easy task for "how do we read a political text by someone like Makuzu?... her gender, and hence her education, deviate from those of the scholars we know" (p.169). It is here that Gramlich-Oka makes good use of Bakin's critique "in which he takes up her text laboriously, page by page, and therefore assists us with his way of reading and interpreting Makuzu's thought" (p.171). Bakin, moreover, "represents a conventional way of argument" (p.171). His voice and Gramlich-Oka's intelligent juxtaposition of other elements of contemporary socio-political discourse give Makuzu's thought context and value. Makuzu discusses gender and male-female relationships, religion and ideology, humans and the universe, human nature and morality, Japanese versus Chinese worldviews and the place of both countries within the larger world, and finally offers advice for economic reform that will benefit Japanese society as a whole. While her ideas are often idiosyncratic, they nevertheless "reflect a variety of current intellectual considerations" (p.241). Needless to say, Makuzu is much influenced by her father's thought and by the "liberal intellectualism" of his circle (p.287), but her treatise also reveals her own wide reading.

What it means to be a 'first'

Gramlich-Oka's book offers a unique insight into the intellectual discourse of the late Tokugawa period and must therefore be of interest to anyone who studies early-modern Japanese thought. However, Makuzu's life, work and ultimate failure (her treatise was neither published, nor widely circulated) also reveal in a poignant way what it means to be a 'first'. In order to position herself within a space that belonged to men, Makuzu had to think through and enunciate her stance as a woman without any help and without any role model. In her discussion of how Makuzu went about doing this Gramlich-Oka asks all the right questions and directs our attention to all the right issues, without anachronistic judgments or emotional feminism. Her book is a fine contribution to the field of gender studies and will certainly appeal to both 'Asianists' and 'non-Asianists'.

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