

Democratizing the Kitchen: The Women of SCAP, Home Demonstration Agents and the “Lifestyle Improvement Movement”

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The U.S. occupation of Japan under the command of General Douglas MacArthur after the end of World War II was a movement to “disarm, demilitarize, and democratize” the country. A vital part of the U.S. effort was to advance the status of women in Japan, and American women working for SCAP believed that American control of Occupied Japan provided a unique opportunity to overcome traditional Japanese biases against women. Ethel Weed, Chief of the Women’s Information Sub-unit stated, “If women, who comprise half the population of Japan and constitute over half the voters, cooperate with men and take part in the reform of Japan, accomplishments that would ordinarily require 100 years may be realized in 50 years and those that would ordinarily take 50 years may be accomplished in 25.” In addition to Ethel Weed, women such as Grace Alt, Golda Stander, Helen Hosp Seamans and Beate Sirota also felt a call to evoke change in Japan by working with women.

In line with MacArthur’s goals for a new Japan a program aimed to improve the lives of women in rural areas was born. This program, called “Home Life Extension” (*seikatsu kaizen* 生活改善), was created by SCAP’s Natural Resource Service which was influenced by the Women’s Affairs Section and the program was administered by the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry in each prefecture. This extension then began the “Lifestyle Improvement Movement” (*seikatsu kaizen undo* 生活改善運動) that was carried out by a nationwide network of “home demonstration agents” (*Seikatsu kairyō fukyū-in* 生活改良普及員). Although the “Home Life Extension” was viewed by SCAP as an original American concept modeled after the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Extension Service, Japan’s history of initiatives to improve rural lifestyles dates back to the pre-war era. In fact, when the Japanese Ministry was given the task of translating “Home Life Extension” into Japanese, they intentionally chose the term “*seikatsu kaizen*,” the exact same name used to describe Japan’s 1920s “lifestyle improvement movement.”

The history of women during the U.S. occupation and the history of “lifestyle improvement” initiatives in Japan have both been well explored, however, in this paper I seek to contribute to this scholarship by integrating the works of both histories. My interest lies in analyzing the relationship and influence of SCAP women reformers from 1945 to 1952 on rural Japanese women through the occupation’s “Home Life Extension.” This paper also compares this relationship to Hani Motoko and her students’ influence on rural women in the 1910s and 20s. Hani Motoko was a well-known Christian educator, and taught the value of rationalizing everyday life in the early 1900s. Hani founded a magazine called “The Women’s Friend” (*fujin no Tomo* 婦人の之友) in 1908 which in part inspired the government’s 1920s “Lifestyle Improvement” drives. Hani’s magazine encouraged women to keep household account books and the virtues of the Western-style housewife who was an equal to her husband. Readers of her magazine spread Hani’s teachings through nationwide local “Friendship Societies” (*tomonokai* 友の会).

The parallels between the SCAP women's relationship with rural women and that of the earlier work of Hani Motoko's daily life improvement efforts, particularly in the Tohoku region, are striking. However, when comparing SCAP women's relationship with Hani Motoko's work in the early 1900s, it is evident that SCAP women were more sensitive to rural women's needs than Hani Motoko was. SCAP women acknowledged rural women's ties to the domestic household and respected that in order to carry out the democratization of the countryside, they needed to start with women and their kitchens. By investing their time and energy into often unrewarded work (unlike Hani's well publicized work), they recognized the value of women in transforming the family through the teachings of concrete methods for daily improvement. Although teaching rural Japanese women to change the layout of their kitchens to a more western style and to wear western clothing could be seen as a form of western imperialism that looked down on Japanese traditions, at the time those changes were respected and was a trend Japanese women in urban areas saw as modern and sophisticated. The efforts of the SCAP women made a significant contribution to the success of the occupation of post-war Japan. By recognizing the important role of women in society, the place of women in Japan was advanced, as was the overall quality of life in rural communities.