CREATING SOCIALIST WOMEN IN JAPAN, 1900-1937

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ABSTRACT

"Creating Socialist Women in Japan: 1900-1937"

In late 19th century and early 20th century Japan, women were primarily constructed as imperial subjects, whose major contribution to the nation-state was as "good wives and wise mothers". The development of Japanese capitalism also, however, provided the conditions for the emergence of the political discourse of liberalism, and the subsequent development of various strands of socialist and feminist thought.

Women were active in socialist groups from the 1900s. Women also participated in autonomous socialist women's organizations and contributed to journals directed at socialist women. The first of the major labour organizations was established in 1912, and factional splits in the 1920s resulted in the existence of several different union federations. Socialist women tried to reach working women through the women's departments of these union federations and the left-wing political parties which were established after 1925.

In this thesis I examine selected writings of socialist women in Japan between 1900 and 1937. Autobiographical texts, political writings, manifestos, pamphlets, poetry and fictional writings can all tell us something about women as political actors in early twentieth century Japan. In these writings, the relationship between socialism and feminism was worked out through discussion of marriage and the family, the sexual division of labour, women and work, women and politics; and through debates with liberal and anarchist feminists. These discussions, however, were carried out in a context where the dominant representations of women were as wives, mothers, and imperial subjects, and where politics was often defined in terms of nationalist goals. Socialist women attempted to find a speaking position through negotiation of the contradictory identities of "wife", "mother", "worker" and "activist".

It is from this perspective that I explore the speaking positions available to socialist women in early twentieth century Japan, the discursive strategies employed in their writings, and the political strategies they envisaged for changing their society. I argue that the creation of "socialist women" involved not only the creation of organizations to mobilize women, but also involved the creation of a new subjectivity for women, which could include the imagination of the possibilities for political action.