



Emma Dalton and Caroline Norma (editors)

## *Voices from the Contemporary Japanese Feminist Movement*

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reviewed by [Flora Rousset](#)

### **Bearing testimony, reading affect-laden life experiences**

It is strikingly in the middle of their book *Voices from the Contemporary Japanese Feminist Movement* that scholars Emma Dalton and Caroline Norma place the following words of feminist activist lawyer Tsunoda Yukiko: 'Having the words to use is really important' (67). In 'Chapter 5. Tsunoda Yukiko: Feminist Activist Lawyer,' Tsunoda concludes her testimony by reflecting on how language changes can help increase the awareness around issues of sexual violence and sexual harassment. Through this insistence on words, Dalton and Norma seem then to draw an arch: an arch that does not so much symbolise a hierarchy among the six Japanese feminist activists that they interviewed in their book, as allegorise the strength of words—their power to rejoin and rejoice despite the many and varied forms of discrimination experienced by Japanese women.

Through 'both its political perspective as well as its commitment to recording the perspectives of Japanese feminists, on their movement as well as on issues of sexism, *in their own words*' (9; emphasis in the original), Dalton and Norma provide an insightful, timely, and much needed account of feminism(s) in Japan that is sure to engage its readers. They undertake to report affect-laden real-life experiences while seeking to avoid reiterating the dualistic and sexist construct that opposes emotion and reason.<sup>[1]</sup> In bearing testimony, Kitahara Minori, Yamamoto Jun, Nitō Yumeno, Tsunoda Yukiko, Mitsui Mariko and Yang Ching-Ja invite a reading that translates emotions into thoughts and actions. In a way, their activism recall Sara Ahmed's conception of feminist affects as 'embodied thought'<sup>[2]</sup>—a doing that demonstrates how involved these Japanese activists are in the fight against sexism. In 'Chapter 6. Mitsui Mariko: A Feminist Leading Feminists,' for instance, we read from feminist activist teacher and then assembly member Mitsui Mariko about her anger at being expected, along with other women, to serve tea at work—a gender-based expectation that both dismissed their abilities and deprived them of any sense of gender equality (75–76).<sup>[3]</sup>

*Voices from the Contemporary Japanese Feminist Movement* is thus less a historical timeline than an attempt to bridge the gap between an academic feminism and grassroots feminisms (7). While being aware that Japanese feminism is 'neither in abeyance nor riding high' (2), Dalton and Norma do not downplay its activism; they insist, rather, on the activists' humility about their wins and call for a feminist resurgence beyond purely academic concepts—and beyond regional

borders.

## **(Re)Building local spaces of feminist knowledge transfer**

One of Dalton and Norma's main focuses is the knowledge transfer they have observed in the works of the Japanese feminists appearing in their book. Sometimes with overlapping interests, sometimes with different purposes, Kitahara, Yamamoto, Nitō, Tsunoda, Mitsui and Yang explain the necessity to create safe spaces in which women can exchange ideas on their experiences and their strategies. This knowledge transfer is thus deeply bound to a grassroots feminist practice in which activists employ various ways to not only *reach out to*, but also *work with* other women. The importance of 'a localised style of activism' (79), as Mitsui in Chapter 6 puts it, is that it helps in engaging women to become politically active.

This kind of local activism suffers from a lack of media attention; it nonetheless succeeds in creating spaces for exchange and for community building and solidarity. A good example of this is the case of the 'Flower demo'—a protest movement that formed spontaneously in 2019 to 'raise awareness about #MeToo and #WeToo' (23).<sup>[4]</sup> The movement had a positive reception and subsequently took root in various places in Japan—all without any formal leadership—and expanded its focus to include all forms of sexual violence (24–25). While this movement is discussed at length by two feminists from different backgrounds, Kitahara in 'Chapter 2. Kitahara Minori: At the Heart of Japan's Feminist Movement of the #MeToo Era' and Yang in 'Chapter 7. Yang Ching-Ja: Seed of Hope,' it is also reviewed by Yamamoto in 'Chapter 3. Yamamoto Jun: Survivor-Activist for the Sexually Abused' and by Tsunoda in the aforementioned Chapter 5.

Further, feminist knowledge transfer corresponds with the changing paradigm of activism. In Chapter 7, Yang stresses how it became essential to change tactics in order to keep alive both the memory of victims of the 'comfort women' (*ianfu*) system and their fight for acknowledgment and reparation. The shift was from trying to speak through the media—which simply ignored their repeated requests—to presenting the history of wartime sexual violence *directly* to young people in Japan' (91; my emphasis) by inviting them to participate in an excursion to South Korea to hear the testimonies of survivors (92–93). While knowledge is sometimes understood as an abstract concept, Yang suggests that it is localised and subsists in the warp and weft of alliances that transcend difference.

In turning Yang's testimony into their penultimate chapter, Dalton and Norma allude to their introduction, in which they address the rise of feminism in East Asia (13). They also prepare the ground for their call for solidarity from within and beyond Asia, that is, an understanding of 'feminism as an internationalist movement that profits from connections between women in the form of "global sisterhood"' (120).

## **Feminism within and outside of Japan: What now?**

As Dalton and Norma show through the interviews with feminist activists of Japan, localised does not mean secluded or isolated. Indeed, all the interviewees have come into contact with feminists from other parts of Asia. In Chapter 7, we read of Yang creating a local feminist activism from global feminist activism through her organisation *Kitōbane*, through which she 'joined in alliance with the Korean Council in order to convey historical facts of the wartime slavery problem to Japanese youth' (92), and for which South Korea's women's movement is an important source of inspiration (104). Yet the transfer of knowledge among feminist activists extends beyond Asia. For instance, in Chapter 5, Tsunoda tells us of the impact of US-feminists' work in the field of sexual

assault on her own research and approach to these issues in Japan (58–60).

Global sisterhood is thus another focus of Dalton and Norma's *Voices from the Contemporary Japanese Feminist Movement*. Influences from other feminists led—and still leads—to the building of alliances and diversification of strategies among activists. In the concluding 'Chapter 8. Japan's Feminist Movement Within the Global Sisterhood,' Dalton and Norma stress the importance such navigation between local and global feminism has for both a sense and a practice of supporting and helping each other as women. They elaborate especially on the feminist connections between Japan and South Korea; they cite, for instance, joint efforts to address issues from different perspectives, such as Kitahara's launching of Ajuma Books, a publishing house that intentionally and explicitly builds on and works for sisterhood (114–15). And it is in wanting to further nourish this global sisterhood that Dalton and Norma conclude, by speaking to us—readers of Anglophone books—*directly*, and inviting us to *connect* with these voices of Japan (120).

Despite the implicit assumption that their—potentially feminist—audience can read English (and should have access to the testimonies),<sup>[5]</sup> the editors are well aware that global sisterhood cannot contain all 'considerations of gain and loss' about feminism, and share testimonies, rather, in the hope of encouraging dialogues (120). Yet the recurring topic of sexual violence, which soon turns into a condemnation of pornography, leaves me wondering if, in trying 'to enhance transnational feminist communication,' Dalton and Norma know about the transnational feminism's inherent 'potential of failed understanding.'<sup>[6]</sup> That is not to say that the work of activists against mainstream pornography and related issues is to be diminished; rather, we might ask if other voices—more welcoming to a *feminist* pornography—could have had their place in *Voices from the Contemporary Japanese Feminist Movement*. Further, while Dalton and Norma give us, in Chapter 3, activist Yamamoto's account of her advocating for the acknowledgment of sexual abuses experienced by people with a disability (37), the question of feminist *and* queer activist voices remains unthematized: for instance, the word 'women' seems to refer only to cisgendered and heterosexual women. Nonetheless, I believe that Dalton and Norma's call for 'greater acts of solidarity and support' (120) among sisters offers us a good example of, as Yamamoto in Chapter 3 puts it, 'a question of balance' (37).

## Notes

[1] For a critique of the sexist (and also racist and queerphobic) mind-body dichotomy and its influence on the understanding of emotions, see Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014 [2004].

[2] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, p. 170.

[3] To a certain extent, her refusal to be a mere object at others' disposal reminds us of Ahmed's feminist killjoy who 'kills joy because of what she claims exists' (see Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017, p. 252).

[4] For an account of #MeToo and #We Too in Japan, see Linda Hasunuma and Shin Ki-young, '#MeToo in Japan and South Korea: #WeToo, #WithYou,' *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 40(1) (2019): 97–111; an article that Dalton and Norma also discuss in their introduction (4–5).

[5] I am an example of a non-native English speaker and reader.

[6] Marianne Liljeström, 'Crossing the east-west divide. Feminist affective dialogues,' in *Working with Affect in Feminist Readings*, ed. Marianne Liljeström and Susanna Paasonen, 165–81, London: Routledge, 2010, specifically p. 167.

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