



Social History of Japanese Girls in early Showa Period

Reflections on Sone Fumiko's 1992 manga Oyanarumono dangai (Cliffs that are parents)

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I visit bookstores less often these days. I can obtain virtually all the information on books I need for my work from advance book notices that arrive by post and over the Internet. I can find old books on the web in the blink of an eye. With a single click, an academic book is shipped from a secondhand bookstore in a country town in Britain and arrives at my door in about two weeks. In spite of that, I still choose the novels I read for my own pleasure and books for my children by picking them up and browsing through them at the neighborhood bookstore. However, I've stopped going to the comic book section entirely. The reason is that stores no longer allow people to browse through comics.

Almost all comic books are sealed tightly in plastic wrapping now. However, when my elementary school-age son and I went to a rustic secondhand bookstore in our neighborhood, he was ecstatic about being able to browse through comic books on the spot because they weren't wrapped in plastic. He made the owner of the bookstore angry by going a little too far, but was happy to be



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scolded, saying, “This is how it is in the world of Doraemon.” Nowadays browsing through comics at bookstores without buying them is an old practice that belongs to the Showa period (1926–1989).

I don't go to the comics section because I don't need to buy comic books I know nothing about. For that reason, I pretty much stopped reading comics other than those that had everyone talking. This tendency has changed recently thanks to my smartphone. I happened to download an app called *Manga okoku* (Comic book kingdom), which lets me browse through comic books without buying them. The app calls this service “free trial reading,” but it's the same as browsing through books at the store without buying them. The smartphone is a medium that does not assume a long association. Many short or small bit works are sold for smartphone users for that reason. Works that have long been out of print have come back in digital format.

Oyanarumono dangai (Cliffs that are parents) by Sone Fumiko is one of the works I have come across this way. I browsed through this comic, got into it and bought it without knowing either the author or the work. This comic is said to have become popular with people who, like me, read it without knowing anything about it, and has reached an impressively high rank in sales. I purchased and read this work, and was surprised what a high quality comic it was. Later, I learned that Sone won the 21st Japan Cartoonists Association Award for Excellence in 1992 for this work. This comic magnificently portrays the social history of a provincial city during the Showa period. The city depicted is Muroran in Hokkaido where the author was born. The story takes place in the period from the early Showa era to the period after the end of World War II. The author, who was born in 1958, was probably surrounded by many people who lived through this period and wrecked remains of that time. In this story, four girls between the ages of 11 and 16 from farming villages in Aomori were sold to red-light district in Muroran in April 1927. At this time Japan was in the midst of the Showa Depression, and farming villages suffered from repeated famines and crop failures. It was commonplace for parents in those villages to sell their daughters. There were even advisory offices set up openly in the Tohoku region for parents thinking about selling their daughters. It was essentially the human trafficking of underage women.

The city of Muroran was a center for the naval munitions industries that developed rapidly



following the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War. Muroran was home to the Japan Steel Works, which was built in 1907 and was reportedly the “best arms factory in the East.” The city had a red-light district, which was legal at that time. Thousands of laborers worked in Muroran in dismal conditions. Brokers earned intermediary margins by buying young girls from farming villages and selling them to Muroran’s red-light district. Upon being sold, these girls were forced to shoulder the large debts of their parents. Wages did not enter their pockets, no matter how hard they worked. They were only paid when those debts finally were paid off. These four girls from Aomori in the same situation each went their own way. One of them committed suicide early. Another was struck down by illness at a young age. Only girls blessed with the strength of mind needed to endure their plight and a body and ability with commercial value were able to survive.

One of the four sold girls caught the eye of a proprietress. The proprietress taught her Japanese dance, how to play the shamisen, and how to speak the Kyoto dialect. This girl made it through these hard lessons and became a geisha. People in other countries tend to mistakenly think that geisha are prostitutes, but that is not the case. Basically, a geisha’s job is to display her artistic skills at a Japanese-style banquet. Sexual services were not part of her job. Naturally, male patrons were necessary for success, and in many cases sexual relations with these patrons were involved because a geisha was an entertainer of a kind. However, the provision of sexual services was not their actual job. One of the other four girls did survive as a prostitute, servicing multiple men every night.

Hokkaido had a very small population up until modern times. The Meiji government sent many settlers there at the end of the nineteenth century as part of its national development policies. However, in actuality many prisoners were used as laborers there in the beginning because of the harsh climate and severe living conditions. In later years traffickers brought many people from the main islands who had been reduced to poverty. There were also people who fell prey to deceptive stories about the fortunes that awaited them in Hokkaido. They were unable to get away when they realized what they had gotten themselves into. Women at the bottom were gathered up as prostitutes for the men. This comic book painstakingly traces the stories of these women and the social history of Muroran. The majority of the episodes depicted in the book introduced me to



things I had never learned about. Muroran's munitions industries grew incredibly as the girls reached adulthood. At the same time, Japan began running headlong into a period of war.

There were factories and workers in Muroran. Naturally, there were socialists, too. One of the girls fell in love with a young socialist, but the nature of the times trampled their love under their feet. A man who made a fortune through the local munitions industries secured the liberty of this brokenhearted girl (bought her by assuming all of her debts and paying an equal amount in compensation) on the condition that the two be married. The munitions industries really took off after the Manchurian Incident in 1931. However, this girl as a former prostitute continued to face ruthless social discrimination even after marrying into a wealthy family. She ultimately left the family, leaving her only daughter behind.

The second half of the story is about the young daughter who was left behind, and portrays her experiences in the war period. A large number of forced laborers from China and Korea were brought to work in Muroran at that time, and many of their dead bodies were reportedly buried in a beach known as *Itanki-no Hama*. After the war, a large number of human bones were actually discovered on this beautiful beach that is now a mecca for surfing and paraglider enthusiasts.

Middle-class citizens were left destitute by the Pacific War. Hunger continued to torment children. The red-light district of Muroran was ordered to suspend operations in 1944 because Japan's situation in the war was becoming increasingly desperate. Many women lost their jobs and literally became homeless. Some of them left Muroran for the Continent (China). The city of Muroran was devastated by a bombardment by U.S. Navy warships on 15 July 1945. Many lives were lost amid the confusion following the end of the war. However, the daughter and her father survived. The story ends when the daughter, who became an elementary school teacher, is happily married in 1958.

The poverty and the misery of ordinary people shock me each time I hear about their experiences in a period when Japan was known as an "empire." Many ordinary people in Japan lived in conditions that were virtually the same as those of people in the world's poorest countries today. Merely two generations ago, Japanese women were working in sewing factories with the



worst conditions in the world. Japanese people were in the comparable situation with the people who pay a large amount to agents to smuggle them into rich countries, only to lose their lives along the way. Has there ever been a society that called itself an “empire” in which the social circumstances of the people in power and the people they ruled were so close? The similarity between the people in power and the people they ruled may be one of the reasons why the memories of war in Asia are filled with so much pain. Our bitter past is different from that of British rule in India or French control over parts of Africa. For that reason, I believe we have all the more responsibility to look straight at the truth with unclouded eyes and ponder it deeply.

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