Japanese Anarcha-Feminism through the *Seitō* Literary Magazine

大阪ニコラス / Nicholas Osaka

The Japanese feminist literary magazine *Seitō* was a revolutionary celebration of femininity and living as woman, in publication over a period of five years with issues spanning from 1911 to 1916. While in distribution, the publication was home to the works of over 110 contributors, with writings spanning poetry, translated Western literature, philosophy, political critique, and short stories. For this, its associated society (also called *Seitō*) was bathed in controversies by the Japanese public, and eventually shut down by the Imperial government of Japan. Over the life of the magazine, editors Hiratsuka Raichō[1] and Itō Noe published 52 issues and ushered in the Japanese women's rights movement. To this day, both editors remain key feminist figures and the many contributors are cemented in history as truly monumental and progressive thinkers.

I present this paper with gratitude to Marquette University's Graduate Philosophy Conference on Hidden Figures for their efforts in highlighting those who have been and continue to be marginalized by and in this profession. In the spirit of the conference theme, I write this paper as a way of honoring the feminists who contributed to the *Seitō* literary magazine. In addition, I write this in honoring the many feminists who have been excluded from the profession of philosophy in one way or another. All of us are expected to demonstrate proficiency in the philosophical canon and to situate our

[1] Raichō is her chosen pen name (lit. "thunderbird"), and will be used interchangeably with her surname in this paper.

thinking within the context of, or in some way connected to, thinkers like Hegel, Kant, Descartes, and Heidegger. Feminist philosophy is not a compulsory part of philosophical training, and the work in this area is not given the rightful respect as *real philosophy* that it deserves. Feminist philosophy is often positioned as a margin note to the canon, despite the continuous line of feminist thinking in the history of philosophy. This is doubly true for any Black, Indigenous, Latina/x, Asian, Queer, or additional marginalized feminist philosophies.[2] In this way, the task of highlighting the hidden figures of philosophy falls to all of us who are committed to robust philosophical inquiry.

I present this paper in three parts. First, I examine the cultural background of the Meiji era and the ways in which *Seitō* constituted a liberatory opposition to the oppressive structures of Imperial Japan. Second, I discuss the two specific eras in the publication's history: The first from 1911 to 1915 where Hiratsuka Raichō served as editor, and the second from 1915 to 1916 where Itō Noe served as editor. These two eras have many commonalities, yet remain distinct for their editorial flavors. Finally, I argue that the women of *Seitō* leave us a legacy of Japanese anarcha-feminism that we ought to engage with, in particular as illustrative of the power of philosophy when read as starting from lived experience.

[2] cf. Hames-García, "Queer Theory Revisited"

Meiji Japan and the Soil for *Seitō*

To sufficiently encapsulate the cultural and legal setting out of which Raichō established *Seitō*, it is important to understand the historical circumstances as they relate to the agency of women and women's legal rights in Japan. In 1232 the Jōei code was established which was an administrative set of laws that governed the shōgun's court. While the code only applied to the upper class of Japanese society, it was "fairly liberal toward women," with marriage rights, equal property and inheritance rights, and some rights in/to divorce.[3] However, these rights were not extended to the peasant class. Over the course of centuries, this somewhat-less-unequal social and legal status for the women of the ruling class was eroded, and by the seventeenth century patriarchal laws for all social castes were in full effect. Marriage furthered its grip as the arbiter of life for women, as divorce was nearly impossible for women to initiate. The only escape from abusive marriage was through refuge in one of very few Zen Buddhist temples where women could become nuns.[4] This tight control over marriage in particular is a result of the feudal family house. In such family houses, womanhood was integral to the maintenance of lineage (and therefore the continuation of generational land ownership).[5]

The end of the Tokugawa Shōgunate was marked by the ascension of Emperor Meiji to the Chrysanthemum Throne in 1868,[6] which ushered in the Meiji era and its associated

[3]Robins-Mowry, *The Hidden Sun: Women of Modern Japan*, 27.

[4]Robins-Mowry, 27.

[5]Suzuki, "Hiratsuka's "Editor's Introduction to the First Issue of Seito"," 185.

[6]Robins-Mowry, *The Hidden Sun: Women of Modern Japan*, 313.

Meiji Restoration. This period from 1868 to 1912 is known for its intense modernization efforts and furthering Japan's re-entry into the international world. As part of these modernization efforts, primary public education became a major component of public policy. At the beginning of the Meiji era, roughly "40 percent of boys and 10 percent of girls" attended some form of primary education; however, this rate of education was significantly lower for lower classes. Over the Meiji era, the rate of primary education increased steadily, and by 1912 the rate reached above 95 percent for both girls and boys.[7] Women's colleges were established, yet the contents of higher education for women were intentionally behind or lower quality to that of higher education for men. These colleges were controversial, and within the Meiji government there was much opposition to government-sponsored institutions.[8]

Following two wars within a decade at the turn of the 20th century and the gears of capitalism fueling the Japanese Empire's occupation of both China and Korea, nationalism gained ideological prominence in the Japanese consciousness. Characteristically, this nationalism brought with it patriarchal social and legislative changes, which led to the prohibition on certain political activity and participation by women. The educational reforms established in the early Meiji era were adjusted to educating women to be 'good wives and wise mothers:' the concept of *ryōsai kenbo* (良妻賢母).[9] Further codifying patriarchy, the Civil Code of 1898 formally established the *ie* (lit. household), or family

[7]Robins-Mowry, *The Hidden Sun: Women of Modern Japan*, 40.

[8]Robins-Mowry, 40-41.

[9]Suzuki, "Hiratsuka's "Editor's Introduction to the First Issue of Seito"," 186-187.

unit, as the authority over the individual members.[10] In this, womanhood was organized in a legally subordinate position. This turn away from the marginal semblance of liberal principles to nationalism is the soil in which Raichō penned the editor's introduction to the first issue of *Seitō*.

The Hiratsuka Raichō (平塚らいちょう) Era

Hiratsuka Raichō attended Japan Women's University (日本女子大学)in the university's early days and she graduated in 1906 as a member of the third graduating class.[11] Five years after graduation at the age of 25, she started *Seitō* in 1911. In the society's first meeting, it was determined that Raichõ would serve as "publisher, editor, and representative of *Seitō*."[12] It was at the same meeting that the women of *Seitō* named themselves: "Bluestocking," after the eighteenth century English women's society of the same name. Most of *Seitō*'s membership were graduates of Japan Women's University, and as a result their intellectual interests are in part shaped by their education at the university.

Raicho herself was heavily influenced by Zen buddhism, Western philosophy, and practical ethics. She took courses on the history of Western thought, Western history, the history of Japan, ethics, practical ethics, and law.[13] Over time, she grew disillusioned

[10]Lowy, *The Japanese "New Woman": Images of Gender and Modernity*, 4.

[11]Hiratsuka, *In the Beginning, Woman Was the Sun: The Autobiography of a Japanese Feminist*, 66.

[12]Hiratsuka, 145.

[13]Hiratsuka, 69-70.

with the school experience. One professor in particular, Naruse Jinzo (who was in fact the founder of the school), was a lecturer on practical ethics and his views were "regarded as the 'voice of God,'" among the students.[14] Raicho saw how the chatter among students would change depending on the contents of Naruse's lecture; she saw a kind of narrow-minded dogmatism and blind trust in educators. She would later criticize Naruse in her writings. By the end of her time at the university, she had become a dedicated practitioner of Zen Buddhism in the Rinzai school, where she had found a certain peace that the Christian faith (the university was heavily influenced by Christianity) did not give her.[15]

In the first issue of *Seitō*, in the early autumn of 1911, Raichō began the editors introduction with the following words:

> In the beginning, Woman was truly the Sun. An authentic person.
> Now, Woman is the Moon. Depending on another, reflecting another's light, she is the moon whose face is ill and wan.
> Now, it is here that *Seitō* has been born.
> Made by the brains and hands of today's Japanese women, *Seitō* has been born.[16]

Her writing in this piece is self-reflective, with scenes from daily life expressed in words. The language moves between the forceful nature of a manifesto and more subtle poetics. In the complete fifteen page piece, Raichō critiques the naturalization of gendered differences,

[14]Hiratsuka, *In the Beginning, Woman Was the Sun: The Autobiography of a Japanese Feminist*, 74.

[15]Hiratsuka, *In the Beginning, Woman Was the Sun: The Autobiography of a Japanese Feminist*, 86; Bardsley, *The Bluestockings of Japan: New Woman Essays and Fiction from Seitō, 1911-16*, 81-82.

[16]Hiratsuka, "In the Beginning, Woman Was the Sun," 37.

arguing that "Genius is neither male nor female."[17] With the essay centering the realization of one's hidden Genius, Raichō advocates for women to turn to individuality, not to others, for liberation. She even says that the hidden Genius resides in one's self, and it cannot be sought through the teachings of Zen Buddhism or Christianity.[18]

During Raichō's time as editor, two publications are of particular interest . In the February 1913 issue, Fukuda Hideko rejects the framing of women's rights as the "Woman Question."[19] She argues that women's liberation must come from *absolute* liberation for all humans. Fukuda sees the framing of equal rights as misunderstanding the struggle. For her, the struggle is not simply a "relativistic movement," (what she calls the rights-based movements) but rather one of liberation for all that subverts the very framework by which the rights-based movements sought to enact change.[20] In her piece, Fukuda sees women's liberation as also the path for men's liberation, and she specifically calls for class warfare and the re-arrangement of family as an institution (although she does not call for the abolition of the family).[21] For this reason, the entire issue was banned by government censors.

In the April 1913 issue, Raichō herself discusses marriage. She opens her piece by lamenting on the gossip surrounding her marital status and further explains that she does

[17]Bardsley, *The Bluestockings of Japan: New Woman Essays and Fiction from Seitō, 1911-16*, 95.

[18]Bardsley, 101.

[19]Bardsley, 43.

[20]Bardsley, 43.

[21]Fukuda, "The Solution to the Woman Question."

not advocate for all women to remain single. Instead, she positions marriage as a political question for Japanese women. Raichō argues that marriage is an economically binding arrangement and socially enforced through the *ryōsai kenbo* concept of the role of women in marriage. Furthermore, she thinks that this is not inherently true of marriage but is instead a result of the social climate of Japan. She writes: "We do not wish to marry so long as it means submitting to this kind of absurd, illogical system. We do not wish to become wives."[22] There were members of *Seitō* who were married, so it is unclear as to whether Raichō was referring to the group as a whole or those who were unmarried.

While Raichō later married a man, it may be inaccurate to characterize her as *straight*. In understanding the historical and cultural differences in categories of sexual orientation, it can be argued that the kind of love shared between Raichō and Otake Kōkichi was queer in nature or kind. Kōkichi commonly wore a man's *kimono*, and is described in Raichō's autobiography as having strong feelings directed towards the young editor.[23] Undeniably, the members of *Seitō* blurred the lines between gender roles, and given that sexuality was (and remains to be) strictly tied to gender (and gender roles) in Japan, it would be dubious to call many of their members *straight*. Therefore, it is perhaps prudent to call in ideas of queerness as contesting binaries and categorization, and to instead read these women as living in a continuum of gender and sexuality.[24]

[22]Bardsley, *The Bluestockings of Japan: New Woman Essays and Fiction from Seitō, 1911-16*, 106-107.

[23]Hiratsuka, *In the Beginning, Woman Was the Sun: The Autobiography of a Japanese Feminist*, 175-176.

[24]cf. Wu, "Performing Gender along the Lesbian Continuum"

The Itō Noe (伊藤 野枝) Era

Itō Noe took on editorial duties beginning in November 1914 before becoming the sole editor in January 1915 at 20 years of age.[25] Itō steered the magazine for fourteen months up until February 1916, when the publication would be forced to end production due to finances and lack of resources. The last editor of *Seitō* had joined the group in its second year of publication, a period of time when the magazine was routinely criticized in the Tokyo-area newspapers for the personalities of its members. Raichō handed her the responsibilities of editor with reservation—many of the members were doubtful of Itō's capabilities at such a young age and her editor's notes in the issues that followed are framed with apologies for late printing and pleas for assistance in soliciting manuscripts.

In her time as editor, Itō brought the magazine into a more radical position through her inclusion of anarchist literature. This in no small part was a factor in the end of the publication: As more radical political pieces were published, more issues were banned by the censors, and *Seitō* had fewer resources to continue their work. Itō held issue with the manner in which publication for the magazine had been handled in the past, as she saw it to be mostly restricted to contributions from prominent authors. Indeed, only members were allowed to submit. Coupling this with the membership fee, Itō viewed the magazine to be imposing barriers of access. In a notable letter to the readers, Itō wrote her 'Anti-Manifesto' to be included as the editor's note in the January 1916 issue. In this note, she reminds critical readers that she warned them that she "would abolish all its rules and

[25]Bardsley, *The Bluestockings of Japan: New Woman Essays and Fiction from Seitō, 1911-16*, 262-263.

that it would have 'no regulations, no policy, no ideology, and no philosophy,"' and that "[the *Seitō*] magazine has absolutely no merit other than to serve as a seedbed."[26]

Under the leadership of young Itō, the magazine published more controversial pieces, especially on sex work and abortion. In the June 1915 issue, a piece by Yasuda Satsuki led to the censorship of the issue. In the piece, entitled "To My Lover from a Woman in Prison," Yasuda presents the reader with a complex narrative about abortion, which sparked debate among the *Seitō* group. Yasuda frames the question of abortion as one of state power and interference in pregnancy. The resulting debate was largely focused on one's relationship to their fetus, and secondarily to future "economic, spiritual, and psychological well-being of both."[27] In the piece, Yasuda argues via narrative for a woman's radical right to bodily autonomy. For her, the issue around abortion is less about whether it is right or not to abort a fetus, but rather the *agency* one has to abortion and role of the state in one's access to abortion. This kind of political outlook on abortion was dangerous to the Japanese state, as Yasuda's argument articulates a fundamental hostility to framing abortion as an issue that involves the state in any capacity. For this reason, the state censors banned the issue.

[26]Itō, "Anti-Manifesto: To All of You, My Readers"; Bardsley, *The Bluestockings of Japan: New Woman Essays and Fiction from Seitō, 1911-16*, 271-272.

[27]Bardsley, *The Bluestockings of Japan: New Woman Essays and Fiction from Seitō, 1911-16*, 61.

The Legacy of *Seitō*

Under Itō, the magazine truly became what we know it as today: a political publication by and for all women. It was clear that Itō's ambition and ideas were set to propel her mission of liberation in Japan forward. In a not uncommon story for revolutionaries, her life was cut short at the age of 27 by the hands of state-affiliated military police. With her death, the end of the *Seitō* era of Japanese feminism was evident. The women of *Seitō* would still remain politically active, but they would do so either independently or through other organizations.

While not the subject of this paper, I argue that it is prudent to view the women of *Seitō* as part of the larger philosophical project that Kyoto School-associated thinkers sought to engage with. In the same year that the first issue of *Seitō* was published, so too was Nishida Kitarō's *An Inquiry into the Good*. Nishida, like Raichō, was deeply influenced by both Western and Zen Buddhist philosophy. Nishida's appointment at Kyoto University along with two other Japanese philosophers brought about the Kyoto School of thought, known for their inter-cultural (re)interpretations and negotiations between and within traditionally Western and Japanese dialogues. Often placed in intellectual proximity to the Kyoto School, Watsuji Tetsurō's work on ethics and identity has been analyzed in conversation with feminist thought by contemporary thinkers like Erin McCarthy.[28] In future discussion, positioning Watsuji's views in dialogue with the literature of *Seitō*

[28]See McCarthy, *Ethics Embodied: Rethinking Selfhood through Continental, Japanese, and Feminist Philosophies*

ought to provide interesting and fruitful ideas.

The rhetorical advancement and methodological toolkit that the *Seitō* group offered to Japan is still of use today. In contemporary Japan, conservative social expectations around gender and femininity are persistent. Because of this, the Japanese feminist struggle continues to call in the activism of *Seitō* and other feminist groups of the early twentieth century. By turning to our intellectual and activist lineage, we can draw out the radical ideas that remain essential today in articulating a feminist future. To this end, the strategies of *Seitō* ought to prove useful in understanding philosophy as something that originates and returns to our lived experiences. The literature of the *Seitō* magazine was firmly rooted in practical philosophy—the kind of philosophy that is instrumentalized to bring about meaningful change. Naming *Seitō* as a philosophical publication is important. In doing so, "doing" philosophy becomes an embodied experience involving one's whole self—a philosophy deeply involved in the blood and tears of struggle and capable of reaching through oppression into liberation.

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