

Ambassadors of Japan: Women's Narratives within the Idea of Cultural Pluralism

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This paper focuses on how Japanese women who married American GIs legitimized their roles within the Cold War “racially and culturally pluralist nation” of the United States. This examination opens up for discussion how Japanese women, who were always under question of their being as American mothers, made themselves intelligible national subjects. Here, I argue that the discourse of cultural pluralism including gender equality and freedom opened up a space for women to claim their place in the United States through introducing “Japanese culture” to the United States. The idea of Japanese war brides as “cultural ambassadors” also created a site where Japanese war brides contributed to Japan for showing Japan’s postwar friendship to the United States. Alternative recognition of Japanese war brides as “cultural ambassadors” between the United States and Japan brought a possibility for Japanese war brides to recuperate from the stigma imposed upon them in the postwar periods — that is, they were always under question as to the legitimacy of marriages that emerged during the occupation.

Along with the Cold War partnership building, not only American women but also Japanese girls were also narrated as “potential ambassadors” between the United States and Japan. The bride school run by the Red Cross during the occupation became a site whereby “Japanese culture” gets defined. In other words, the school also instructed the young brides which Japanese culture they can be proud of:

We American wives in Japan think of ourselves as ambassadors from the United States — conversely, each of you will be an ambassador from Japan when you go to the United States. You have a wonderful heritage of history and culture. Be proud of it! America is a new country — at least that part of it that is the United States; you have many centuries of

culture as your background — do remember that always. When you leave here, take all the Japanese treasures you have — your kimono, which you will usually wear only in your own home; your kakejiku; the dishes you love. All will be admired. Your skill in flower arrangement; doll making, bonkei; these are arts which will make you envy of American women.¹

It was kimono, flower arrangement, tea ceremony, and doll making that the school taught was ancient Japanese culture they should be proud of. These are all politically inert, timeless, and exotic in Western countries. Indeed, making friendship had to be a mutual process: “Japanese brides should also introduce your culture in exchange of what they learned American ways.” Another director instructed Japanese girls to become “a good neighbor” who make a friendship. To do so, she recommended introducing Japanese cultures.

It was not all one-sided, this information offered in the name of friendship. The instructors told the brides: Bring something of yourself to America. The kimono, the obi, the delicate flower arrangement art. Be a good neighbor when you make your new home. Bring part of Japan in your kakemono and the tea ceremony. There is warmth and friendliness and good neighborliness awaiting you, if you will help yourself find it as you have come to these classes.²

Again, what she mentioned Japanese culture was “the kimono, the obi, the delicate flower arrangement art, kakemono, and tea ceremony.” As another example, one of the classes instructed them to become a good hostess in the United States and bring Japanese things to introduce. That was the way to become a friend to Americans in neighbors.

As the hostess of your new home, you have real chance to combine the cultures of Japan and the new ideas you have learned in America. Your new friends will all be interested in what you ate, what you wore here, how you cooked your food, how your houses looked. Most Americans can't afford to travel to Japan any more than most of your countrymen here are able to go stateside, and so we're all eager to know about people in other countries. When you leave Japan, don't put away all your Japanese things. Take along at least your best kimono and your geta and obi.

If you have some favorite pictures, tuck those in, and include, if you can, some of the ladies for tea some afternoon. Wear your best kimono, and honor them with a real Japanese tea ceremony.³

Japanese culture that the school taught was indeed “products of centuries” that were not modern and new, but old and ancient. Interestingly, her sense of what things are American and what things are Japanese are also a part of American exceptional language as well as an orientalist view of Japan. What she listed as Japanese things all signify anarchic, feudalistic, and barbarically sexist traditions. All these notions legitimate American intervention within its mission to “rescue” by providing democracy and freedom.

While Japan was defined by old, traditional and ancient, America was represented as new and young. The bride school taught that the United States was the nation where people all over the world can equally become the national subjects. It was the idea of the “melting pot” that “people of all the world mix and blend together” and constitutes the U.S. nation. The class taught:

Your new homeland of America will welcome you with genuine and sincere warmth, for the United States is a wonderful country that has been built and molded by the peoples of other lands. Its history has been made by the people of Europe, Africa, Asia of all the countries of the world, who came to the United States to establish new homes, to find freedom of speech and religion, to build new careers, and to achieve happiness and a worthwhile life. The United States is often called the “melting pot” — in which people of all the world mix and blend together their hopes, ambitions and daily lives. It is that fusion which gives to the United States its strength, its courage and its power.⁴

Again, it was the Cold War national ideology that the idea of the “melting pot” and pluralistic model of nation became important. The class indeed taught that “the Japanese girls” would become an American because the United States was the nation for “the people of all the countries of the world.” Another teacher also told them:

I am here today because of the faith I have in each of you as a contribution to America. America is young and so has not old culture and cus-

toms of its own. It is a blend of cultures and customs of people from all over the world, so each of you can be an important contributor. Americans are eager to learn about culture, customs and manners of other people. Give all your knowledge and talents, for you have many. Do not belittle origin and country. Be proud of both.⁵

By teaching which Japanese culture should be valued and which should be erased, the school also told that America can accommodate your culture, customs and manners. With these premise, then, the school sent out their students with “a hope that you would eventually become American wives and mothers.” The chairman of the bride school shared a letter written by a bride’s husband at the end of the school session and celebrated their volunteer work:

Although she is studying and learning about America and its people everyday, I believe that the greatest thing she has learned is that there are people everywhere who are always willing and always are helping those who need it. The sincere and effective teaching by your instructors has convinced my wife that she can and will someday become an American citizen. She feels assured that no matter where she goes, she can live as an American because you have taught her that America is a country for all, regardless of race, color, or creed. This is the first step into the U.S.⁶

This was indeed what the bride school taught about; now that the bride school told how to survive in the United States as American wives and mothers, and also that America is a country for all regardless of race, color, or creed, Japanese brides can become Americans. However, the premise never comes to reality because what is of value to American Cold War nation was the premise itself. Japanese brides’ belated status as American wives can prove American superiority of domesticity as well as the nation itself as racially pluralist. In addition, the premise that they can eventually live as Americans, endorsed by the idea of America as the nation for all the people, personalized the racial problem. If Japanese brides cannot overcome racial barriers and face problems in the United States, it is their personal fault. The bride school project demonstrates how the Cold War nation did not depend on a logic of exclusion, but on a logic of “differential inclusion,” of invigorating the U.S. nation by inviting “other” nations and peoples as the liberated. These Japanese brides as

“other” people became the national subjects to self-evidently prove American pluralism, democracy and freedom.

How then did women who married American soldiers in the postwar moment, called Japanese war brides, understand themselves in the Cold War U.S. nation? What was the possibility for Japanese war brides to produce themselves in the nation? What is interesting here is that Japanese war brides attempted to legitimate themselves in the United States as those who introduced Japanese culture to the United States, that is “grass-roots cultural ambassadors.” As I showed in previous chapter, Japanese women’s legitimacy as American wives and mothers was always questioned. These women attempted to become intelligible national subjects through alleging their roles in introducing “Japanese culture” to American public. For example, Sae, who married a white American soldier and lived in Seattle for years, explained Japanese war brides’ introduction of Japanese culture to American neighbors as their contribution to the United States: “We, ‘Japanese war brides,’ introduced chopsticks, soy sauce, Japanese curry rice and sushi to American society, and now sushi bars are everywhere in the United States.”⁷ She also mentioned that Japanese war brides could spread authentic Japanese culture because they came to the United States in their twenties strongly holding their own culture and could not lose it. Another woman, Setsu who married a white American officer and lived in Indiana and Washington DC for years, strongly identified herself as a grassroots ambassador who introduced Japanese culture to Americans.⁸ She said that she taught sawing and flower arrangement to American neighbors and also made American friends through showing them how to play Koto, or Japanese harp. She also told that she was nervous when she joined the officer’s club due to her accented English and unfamiliar cultures, but the anxiety disappeared when she made friends through introducing Japanese culture. Another woman, Tatsuko, who married a white American soldier and lived in Wisconsin in the postwar periods, was proud of herself for introducing Japanese culture to American neighbors.⁹ She said that American neighbors were interested in Japanese culture; she became “popular” among white neighbors when she attended her daughter’s graduation ceremony wearing her Kimono. She was also called a “gourmet cook” since she treated American neighbors to Japanese dishes.

By emphasizing their roles in introducing Japanese culture to American public, Japanese war brides also attempted to recuperate from the stigma of marriages with American soldiers thrust into postwar Japan. They attempted to legitimize themselves by alleging their roles as grassroots ambassadors of Japan. Possibility of war brides' identification as grass-roots ambassadors of Japan became prominent when then Princess Michiko recognized Japanese war brides' roles in the United States for Japan. A war bride, Stout Kazuko Umezu, was invited to the 40th Anniversary of Overseas Japanese Association Convention in Tokyo in 1984 and met Princess Michiko. She recalled the moment;

When I heard then Princess Michiko saying, "You must had hardship in the country where has the different language and customs. Please tell ladies [Japanese war brides] in America we are thinking about you and we appreciate all the work you are doing," I was so impressed and just cried. Then, I realized that then Princess Michiko recognized that our effort and energy that we overcame the hardships and that we supported for the international students and Japanese residents in the United States. I thought that I should be confident and proud of being a Japanese war bride.¹⁰

When Princess Michiko's comment on "Japanese war brides" encouraged Stout to think that "Japanese war brides" overcame hardships, assimilated into American society, and contributed to supporting Japanese people who came afterwards. Princess Michiko's comment empowered her to also think that "Japanese war brides" have contributed by introducing Japanese culture to the United States. Stout said, "While 'Japanese war brides' think of our home, we introduced Japanese culture to the United States . . . and we are unconsciously playing a role as grass-root ambassadors between the United States and Japan."¹¹ By situating themselves as cultural ambassadors who hold Japanese culture while successfully assimilating into American culture and society, Stout perceived that Japanese war brides were meaningful figures for both the United States and Japan based on the Princess Michiko's recognition. They embraced alternative meaning of "Japanese war brides" and recuperated from the stigma of being "Japanese war brides."

This event instigated Kazuko to form a Nikkei (Japanese) International Marriage Society. She thought that she was obliged to convey then Princess Michiko's message to women who were called "Japanese war bride." On October 30, 1988, she gathered 320 "Japanese war brides" who lived in the mainland United States, Hawaii and Australia at a hotel in Olympia, Washington, not only to commemorate and deepen understanding among themselves, but also to change the social meaning of Japanese war brides.¹² After the success of this convention, Stout established the Nikkei (Japanese) International Marriage Society whose number was initially over one hundred women and increased to five hundred during the peak periods. The Society held five conventions to date and also published newsletters quarterly.¹³ Through the conventions and newsletters, "war brides" called for public recognition of their achievement as American citizens and their contributions toward establishing good relations between the United States and Japan as grass-roots ambassadors.

This transnational movement is interesting in that the postwar U.S. "cultural pluralist" nation created the space where Japanese war brides could be celebrated through introducing "Japanese culture." The postwar regime of "cultural pluralism" allowed Japanese war brides, who were biologically and legally differentiated when they immigrated to the United States, to possibly become "cultural ambassadors." This kind of ideological space, where Japanese war brides became "cultural ambassadors," again opened up a site¹⁴ where Japanese war brides were recognized as political ambassadors for Japan in the 80s. This newly emerged subjecthood opened up a transnational space where Japanese war brides became crucial figures who contributed to the postwar Japan to be recognized its excellence as a Cold War friend to the United States. However, again, which cultures "ambassadors" could only introduce as Japanese culture was contained within Cold War cultural regime which produced American superiority and benevolence in "belated" Asia.

Notes

1 "Introduction to Home Management Course" in Brides' School handbook, 1954. RG 200, box 1,280, file 618.4, Red Cross Central Files, American National Red Cross, NA.

2 “Excerpt from report from Mrs. Frank O. Blake, Director, Volunteer Services, American Red Cross, Far Eastern Area,” July 6, 1953, RG 200 Box 1,280, file 618.4, Red Cross Central Files, American National Red Cross, NA.

3 Brochure, Box 1,280, file 618.4, Red Cross Central Files, July 6, 1954, RG 200, American National Red Cross, NA.

4 “Camp Kokura Brides’ School Handbook, 1956,” RG 200, box 1,280, file 618.4, Red Cross Central Files, American National Red Cross, NA.

5 “Camp Kokura Brides’ School Handbook, 1956,” RG 200, box 1,280, file 618.4, Red Cross Central Files, American National Red Cross, NA.

6 “The Japanese Brides’ School of 1951, Held Under the Auspices of the Christian Woman’s Association of the Tokyo Area,” 1951, RG 200, box 1,280, file 618.4, Red Cross Central Files, American National Red Cross, NA.

7 Stout, “Hito [human],” *Asahi Shinbun*, 17 March 1991; Sae, Interview 2006.

8 Setsu (pseudonym), interview by author. Honolulu, Hawaii, 5 August, 2007.

9 Tatsuko (pseudonym), interview by author. Honolulu, Hawaii, 2 August, 2007.

10 Yasutomi Shigeyoshi and Stout Umezu Kazuko. *Amerika ni Watatta Senso Hanayome [War Brides in the United States]: Nichibei Kokusai Kekkon Paionia no Kiroku [Recorded by a Pioneer of International Marriages]*. ed. Shigeyoshi Yasutomi and Stout Kazuko U. (Tokyo: Akashi Shoten, 2004), 147.

11 Yasutomi, *Amerika ni Watatta Senso Hanayome [War Brides in the United States]*, 226–7.

12 Shigeyoshi Yasutomi and Stout Kazuko U, *Amerika ni Watatta Senso Hanayome [War Brides in the United States]: Nichibei Kokusai Kekkon Paionia no Kiroku [Recorded by a Pioneer of International Marriage]* (Tokyo: Akashi Shoten, 2004), 233.

13 The Society developed not only throughout the United States, but also in six other countries such as Australia, Canada, England, New Zealand, and Japan. They had their first world convention in Hawaii in 1994, followed by the second in Fukushima, Japan in 1997, a third in Torrance, California in 1999, a fourth in Fukuoka, Japan in 2001 and Hawaii in 2004. Because of their age, the number of the Society’s members has been decreasing recently, but there were over five hundred people at the peak in 2002. Meanwhile, they also held mini conventions once a year within mainland United States.