Moga, Factory Girls, Mothers, and Wives: What Did It Mean to Be a Modern Woman in Japan during the Meiji and Taishō Periods?

Authors: Rebecca Hong, Lick-Wilmerding High School, San Francisco, California
Catherine Mein, Ballard High School, Huxley, Iowa
Johanna Wintergerst, Centaurus High School, Lafayette, Colorado

Introduction

During the Meiji and Taishō periods, from 1868 to 1926, Japan underwent deep change and modernization. As with any rapid societal change, modernization of the Japanese nation and society was a complex process. Modernization included, but was not limited to, rapid industrial growth, new governmental and economic structures, transformation of economic roles and societal structures, and the forging of a national identity. Throughout, the process involved the search for and evolution of new ideas and new models of organization and function. Japan looked to some Western nations, who had embarked on modernization earlier in the 19th century, and adapted promising models, blending those with ideas and structures that would preserve the "Japaneseness" of Japan.

This lesson considers the increasingly complex and differentiated society that emerged in the modern Japan of the late 1800s-early 20th century, roughly the late Meiji (1880s-1911) and Taishō (1911-1926) periods. This lesson considers this emerging society through a case study of women's roles. Students undertake close reading of visual and written texts by and about women in late 19th- and early 20th-century Japan to begin to formulate a complex definition of what it meant to be a "modern woman" at this time. In so doing, they consider what Japanese women's experiences tell us more broadly about modern Japanese society at the time.

The lesson opens with discussion of women in this time period, drawing from students' prior knowledge and an advance reading assignment. To add to their knowledge, students then examine two images of women from this time period and begin to recognize the varied roles and responsibilities for Japanese women in the modern society of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As a next step, students consider excerpts of the Meiji Civil Code of 1888, a state document that formalized the roles and responsibilities of men, women, and families in the new nation under construction during the Meiji Period.

With this foundation, students engage in the main activity of the lesson, in which they work in small groups to undertake a critical reading of a collection of visual and text documents and then use their historical imaginations to consider the variance in the descriptions and experiences of women in Meiji and Taishō Japan. Each student chooses a character and writes a brief biography based on either textual or visual cues offered by the document collection. The lesson culminates in a synthesizing activity in which students mingle with each other to learn about the deep variations in women's voices: a "mocktail party" of women followed by a discussion of how women's roles can inform students of the larger complexity of modern Japan.

Grade Level/Subject Area: Grades 11-12/World History, Global History, Asian Studies

Time Required: 2 class periods

Materials

For Students:

Reading: "The Taishō Era: When Modernity Ruled Japan's Masses," by Michael Hoffman, *Japan Times RSS* (July 29, 2012). Access this reading directly at http://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2012/07/29/general/the-taisho-era-when-modernity-ruled-japans-masses/#.VOTctfnF98F
Handout 1: The Meiji Civil Code Addresses the Roles of Women
Handout 2: Writings by and about Women in Modern Japan
PowerPoint: Images of Women in Modern Japan
Sticky notes or tape

For Teachers:

Access to a computer with a projector and/or a computer with a color printer
Optional: 4-5 computers for group work

Objectives: At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be better able to:

1. Understand transformations in the roles of women and Japanese society generally during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
2. Discuss what it meant to be a "modern" woman in the Japan of this period.
3. Recognize the diversity and complexity of the roles of women in late 19th- and early 20th-century Japan.
4. Identify alternative visions within society through looking at female roles.
5. Recognize conflicting messages of modernity within modern Japanese society through women's experiences.
6. Practice historical empathy through historical imagination.
7. Develop and apply skills of reading visual sources for historical information.

Essential Questions

- What did it mean to be a modern woman in Japan during the Meiji and Taishō Periods?
- What do modern Japanese women's experiences tell us about the impact of rapid modernization on Japan and its people?
- What do modern Japanese women's experiences tell us about changes in Japanese culture and society, generally, of the early 20th century (circa 1900-1930)?

Teacher Background

From Meiji to Taishō. In 1888, the Japanese government under the Meiji emperor adopted its first written Western-style constitution. The Constitution was modeled after the Prussian constitution of the time, providing for a government in which authority emanated from a

hereditary emperor whose government ruled for the people. In seeking to define the role of the people, the Meiji Constitution outlined the responsibilities of subjects to the emperor and nation, with discussion focused on duties rather than rights. The promulgation of a written constitution was also orchestrated as part of a massive effort to modernize the nation, drawing upon Western ideas of liberalism and social modernization. Such renovations, Japan's leaders understood, would help to give it international standing in the world of increasingly democratizing modern states.

Meiji reforms included laws that led to social equalization through such means as land distribution and class restructuring and, some would say, elimination. But they also included laws that clearly limited the rights of individuals in protection of government authority, including the Law on Assembly and Political Association of 1889, later known as Article 5 of the Peace Police Law of 1890. These laws, and indeed the range of control indicated by their passing, marked the strength of the Meiji government and the ultimate ongoing legitimacy of the imperial institution.

Those within the government of the imperial state were not the only ones with access to new ideas about democracy and modernization: Japanese intellectuals and activists were also examining liberal social and political ideologies from the West and writing about reform and political participation. By the end of the Meiji period in the early 1900s, democratic ideals were gaining in popularity among the Japanese people. Certain social and economic groups pushed for greater democratic participation in the government, while other groups demanded the government respond to social and economic problems. During the Taishō Period, 1912-1926, advocates for social, economic, and political reforms were loud enough to characterize the period: historians identify this democratic push as "Taishō democracy" and "imperial democracy."

The term "Taishō democracy" bears further examination. During the Taishō era, as mentioned, there was a flowering of democratic activity, including male suffrage, populist engagement on specific reform efforts for labor, and women's rights. Dissatisfaction with government found increasing expression in the form of writing, artistic production, and political activism broadly speaking. The Taishō period was marked by a weak imperial ruler. In this setting, democratic ideas gained traction and voice. Increasingly, people and politicians called for change and rallied for greater democracy. Examples of these efforts include the Tokyo riot in Hibiya Park in 1905, the Rice Riots of 1918, and the push for the Universal Male Suffrage Law in 1925.

Because this burst of activity took place under an imperial system of government, historians have come to refer to the period as marked by "imperial democracy." Though that term may seem oxymoronic, in the context of Japan, the democratic flourishing was at least in part a programmatic restructuring of society guided by the imperial government of Japan in its effort to become a "modern state." Though all of the consequences of this restructuring were not necessarily anticipated, to imply that democracy arose against the imperial state would not capture the historical complexity of Taishō Japan.

Women's Roles in a Changing Modern Japan. Looking closely at women's roles in Japan during this time can reveal the complexity of the relationship between the imperial state and its people. As reform and modernization moved through society, women's roles, particularly, were sometimes co-opted by the government to further the growth and strength of the state, while at

the same time the images of the *modan gaaru* or *moga* ("modern girl") were popularized to show Japan's entry into the modern world. This modern image caused problems, however, as fear of this new female construct and the roles that it entailed caused the rise of a traditional backswing for and towards women.

The late Meiji period was the time of the "Good wife, wise mother," advocated by the government to strengthen the social fabric of the state along traditional lines. However, given the rapid industrialization and new social structures implemented under the Meiji Restoration, Japan was experiencing a great diversification of social and cultural identities. Socially, the Taishō Period is often remembered as the so-called "jazz age" of Japan. Both influenced by and similar to the Roaring Age of innovation and excitement of the 1920s in the United States, the period saw a proliferation of social expression through magazines, movies, cafe and urban culture. This was the period of the *moga* who was, in essence, the Japanese flapper: a sexually liberated, urban consumer who symbolized a new freedom of the individual and liberation of that individual from the past.

While some in the state insisted that modern and imperial could continue hand in hand, the apparent disagreement was evident in the varying role and portrayals of women. As the Taishō period came to an end, in 1925 the Universal Law of Male Suffrage was passed (notably barring women from voting). Tension regarding the roles of women would continue to exemplify an aspect of Japan's ongoing complex experience of modernity.

Preparing to Teach the Lesson

1. Access the Reading at http://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2012/07/29/general/the-taisho-era-when-modernity-ruled-japans-masses/#.VOTctfnF98F to make sure the link is live and to gain a broad overview of women and society during the early 1900s, the Taishō period.
2. If students will have access to the internet and can get links, post the links to all handouts and the PowerPoint so students will be able to access these directly at their computers. Also secure access to 4-5 computers (one per group) in order for students to examine the online materials.

   Or

   If students will not have access to the Internet and cannot access online resources directly, print out copies of the Reading and distribute to students as a pre-reading prior to Day One of the lesson. Also print out Handout 1 and the images in the PowerPoint. Finally, print five copies, one for each group, of Handout 2.

Lesson Plan: Step-by-Step Procedure

Prior to Beginning the Lesson

1. As homework, assign the Reading, an overview essay on society and culture by Michael Hoffman entitled "The Taishō Era: When Modernity Ruled Japan's Masses."
2. As a homework response assignment or brief in-class discussion, ask students to discuss the following question: What were "some of the ways" it meant to be modern during this time, particularly for women?

Day 1

1. As a warm-up, ask students to discuss with the person next to them, "What were some of the ways it meant to be modern for women during this time?" Remind them to refer to the Hoffman reading done as homework.
2. Ask two or three pairs to share their responses. Then project the first and second slides (in succession) from the PowerPoint. For each, ask students to consider the lesson's essential question: What did it mean to be a woman in modern Japan? Have the students comment on the similarities and differences between the two images. Ask: Why were the women in the images presented in those ways? Be sure students discuss why one woman is presented in kimono, the traditional dress in Japan, and the other woman is presented in clothes that might be seen in many places around the world at that time.

   To discourage students from creating stereotypes and to develop their reading skills, ask them to consider various aspects of the images that are both visible and more subtle. For example, in these images, it is important to consider to whom the image was directed. What are the images advertising, either directly or indirectly? Who would be the audience, or "consumers" for these images? What message was being sent to each audience? How might that affect the way the women are pictured? (*Suggested responses: The woman in kimono is in an advertisement for a traditional Japanese drink. The advertisers may have been appealing to consumers based on the Japanese-ness of their product and thus needed a woman in kimono to maintain that theme of Japanese-ness, as well as the preservation of tradition during a time of change. The poster, on the other hand, was promoting safety in a modern industrial setting.*)
3. Have students comment on how the juxtaposition of these two images, and the products they represented, suggest a tension between being "Japanese" and being "modern." Remember that this discussion is meant to set the stage for an ongoing discussion of what it meant to be modern in Japan in the early 20th century. Consequently, this discussion should raise more questions than it answers. As a wrap-up to this discussion, ask students to look for ways that women could be "Japanese" and "modern."
4. Put students in groups of three or four and give each student a copy of Handout 1, which presents excerpts from the Meiji Civil Code. Have students read the document and discuss in their groups the following questions: What did it mean to be a woman in modern Japan at this time, according to this document? What limits did this document place on women's lives? What does this document suggest about the expectations for women in Japanese society in the late 1800s? (*Suggested responses: Women were classified the same as incompetent people, suggesting that women were not believed to be capable of making economic or political decisions for themselves. While both men and women could call for a divorce, only women's infidelity was cause for a divorce. This codified a double standard in society whereby women's social and familial roles were far more limited than men's. These laws suggest that women were meant to be controlled by the family and were not expected to take significant economic roles outside of the home.*)
5. Tell students that they will continue to work in their groups using Handout 2 and the PowerPoint. Handout 2 includes several text documents, while the PowerPoint includes a

variety of images of women in the early 20th century (1900-1930s). Each group should get several images and one or two of the text documents. Note: Alert students that on Handout 2, the text documents, Japanese names appear in Japanese name order, with family name followed by given name.

For the purposes of the mocktail party on Day 2, having different groups analyze a different set of images and text documents will be advantageous. A more limited selection of images may be used, depending on the level of the students. If a more limited selection is chosen, adjust the directions for the mocktail activity accordingly.

6. Explain to the students that as they analyze and discuss the visual and written documents in their groups, their goal will be to focus on the lesson question: What did it mean to be a woman in Japan in the early 20th century? Specific questions to guide their analyses and discussion in preparation for the mocktail party are as follows. These may be projected or written on the board to guide students through the activity.
   - As you read and study the resources, highlight specific details in the images or passages of the text that help you answer the essential question.
   - Note details across images that seem to indicate a variety of roles, or roles in tension, such as we saw in the two advertisements we first looked at.
   - Based on the information provided, what was each woman's experience in the early 20th century?
   - How might each woman react to reading the text of the Meiji Civil Code?

Day 2

1. Have students reassemble in their groups and ask each group to share briefly their list of details from the previous day. Particularly ask students what conclusions they could draw about being a woman in Japan in the early 20th century. Students should be able to identify some differences based on class, particularly between some of the images and some of the text documents.
2. Next, have each student choose a woman from either the images or the text documents. Each student should write two paragraphs from the perspective of this chosen woman, answering the question: What did it mean to be a woman in Japan in the early 20th century? Students should write in the form of a journal (i.e., in first person). For the mocktail party, each student will take on the persona of the woman chosen, which is why this exercise should be written in first-person journal style, rather than as a third-person biography.
3. Using a sticky note and/or tape, each student should create a nametag with the name of his/her woman. For the mocktail party, students should mingle with their classmates and "meet" for brief (two-minute) discussions. The discussions should focus on the central question, as well as comparisons between the women and their lives. The teacher may need to call for periods of mingling and meeting to facilitate the mocktail party.

   An alternative "speed-dating" structure would be to have the students seated in two rows facing each other. Each pair would have two minutes to introduce themselves and share their experiences as women in modern Japan. After two minutes, one row of students should shift to the next seat.

4. Depending on time, the mocktail party should last 15-20 minutes. If a more limited selection of images and documents was used on Day One, the students may need to be put into groups for the mocktail or speed-dating to better insure that they have an opportunity to talk to a variety of "women." One possibility would be to have each group of students pair with another group of students for the mocktail party and only mingle with that group.
5. After students settle back in their seats, debrief the students on what they learned about the questions: What did it mean to be a woman in Japan in the early 20th century? What do Japanese women's experiences from this period tell us about modern Japan of the early 20th century? (*Some of the common features should include the importance of the family and the way that family needs could take precedence over individual needs, the ability of women to make choices for their own lives, and women's roles in portraying a "modern" Japan*.)

Assessment

Students' responses in the final discussion can be used to assess learning. In addition, students might be asked to complete an exit ticket on which they write three to four sentences on the question: What do Japanese women's experiences from this period tell us about modern Japan of the early 20th century?

Standards Alignment

Common Core (http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/):

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.6: Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.9: Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

National Standards for World History (http://www.nchs.ucla.edu/history-standards/world-history-content-standards):

Era 7, An Age of Revolutions, 1750-1914, Standard 5: Patterns of global change in the era of Western military and economic dominance, 1800-1914.

Standard 5D: The student understands transformations in South, Southeast and East Asia in the era of the "new imperialism."

Grades 7-12: The student is able to analyze Japan's rapid industrialization, technological advancement, and national integration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. [Formulate historical questions]

Era 8, A Half-Century of Crisis and Achievement, 1900-1945, Standard 1: Reform, revolution, and social change in the world economy of the early century.

Standard 1A: The student understands the world industrial economy emerging in the early 20th century.

Grades 7-12: The student is able to analyze the impact of industrial development on the culture and working lives of middle- and working-class people in Europe, Japan, and the United States.

References

Goto-Jones, Christopher. *Modern Japan: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Huffman, James L. *Japan in World History*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Gordon, Andrew. *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Additional Resources

Weisenfeld, Gennifer. "Selling Shiseido: Cosmetic Advertising and Design in Early 20th-Century Japan." *Visualizing Cultures*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology ,2010. http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/shiseido_01/sh_essay01.html.

Ulak, James T. "Tokyo Modern I: Koizumi Kishio's "100 Views" of the Imperial Capital (1928-1940)." *Visualizing Cultures*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2009. http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/tokyo_modern_01/kk_essay01.html.

