

# Schoolgirls' Resistance of Ryōsai Kenbo in Late Meiji Period

Jiatong Ying

Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing 100000, China

**Abstract.** This paper aims to investigate late Meiji high schoolgirls' resistance to the good wife and wise mother norm by analyzing an individual case, fictional figures and research papers. This paper tries to show the resistance of girls and their reason from a different angle. Because more education opportunities and resources were available to girls in late Meiji period, more freedom of moving, more information from the outside world and the older generation's liberal experiences gave girls the chance to cast doubt on women's role of Ryōsai Kenbo. Some girls diverged from the ideal path expected by the society, and the public despised them as "degenerating girls". These high school girls, though mostly failed in their struggles, signal the awakening of women's rights.

**Keywords:** *schoolgirls, Ryōsai Kenbo, women education, late Meiji period*

## 1. Introduction

In the late Meiji period, secondary education opportunities and resources were available to Japanese females from affluent families after the enactment of Girl's High School Act. However, women's higher education of Ryōsai Kenbo was erected not for women themselves, but for the benefits it could bring about to Japanese families and the country.

However, ironically, good wife, wise mother education didn't promise the production of numerous ideal women, instead, it triggered some women's conscious awakening of female rights and independence. Small portion of females began to resist the absolute duties the social traditions expected them to obey tamely.

Schoolgirls' deviance manifested as refusing to enter into contracted marriages, resisting the role of wives and mothers, and chasing after self-independence. High school girls' affairs with boys became the main target of moral criticism and the contents of popular literature. Though few of them succeeded in their struggles, their resistance marked the awakening of women.

## 2. Opportunities of Secondary Education

In Tokugawa period, women were thought too stupid to learn anything according to yin and yang theory in which women were yin, the dark and passive side. *Onna daigaku takarabakon* (Treasure box of greater learning for women, a neo-Confucian values book), the most representative work of texts for *terakoya* and also private homes, states that "A woman's nature is yin, which is dark like the night. Thus, compared to men, women are born foolish and stupid. Being this foolish, a woman should show humility in all things, and obey her husband." [1] But Neo-Confucianism which humiliates women didn't prevent them from education as in Edo period, *terakoya* that accepted female students numbered 8636, accounting for 63% of the whole number. 148138 female students studied in *terakoya*, accounting for 20% of the whole student number. [2] Hand-writing and reading were the contents of *terakoya* courses, but no further education was available for middle class.

The Girls' High School Order enacted in 1899 officially made more girls' high school available for all classes, and regulated the courses and classing time. In 1900, the number of girls' high school increased by 38 compared to 1894 and 11984 girls enrolled into high schools. Five years after, the total enrollment was 31918 and the figure turned into 56239 in 1910. [3] But compared to the whole population, these figures were still minute—in 1903 only 1.2% of high school aged girls attended high schools as the tuition fee of 25 yen per year put strain on the population of enrollment. [4] Those who enrolled in female high schools or colleges were from middle-upper class in Japan at that time.

### 3. Deviation From the Track

#### 3.1 The Ideal Womanhood

Japanese government and intellectuals harbored various expectations on women's education, which was not only a signal of civilization which Japan at that time was eager to erect, but more importantly, a way to produce Ryōsai Kenbo. Alongside with the rise of nationalism after Sino-Japanese War, the ideal womanhood Ryōsai Kenbo, which was advocated by intellectuals mainly theoretically before the war, became the way acknowledged by the government for women to contribute their part to the country. In April 1899, Kabayama Sukenori, when gave an instructional address to a conference of prefectural governors said: the education provided in girls' middle schools is in preparing their students one day to marry into a distinguished household and become wise mothers and good wives. [5] What good wives and wise mothers could bring to Japan were mainly two points in eyes of Akizuki: First, cultivate men's morality of sacrifice. Second, free men from household worries to help him better focus on national contribution. The first is the specific purpose of children-rearing duty and the second is of household management. [6] Akizuki was representative in the ideas of Ryōsai Kenbo.

Not surprisingly, Ryōsai Kenbo education was criticized as a traditional backlash because it limited the learning scope of female to practical skills and traditional morals, and took female as the tool that serves male and the country. However, Ryōsai Kenbo education failed to raise all women's interests towards being wives and mothers. Instead, it played a role in the rebellion of some high school girls towards the Ryōsai Kenbo norm.

High school girls' trespass of the national interest triggered the intense social criticism towards high school girls. Ryōsai Kenbo idea, the official model of women, advocated by the government and social media, and taught in female middle and high schools extended the family affairs to public scale. The wife and mother is qualified or not turned out not a private household matter, but an important public concern in late Meiji Japan. Women who didn't marry was thought "abnormal", which was a fatal word for a person. High school girls were treated like superstar, whose affairs with boys became news and stories shared and discussed by the public, and indeed, medias and literature described their affairs as evil deeds doomed to end up miserably. Their criticism boosted not only because of bad girls' deviance from norms in their minds, but also because they were harshly contradictory to the ideal purpose of the quickly grown female secondary education which carried decent expectations from the government and the public in the background of roaring nationalism since Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895). Women, who were well educated as good wives and wise mothers, should contribute to the country by conducting decent home education to their children, managing households intelligently for freeing their husbands from trouble. Moreover, these girls obviously deviate from social expectations.

#### 3.2 Contact

Since the establishment of public women high school education by 1899, Japanese girls had more opportunities to contact with the world. Girls living in provinces came to big cities like Tokyo to receive high school education. And the way to home and the school, and the classing time free them from parents' supervision to some extent. As Kaneko Fumiko (1903-1926) stated in her diary, she loves school time and also the playing time on the way to home because it's her free time. [7] Not only they had more time off parents' restriction, but also more freedom of moving. New and modern hairstyle which was more convenient caught popularity in rapid speed among schoolgirls. And school uniform *hakama* which initially was allowed in Kazoku Jogakkō, a girls' high school established in 1885, quickly became the general uniform for high school girls. *Hakama* provided girls more physical freedom than kimono in sports activities. [8] Moreover, newspapers, magazines, novels and songs informed Japanese school girls of various events happening in Japan and in the world. Some intellectuals realized the danger brought by information. Makino Nobuaki criticized that reading literature that depicted erotic and delinquent *Jogakusei* can provoke delinquent thoughts

among youth. But supervision of the reading of girls in high schools failed to prevent girls from information thoroughly.

### **3.3 A Shift From Liberty to Restriction**

School's unreasonable restrictions upon reading materials exacerbated some girls' abhorrence of censorship and authority. Yamakawa Kikue (1890-1980)'s experiences could be an example. Women were not allowed to read beyond the contents of textbooks in Kikue's school time as newspapers and magazines were thought to be unsuitable works for women to read. Kikue used to be called by her teacher who wanted to know why she possessed "dangerous thoughts" because her on-the-spot composition mentioned world news involved in a newspaper. But she didn't quail when facing her teacher's blunt blaming, instead, she bravely admitted she read newspaper and said "Yes. It's not just me. The whole family reads them." Her recalcitrance could also be proved by her unbroken continuity of passion on reading magazines and newspaper, her bold expression of her longing of women liberation in Tsuda Eigaku Juku entrance exam paper, and her letters later again involved "dangerous thoughts" as Tsuda Umeko warned.

However, the generation before Kikue's, had contradictory experiences. Chise, Kikue's mother, met the initial opening of Japanese women education in 1870s when Japan deliberately imitated the West and produced a mixing education including world geography, world history, mathematics, English, science as well as Japanese traditional courses and clearly the western part outweighed the traditional one. Besides that, in her schooling time, extracurricular reading was encouraged. Therefore, the younger generation which Kikue belonged to had witnessed a switch in Japanese women's education that restricting their freedom instead of further developing it. At the same time, the liberal pattern erected exactly by their mothers' generation stung their hearts. Thus, ironically, while her mother accepted the roles of children's mother and a man's wife, Kikue once refused to enter into any female schools and hated ethic and sewing classes which intended to adapt girls into women's intended roles.

However, Kikue couldn't be such straightforward and bold in expressing her resistance without her compatible and well-educated family's backup. Not all school girls had the privilege to refuse the Ryōsai Kenbo education because they could hardly get education opportunities once their willingly or unwillingly giving up.

### **3.4 Schoolgirls' Struggle**

Most of Japanese schoolgirls who were not as lucky as Kikue faced far more difficulties. Learning was not an easy task for every girl. There were cases of girls' health condition collapsed because of studying pressure and some girls performed badly in science or mathematics courses. This led to social suspicion that always waited to point a finger at girls of whether girls have enough ability to enter high schools or colleges. Also, it's not uncommon in late Meiji period, girls were withdrawn from schools for reasons like caring a sick mother or helping family business because in eyes of parents, education was still not the primary need for girls. [9] As Alice Mable Bacon mentioned in *Japanese Girls and Women*, sometimes parents forced girls to marry a man before they finished their school course. Some girls would bravely resist, but "more often" their struggles failed. [10] Sometimes as a way to force girls to leave schools, the families deprived them of economic support. In *Demon Winds Love Winds*, the major character who was a schoolgirl, Hatsuno lost the financial support because her brother thought it's annoying to have a schoolgirl for his sister. Hatsuno then had to sell her bicycle to pay for her medical fees. [11] After that Hatsuno gradually realized economic independence could prevent her from being at other's disposal. Japanese society at that time criticized some high school girls because they freely chased after love, held hands with boys and dated with them.

High school girls' sexual affairs with boys began to be a heated topic of criticism and popular literature. The label of rarity, female, the upper class and sex of high school girls' affairs greatly attracted the public. To hanker profitable curiosity, social media and literature depicting high school lovebirds mushroomed in late Meiji period. *Demon Winds, Love Winds* represented the social

stereotype of the “degenerating” school girl: When Tonoï first entered Hatsuno(a schoolgirl)’s room, he found a small bottle of pills and asserted it was syphilis medicine. Actually it turns out that is Hatsuno’s sleeping pills. Another scene is Baroness Natsumoto (a wealthy mother) walked into her husband’s room and accidentally found Hatsuno who was assaulted was quickly retying her kimono sash. Baroness Natsumoto, therefore, concluded Hatsuno is one of the schoolgirls who “are strapped for cash to pay tuition and prostitute themselves.” [12] In fact, Hatsuno was inconsistent with the profligate image Tonoï and Baroness Natsumoto assumed, but she indeed rebelled social norms by refusing to enter into a relationship with no love and chasing after economic independence. This novel gained great popularity probably because it showed public exaggeration of the image of schoolgirls, and the independent spirit of women, which arose cognizance and provocation among the public as well as school girls. Another thing is all novels that can be classified as degenerating school girls’ contents like *Demon Winds Love Winds*, *Futon (The Quilt 1907)* and *Seishun (Youth 1906)* [13] ended up in tragedy. A happy-ending of bad girls was unacceptable for audiences because these girls were morally stained. The tragedies also echoed with miserable consequences degenerating school girls usually met in real world. The *Yokohama Daily Newspaper*, which provided a nonfiction account of late Meiji schoolgirl life, mentioned some degenerate girls from good families ended up as maidservants or mistress. [14]

#### 4. Conclusion

Ryosai Kenbo limited the scale of their learning but at the same time, paved the way for female secondary education. School education indeed produced good wives and wise mothers but also left the room for bad girls who drifted off the route society wanted them to follow. With the establishment of female middle and high schools for the sake of Ryōsai Kenbo notion, middle-upper class girls acquired not only the opportunity of secondary education but also more information by contacting with the outside world.

Restrictions and censorship were implemented in girls’ school to regulate their ideas. However, for those who were displeased with good wife and wise mother ideas and had witnessed more liberal experiences the older generation enjoyed, these confinements aggravated their rebellion.

However, schoolgirls who struggled to resist the Ryōsai Kenbo norm in most cases ended up in tragedies because of the pressure and suspicion from families and the society. Some schoolgirls were also greatly criticized and described as sexually indulgent by social media and this impression encroached the whole image of schoolgirls in public’ minds. The reason why school girls were so excessively criticized is probably because their divergence was considered not only in individual scope, but more importantly in national interest scope.

Late Meiji girls’ departure from norms signaled the new change or awakening of Japanese women. It brought people’s attention to norms restricting girls and established the foundation for breaking or changing some unreasonable norms in the future.

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