



On the Forest Fringes?: Environmentalism, Left Politics and Feminism in Japan

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Abstract: This article examines the inter-relationships between environmentalism, left-wing politics and feminism in Japan. Using a historical perspective, the article identifies alliances and significant areas of influence between these three social and political movements. The article concludes that there exists support networks between the three that are important to maintaining their vitality and membership. The article also finds a lack of a wider vision characterising these movements.

Key terms: environmental movement, LDP, Japanese Socialists, Seikatsu Club

Introduction

This article examines the environmental movement in Japan in the context of its historical relationship with left-wing politics and feminism. On the surface, these three social and political movements (environmentalism, left-wing politics and feminism) would seem to occupy a distinct place in Japan's social and political environments; a place distant enough away from the dominant conservative elements of Japanese politics and society to be able to label them into the category establishing a new political paradigm. This new paradigm involves 'alternative movements' that occur in waves.¹ Their main issues are to do with political participation, identity, meaning and autonomy. However, just how allied the environmental movement is with left-wing politics and feminism is a much more vexed question. As this article traces these historical relationships, it will focus on the extent to which there are clearly identifiable alliances and significant areas of influence between these three social and political movements in Japan. It argues there are some interesting support networks between them, support networks that are important for their enhancement.

Left politics

Not surprisingly, left-wing politics emerged in Japan long before there was any significant environmental movement. The emergence of left-wing politics is best seen in relation to right-wing politics. Both sides clearly began new transformations in the aftermath of the Second World War. After the war the conservative, right-wing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) began to take shape and was formally established in

¹ . R.E. Goodin, *The Politics of the Environment*, (Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, Aldershot, 1994).

1955.² The LDP has since dominated national government in Japan, apart from a very short period on the outer between August 1993 and June 1994. Local politics are overwhelmingly held by independent but conservative politicians. Although the LDP is the dominant political party at the national level, it co-ordinates the policy-making process in a three-way arrangement (*Sankaku Dômei Seiji* – Triple Alliance Politics) with the national bureaucracy and big business community.³ The ruling triumvirate was characterised by the conspicuous absence of labour union representatives, at least until the 1980s. This was because labour has been effectively bought off with increased wages after an era of strikes and protests in the late 1950s.⁴ Throughout the 1980s, Japan's political economy developed "corporatism with labour". The Association of Labour Unions (*Rengô*) are now very much involved in political bargaining.

The political parties that dominate the left side of politics in Japan include: the Japanese Communist Party (JCP - *Nihon kyôsan-tô*), which is on the extreme left, and the Socialist Democratic Party of Japan (SDP - *Nihon shakaitô*). This party was known as the Japanese Socialist Party (JSP) up until 1990. The JCP is Japan's oldest political party, having been established on July 15, 1922.⁵ It operated underground until it was legalised after World War Two. The JSP was established in November 1945 as a united front embracing the various prewar proletarian parties. Both the communist and socialist parties that existed in some form before the war, however, have consolidated since then. These parties are basically ideological groupings unlikely to ever form government in their own right in Japan. The largest supporters of Left politics are the labour unions of both white-collar and blue-collar workers. *Sohyo*, the left-wing Japan Council of Trade Unions, was a major source of support for the SDP.⁶ In this paper I will argue that these two political parties owe their continued existence, in part, to feminist politicians. Furthermore, I will show how pro-environment lobbyists perceive these two left-wing parties more favourably than the LDP.⁷

Feminism

The history of Japan's women's movements also goes back well before any significant environmental movement came on the scene. In the 1920s and early 1930s Japanese women under the Imperial system united in a struggle for suffrage. Hiratsuka Raicho⁸ (1886-1971), one of Japan's foremost suffragists, was also

² E. Reischauer and J. Jansen, *The Japanese Today: Continuity and Change*, (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Massachusetts, 1995).

³ Y. Sugimoto, *An Introduction To Japanese Society*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997).

⁴ T.J. Pempel, and Keiichi Tsunekawa, "Corporatism Without Labor? The Japanese Anomaly" in *Trends Toward Corporatist Intermediation*, edited by P.C. Schmitter and G. Lehmbruch, (Sage, Beverly Hills, 1979), pp. 231-270.

⁵ K. Kishimoto, *Politics in Modern Japan: Development and Organisation*, (Japan Echo Inc., Tokyo, 1988).

⁶ See T.J. Pempel, and Keiichi Tsunekawa.

⁷ I would like to thank the two referees who provided very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

⁸ All Japanese names appearing in the text are given in the customary East Asian form of family name followed by personal name.

perhaps the country's best-known prewar feminist leader.⁹ She was the founder of the famous Bluestockings Society (*Seitoshu*), a vehicle for feminist criticism in the early 1900s. Suffrage was finally granted to Japanese women in 1945 during the American led occupation. Female suffrage was seen as one strategy to bring about stability in war-torn Japan. Postwar Japanese feminists argue that their prewar counterparts collaborated with the male dominated authoritarian regime during Japan's wars with China and the Western powers and as a result have distanced themselves from that prewar movement.¹⁰ Consequently there has been a distinct 'new' women's movement beginning after the Second World War under a more liberal system, making connections with progressive groups such as the JCP and labour unions.¹¹ Women who collaborated with the wartime regime were part of groups such as the Greater Japan Women's Patriotic Association (*Dai-Nippon Aikoku Fujin-Kai*).¹²

Feminism in Japan has been a much more low key movement than it has been in the West, and, moreover, radical feminism, which focuses on gender politics and power relations between women and men, has not taken root in Japan.¹³ However, this does not mean it has not been successful in promoting equal opportunity for Japanese women. The open, confrontational tactics of Western women's movements quite simply does not fit the Japanese style. Furthermore, Japanese women are proud of their dominant family role and see themselves in many respects as the stronger sex. Japanese women have achieved progress for their causes by way of low-key action groups (for example, *Women's Action Group*), newsletters and journals (for example, *Kodo suru onna* and *Onna Eros*) and petitions that make their way to policy-makers.¹⁴ Many believe that, at the highest level, the women's movement is the peace movement, abhorring anything that might lead to a revival of militarism.¹⁵ Japanese feminism is pluralistic with regard to many issues emerging in the women's movement. One expression of this pluralism (emerging in the 1980s) is "eco-feminism", which asserts the special strength and integrity of every living thing.¹⁶ Feminist activists in Japan have readily joined pressure groups that have attempted to influence environmental policy, but with only limited success.

Similarly, the open, confrontational tactics of Western environmental movements, when adopted in Japan, do not receive support and sympathy from those whom it is intending to lobby, nor from the Japanese public in general. Indeed, Japanese people prefer to solve disputes through mediation and behind-the-scenes consensus building

⁹ Susan Pharr, *Political Women in Japan: The search for a Place in Political Life*, (University of California Press, Berkley, 1981).

¹⁰ S. Garon, "Women's Groups and the Japanese State: Contending Approaches to Political Integration, 1890-1945" in *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 19 No. 1, Winter 1993, (Society for Japanese Studies, University of Washington), pp. 5-41.

¹¹ AMPO-Japan Asia Quarterly Review (eds), *Voices from the Japanese Women's Movement*, (M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, 1996).

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Anne Imamura, *Urban Japanese Housewives: At Home and in the Community*, (University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1987).

¹⁴ Vera Mackie, "Feminist Politics in Japan" in *New Left Review*, No. 167, Jan-Feb 1988, (New Left Review Ltd., London), pp.53-76.

¹⁵ Tomoaki Iwai, "The Madonna Boom: Women in the Japanese Diet" in *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 19 No. 1, Winter 1993, (Society for Japanese Studies, University of Washington), pp.103-120.

¹⁶ Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (eds), *Ecofeminism*, (Spinifex, Melbourne, 1993).

(*nemawashi*) rather than through confrontation, and a number of conservation organisations in Japan are still perceived as too confrontational and emotional. Indeed, Greenpeace Japan's tactics are often perceived by mainstream Japanese society as being too radical. Greenpeace Japan is also perceived by many in the LDP to be so anti-government that it has been refused legal status as an NGO.¹⁷

In terms of linkages between Japanese women and left-wing politics, the following statistics reveal some interesting facts. Of the total number of 46 female members of the National Diet as of 1991, 30 belonged to either the SDP or the JCP.¹⁸ This means 65 percent of all national female members of Parliament in 1991 were aligned to the left side of Japanese politics. Furthermore, women make up about 40 percent of the membership of the JCP. One reason why this percentage is so high is because the JCP has trouble recruiting more men. However, it is not conclusive to claim that left-wing politics usually has a greater emphasis on egalitarianism, and, therefore, is more likely to support women's activities in the male dominated domains. Similarly, the claim that Marxism and other class-based theories tend to be sympathetic to the causes of women's inequality is highly contested. During the 1970s, the reality was that many Japanese women became disillusioned with left-wing politics that dismissed feminist demands (Mackie, 1996),¹⁹ but since then they have slowly moved their support back to the left as the LDP has been increasingly linked with bureaucratic corruption.

In 1990 there were several cases of female Diet members joining together to take environmental action that transcended party affiliation.²⁰ One occasion was the "Earth Day Proclamation" issued by 41 female Diet members. A similar male transcendence of party lines has never taken place and that shows how female politicians are more likely to sacrifice party politics for the betterment of a particular issue. In the postwar period, the socialists and communists have had a much better record than the conservatives in raising women's issues in the national assemblies, and in standing women candidates and having them elected.²¹ In 1986, Doi Takako became the first female leader of a political party in Japan with her election to the leadership of the SDP. She brought greater popularity to that party, but was unable to transform the inadequate welfare and employment policies for women because of the sheer strength of the ruling LDP. Although no longer the leader, she is still a prominent member of the Diet. The idea of socialist women in Japan is not a postwar phenomenon by any means. As Mackie (1996) points out, there is a long tradition of socialist activism in Japan on the part of women. This is clearly evident when considering the attempts by prominent women to bring a gendered perspective to the socialist movement in the early years of the twentieth century. This early development of productive relationships with political parties, mainly on the Left according to Threlfall (1996),²² is a common thread in the women's movements of many different countries.

¹⁷ Pekkanen, Robert, 2000, "Japan's New Politics: The Case of the NPO Law" in *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, Volume 26, No. 1, Winter 2000, (Society for Japanese Studies, University of Washington, Seattle), pp. 111-148.

¹⁸ See T. Iwai.

¹⁹ Vera Mackie, "Feminist Critiques of Modern Japanese Politics" in Monica Threlfall's edited *Mapping The Women's Movement*, (Verso, London, 1996), pp.260-287.

²⁰ See T. Iwai.

²¹ See Vera Mackie, 1996.

²² Monica Threlfall, (ed)., *Mapping The Women's Movement*, (Verso, London, 1996).

Environmentalism

This section provides an historical overview of the environmental movement in contemporary Japan in order to understand its main characteristics and how it emerged in relation to left-wing politics and feminism. Literature about the emergence and influence of Japanese environmental protest groups is becoming increasingly substantial and the studies tend to include aspects of the relationships between environmental politics *and* left-wing politics and feminism.²³

An environmental movement is a loose collection of citizen groups and professional organisations that usually operate outside mainstream politics. The movement's main policy objective is to attain a sustainable relationship between human beings and the natural environment. Arguably, the strength of an environmental movement reflects how a society and its political regime feel towards environmental issues. Although there are "greenish" parties in Japan, they receive few votes and none of their members has actually been elected to the Diet. Five environment-related parties (Anti-Nuclear, Greens, Earth Club, Environment Party, Life Party) were among the minor parties in the July 1989 election, and they managed to gain about 1.3 percent of all votes cast.²⁴

Conservation organisations are an integral part of the environmental movement of a country. They are non-government organisations (NGOs) representing the grassroots level and involvement in them is the main way of measuring environmental activism and participation. It is said that the size of Japan's environmental movement is small compared with the United States and Europe, both in number of members and funding.²⁵ The common theme throughout the literature is the comparative weakness of Japan's environmental movement, due largely to a lack of public support for conservation organisations, and an unwillingness by the central government to recognise their existence. However, this is slowly changing for the better.

Environmental protest groups emerged in Japan in a noticeable way in the 1960s due largely to the severe pollution problems at that time. This was a time when Japan was considered the most polluted country on the planet. These pollution problems resulted in incidences of methyl mercury and cadmium poisoning and asthma. The media coverage of these prominent cases awakened the public to the dangers of pollution and contributed to the creation of citizen movements.²⁶ These movements were not politically sponsored at the outset. The citizens were able to persuade the LDP government to make and implement far-reaching policies that reduced pollution to a considerable degree. They achieved this by increasing and diversifying the support base calling for such government action. The filing of law suits by the victims' families, the mass protests by up to 3,000 citizen groups (*shimin undô*), led by a union of scientists and citizens (*jishu koza*), and the support by the courts and the media, forced the government to institute reforms in the area of environmental

²³ See for example, McKean, 1981; Pierce et al., 1989; Holliman, 1990; Miyamoto, 1992; Suzuki, 1996; and Broadbent, 1997.

²⁴ B. Barrett and R. Therivel, *Environmental Policy and Impact Assessment in Japan*, (Routledge, London, 1991).

²⁵ S. Lauber, "Japan and International Environment Law: Economy Over Environment" in *Japanese Studies Bulletin of the Japanese Studies Association of Australia*, Volume 13, Number 3, 1993, pp.37-54.

²⁶ See M. McKean, 1981.

pollution.²⁷ The citizens, media, local politicians (including a significant number on the left side of politics) and the courts all chorused the urgency for government intervention on the pollution problem. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, disgruntled voters elected a wave of leftist progressive mayors and governors to power.²⁸ This was their rebuttal of the LDP whom they held responsible for the pollution problems caused by their economic growth policies. Likewise, many citizens' movements recruited members from the leftist labour unions, JCP and SDP.²⁹ They were also able to attract a large number of women who were apolitical. Furthermore, the JCP and SDP have a reputation for being antipublic works where those projects, such as dams, cause environmental degradation.³⁰ Often these public works are instigated by the LDP. The JCP and SDP usually draft their antipublic works parliamentary proposals in close collaboration with environmental groups.

The Japanese sociologist Iijima Nobuko has stressed the importance of women in the environment movement.³¹ This is not only due to the large number of women involved, but significantly because of their concern with nurturing children, sick family members and the elderly. Japanese women have been the foot soldiers of local movements against pollution because of their concern for the health of their families, especially for their children. Women also played a key role in the campaign against mercury poisoning by the Chisso Corporation (a fertilizer company) in Minamata (Kyushu) because most men in that region were on the Chisso payroll and therefore could not challenge the company without endangering their livelihood.³² One woman writer, Ishimure Michiko, published her first literary account of Minamata disease in 1960 in an anthology entitled *Nihon Zankoku Monogatari - Gendai Hen* (Cruel Tales of Japan, a modern edition).³³ Ishimure then went on to become increasingly active in the Minamata movement and founded the Citizens' Congress on Minamata Disease Countermeasures in 1968. A book titled *The Women of Kazanashi (Kazanashi no Onnatachi)*, written by Matsushita Ryuichi and published in 1984, depicts a sympathetic history of the fight against a cement plant in rural Kyushu. Mostly women were involved in this dogged campaign and their love of their village and their families drove them. They were eventually successful in 1973, winning a lawsuit to stop the cement plant from extending.

Women (mothers) also founded the Seikatsu Club (a producer-consumer cooperative) in the late 1960s in a reaction to the Minamata disease.³⁴ They were concerned about the impacts of food pollution on their children and they used the

²⁷ A.R. Krishnan and M. Tull, *Resource Use and Environmental Management in Japan*, (Area Research Centre, Murdoch University, Perth, January 1993).

²⁸ See Jeffrey Broadbent.

²⁹ Tsutomu Shiobara and Shinji Katagiri, "The Sociology of Social Movements in Japan" in *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, 4, No. 2, 1986, pp. 39-59.

³⁰ Minoru Kashiwagi, Japan Wetlands Action Network (JAWAN) member, interview, June 1998, Tokyo. Also see various February 1996 editions of the *Asahi Shimbun*.

³¹ Nobuko Iijima, "Environmental Sociology in Japan and Environmental Problems in Asian Societies" in *International Journal of Japanese Sociology*, No. 3, 1994, pp. 121-130.

³² See Vera Mackie, 1996.

³³ Karen Colligan-Taylor, *The Emergence of Environmental Literature in Japan*, (Garland Publishing, Inc., New York, 1990).

³⁴ See Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, AMPO-Japan Asia Quarterly Review, and the Seikatsu Homepage at <http://iisd1.iisd.ca/50comm/commdb/desc/d08.htm>

purchasing power of consumers, particularly of women, to promote the development of organic farming. The ideology of the Seikatsu Club is founded on the premise that rearing healthy children and living a healthy life will lead to changes in society. The members buy healthy food from special consumer cooperatives that number about 670. The Seikatsu Club uses the term *seikatsusha* (living person) instead of consumer. The Seikatsu Club had 170,000 members in 1989. It also encourages political action, and has had over 100 members elected into various municipal offices. Women were also particularly numerous and important in the anti-nuclear energy movement.³⁵ This was particularly evident after the Chernobyl nuclear accident in 1986 when formerly indifferent women suddenly became interested in opposing nuclear power in Japan and they acted independently of men. In a few cases, women who had been active in these movements tried to run in local, prefectural and national assembly elections, but most were not successful.

Japanese women continue to play a strong role in citizen groups that have a vested interest in protecting some local environmental issue. Many environmental groups are run out of homes by volunteer women who are not interested in partisan politics.³⁶ Gender roles in Japanese society tended to define women as outside the realm of politics and power. The main reason for this dominance by women, especially in these early environmental citizen groups, is because they had the time (mod-cons in the home such as electric washing machines helped free up their time), their husbands were too pre-occupied with commuting and working six day weeks and were only ever at home at night, and it was not appropriate for men to be seen participating in "radical" protest groups. The women's domination of the environmental movement has also contributed to many events being held as festivals, giving a sense of fun to environmental protest.³⁷

McKean (1981), in her seminal study of environmental protest and citizen politics in Japan, found rural anti-pollution activists were happy with the left and urban anti-pollution activists were cautious-to-hostile towards the left. She explained this was due to left political parties holding political power in urban areas who were perceived as one source of the pollution problem. She found the poorly educated of the activists favoured the left, while the well educated were cautious of the left. However, on the whole McKean's study concluded that most activists were in favour of the left. Moreover, they generally preferred the JCP to the Socialists as their most trustworthy allies in the fight against pollution. At the height of Japan's environmental movement in the 1960s and 1970s, conservation organisations said big business represented the greatest obstacle to their cause, followed by the LDP and then bureaucracy.³⁸ These three elements make up the triumvirate that many scholars believe still control Japanese policy-making. Conservation organisations said the Environment Agency is sympathetic to their cause, as well as the JCP, but that these are comparatively powerless actors in the policy-making process.³⁹

Even today, the JCP candidates are known to take an active interest in environmental problems; they actually come and sit down and discuss these issues

³⁵ See Nobuko Iijima.

³⁶ M. Noguchi, "The Rise of the Housewife Activist" in *Japan Quarterly*, Volume 39, Number 3, July-September 1992, Tokyo, pp.339-352.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ Robert J., Mason, "Whither Japan's Environmental Movement? An Assessment of Problems and Prospects at the National Level" in *Pacific Affairs*, Volume 72, No. 2, Summer 1999, pp. 187-207.

³⁹ *ibid.*

with environmental groups, unlike many of the other politicians.⁴⁰ A survey by the Prime Minister's Office in 1993 about social consciousness showed that most respondents rated Left parties like the JCP, SDP and the Shaminren as the most active against environmental degradation, while the LDP was rated as the most inactive.⁴¹ But no party was judged very favourably.

There are about 4,500 active grassroots conservation organisations in Japan today but most have fewer than a few hundred members.⁴² Most conservation organisations in Japan tend to be ad hoc and largely remain reactive rather than proactive in nature. They form usually in response to one or two specific and local environmental issues that they perceive as requiring urgent attention. Since most are small and with few finances, they tend to rely on volunteers. Many of these volunteers are housewives in their forties and fifties whose children have already entered secondary education.⁴³ A number of the volunteers are also elderly men. Women are in the majority as rank-and-file members, but are significantly underrepresented as leaders.⁴⁴ Therefore, conservation organisations have not proven to be a vehicle to advance gender equality to any significant extent.

Conservation organisations in Japan can be classified according to a wide range of environmental protection categories where they have a vested interest. There are a number, for example, which can be classified under nature conservation headings such as forestry protection and nature protection and others are related to consumer and recycling cooperatives. However, a lot of environmental activism in Japan can be seen as protection of the family's health and livelihood.⁴⁵ This reflects the female side of environmental politics in Japan where the focus is more on the neighbourhood and health issues rather than on national concerns.

Part of Japan's environmental movement includes the Japanese branch of international conservation organisations such as Greenpeace, World Wide Fund for Nature and Friends of the Earth (many of these professional foreign entrant groups have Japanese women in senior positions). However, their foothold in Japan is not as strong as it is in other countries. For example, Greenpeace Japan has just over 5,000 members, and is still perceived as too radical for many Japanese.⁴⁶

Conclusion

This article has examined briefly the emergence and main characteristics of three social and political movements in contemporary Japan, namely the environmental movement, the women's movement and left-wing politics. In an attempt to focus on the intersections between the three, historical evidence of the postwar period has been used. It has been argued that there are some interesting support networks between them, support networks that appear important for their enhancement. The environmental movement and left-wing politics need the continued patronage of women in order to survive in a country where most men are either too preoccupied with their jobs or too politically disinterested to be involved with these movements.

⁴⁰ See Minoru Kashiwagi.

⁴¹ Prime Ministers Office, *Shakai ishiki ni kan suru seron chōsa* [Public opinion poll concerning social consciousness], Tokyo, 1993.

⁴² See Robert Pekkanen.

⁴³ See Nobuko Iijima.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ See M. Noguchi.

⁴⁶ Greenpeace Action (in Japanese), December 1997 edition.

The women's movement has been a vehicle for their activities and for empowerment in the environmental movement (for example, striving for a healthy local environment for their families) and in left-wing political parties such as the SDP and the JCP. However, conservation organisations have not proven to be a vehicle to advance gender equality to any significant extent. Most Japanese women politicians remain on the Left side of politics. Most environmental citizen groups in Japan are dominated by women (but not in positions of leadership) because of a strong perceived link between local environment and family welfare. The pollution issues of the 1960s were an important vehicle for progressive left politics, but this relationship waned after the oil crises of the 1970s which refocused attention on the national LDP party and economic growth.

A lack of a wider vision too often characterises the environmental movement, left politics and the women's movement in Japan. One of their weaknesses is their focus on single and localised issues that in turn limits the number of supporters they attract, as well as the influence they can have. Rather than being so parochial, it is thought the various environment and women's groups, at least, need to form coalitions with similar minded groups, establish an overall vision and thus see if they can move inward from the fringes towards the central core where the decisions on Japan's future are made. The three are characterised by social movement politics, that is, they tend to be ad hoc, parochial and unwilling or unable to form national alliances. However, it has to be said this is truer of the 'younger' environmental movement than the other two.

Note on the author: Mike Danaher lectures in Asian and Environmental History and Japanese language at Central Queensland University. He is nearing completion of his doctorate in the field of Japanese environmental politics. Mike has published a number of articles in that area including a chapter titled "Crusaders of the Lost Archipelago: The Changing Relationship between Environmental NGOs and Government in Japan", in Javed Maswood, Jeff Graham and Hideaki Miyajima (eds), *Japan: Change and Continuity* (London: Curzon Press, 2002).