

Continuity and Change : The Japanese Woman's Magazine and the Practice of Cultural History

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CONTINUITY AND CHANGE
THE JAPANESE WOMAN'S MAGAZINE
AND THE PRACTICE OF CULTURAL HISTORY

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Cultural History and the Woman's Magazine

I begin my response to this volume by recalling the opening of the Symposium where the papers collected here were first presented. Then Professor Suzuki Sadami defined the task in which we were engaged as the inter-disciplinary work of Cultural History.

Cultural History attempts to understand the world which we inhabit through an analysis of how we came here. One way of understanding the work of Cultural History is to draw on the idea of early twentieth century formalist literary critics who argued that Literature de-familiarized the world, that is made the familiar strange, made readers question the ordinary assumptions on which their understanding was based. Cultural history, too, can de-familiarize what we take for granted and challenge us to think differently about the present we inhabit. It can help us to understand our own positions as cultured subjects, gendered and embodied, and inheritors of particular linguistic and national traditions which make us but which we also make in our turn. Members of the Symposium came from a variety of language groups, traditions and national histories, from a range of academic disciplines and from different personal histories but we shared together in this project. I return to the subject of what we share and what divides us in a moment.

The tool which we have used to undertake the task of Cultural History is the woman's magazine. This is, I would argue, a useful though neglected tool appropriate to this task. It is useful because the magazine is a complex cultural form both in itself and in its relationship to the power dynamics which structure all modern cultures. Because of the complexity of cultural histories, we need sophisticated forms through which to study them. It may sound strange to describe the ordinary, and often rather despised, woman's magazine in this way. However, the papers in this volume make clear something of the magazine's complexity as a form and its usefulness as a tool of cultural analysis.

Firstly, as papers by Barbara Holthus and Barbara Sato show, that complexity is evident in the heterogeneity of the form. The magazine consists of a mixture of genres which co-exist together within the covers of one magazine; articles, fictions, confessional letters, advertisements, recipes, advice lie together happily between the covers. The magazine for women traditionally is both didactic and non-didactic, it offers both instruction and entertainment. It deals with the mundane practical details of women's daily lives — shopping, cooking, manag-

ing family relationships — but it also address their dreams and fantasies. Indeed it is not always clear whether a particular item is practical advice or fantasy. The recipe and the fashion feature present themselves as advice but, as we know if we have tried to make the dishes featured in the average magazine or tried to make ourselves look like the models on their papers, this “advice” is often more about fantasy than about practicalities.

This mixture of genres and the movement between different kinds of writing mean that the magazine can be contradictory. Readers are used to reading on one page how to produce those wonderful meals every woman should be able to cook and on the next how to lose weight so that she can have the desirably thin body shape. Cultures are not monolithic but diverse and fractured. As individuals we often live with quite contradictory ideas simultaneously. The magazine both reflects and creates these contradictory positions.

As well as its formal complexity, the magazine — because it comes out weekly or monthly — has a particular relationship to time which enhances its value for the cultural historian. Periodicals a name which includes newspapers, journals and magazines, are characterized by that seriality or periodicity which gives them their name. As various of the papers in this symposium have shown, studying a periodical through a number of years or looking at how particular journals situate themselves within traditions of publishing and of politics is a fruitful historical method. Just as cultures are fractured and complex if we consider them synchronically, that is at a particular historical moment, so diachronically or across time, they are not static but constantly being remade. The particular relationship to time which characterizes the magazine, enacts this cultural dynamic.

Along with this diversity and the dynamic quality of the form, the magazine — I suggest — is a useful tool for cultural historians because of the way it is the site for negotiations between different groups who exercise different kinds of power — economic power, class power, gender power and the power of generation or other kinds of dominance. Throughout its history but increasingly in the twentieth century, the magazine has existed as a medium for advertisers as much as for its publishers. Because they can sell the same space twice, first to the advertiser and then to the reader, magazines are extremely efficient commodities. They are embedded in capitalist power structures. They are also, of course, a space in which groups of publishers and writers seek to shape and influence their readers' views and actions. This is true both of magazines with explicitly political agendas and of those whose agenda is implicit.

However, the magazine as a form does not only give power to its producers and advertisers. Readers have their own forms of power. Of course, all print forms depend upon readers to — as it were — activate them. However, those qualities of the form which I have outlined above mean that readers can to a large extent make their own version of the magazine. Very few people read a magazine all through in order. They will turn to the back, read their favorite bits and ignore others, even — because the form is ephemeral — cut out articles or pictures or recipes. They can circumvent at least the most direct commodification of the magazines by leading each other copies and circulating back numbers, recipes or patterns among their

friends. Most important of all, if the magazine ceases to interest them, they can stop buying. Even the traditional housewife exercises these powers in relation to "her" magazine. Because of the complex ways in which power works in magazines, therefore, they are potentially interesting sites for studying the creation and circulation of shared cultural meanings.

For all these reasons, as this volume shows, the magazine for women is a fruitful object of study. However, there are many methodological as well as practical problems which still face the researcher who chooses such work. I indicate three of these areas, each of which the following articles have addressed in different ways. There is the sheer volume of material which even a single magazine produces in the course of a single year. Researchers have to find ways of delimiting the material and — I have found in my own research — of disciplining themselves to resist the seductions of the serial form. Secondly, the complex and even contradictory nature of the magazine makes reading it a difficult task since scholars — unlike magazine editors — have to produce self-consistent arguments. Finally for historians of culture, there is the different and apparently contradictory problem of lack rather than excess of material. For most magazines there is little surviving evidence about historical readers, or even historical purchasers. Some valuable work has been done on contemporary readers but, though this work is often suggestive, it cannot simply be extrapolated back into the past.

My argument about the interest of this form are, perhaps, redundant at the end of a collection which makes abundantly clear how fruitful and exciting an area of research this is, despite these difficulties. I turn, now, therefore to consider the specific arguments of the volume more directly.

Continuity and Discontinuity: Women's Magazines in Japan

Across the rich diversity of the papers reprinted here certain themes recur. Taking the title of Andrea Germer's paper, I suggest that one way of thinking across the various topics discussed is through categories of continuity and discontinuity or tradition and transformation. In the second part of this response, therefore, I pick up some of the themes of the volume in terms of these concepts.

The workshop from which this volume came was part of a wider event on "Translation of Culture and the Culture of Translation". Translation was crucial both to the process of the workshop and to its substance. Here I would pay tribute to the patient courtesy of all the scholars present in dealing with my own inadequacies in translating. The nature of translation, as the English word suggests, the process of "carrying across" from one language to another and from one culture to another, is never simple. There are continuities of course but there are also breaks, moments where a simple carrying across of meaning is impossible and it is better to step sideways rather than go straight forward.

The continuities and discontinuities involved in translation are intimately related to another structuring set of relationships, those between the local and the global. In an interna-

tional gathering where the participants are drawn from several parts of the world, these relationships are embedded in the proceedings. However, they were also central to the subjects of discussion. What is the relationship between the feminist magazines of second wave feminism in Japan and those in the United States, Britain or France? Where was there direct imitation or importation? Why does *Elle* produce under the same title a different magazine for Japanese readers, from French or American or Indian? What was the impact of pictures taken from the French *Elle* and reproduced in the Japanese *Croissant* in the 1980s? The periodical was a print genre which developed first in western Europe and American but in every modernizing culture the form has played a crucial role. Now the Japanese read more periodicals than any one else. What is specific and what global about these Japanese versions of the periodical forms? This characteristically “modern” form of print is embedded in global capitalism. Here again the particular local manifestations of this form have been our focus but they cannot be divorced from global capitalism whether of publishing companies or of trans-national companies who advertise in their pages. These are the persistent questions which these studies both begin to answer and continue to raise.

This spatial question of continuity and discontinuity is linked with temporal dimension. As historians we are inevitably concerned with such questions and several of the papers directly addressed issues of persistence through time of traditions, of ideological structures, or of political movements. Ulrike Wöhr’s paper invited all who were engaged in the workshop to think about continuities and discontinuities in the attitudes of intellectuals and feminists towards mass women’s magazines. Andrea Germer discussed the way the second-wave feminist magazine *Onna Erosu* deliberately looked back to an earlier 1930s publication (*Fujin sensen*) despite the obvious differences produced by a gap of more than 40 years. Barbara Holthus looked at changes in the way female sexuality and body images were represented in *Croissant*. Ishiwata Yoshimi traced continuity and change in the way certain new religions defined the married couple in the 1960s and 1970s. Barbara Sato discussed the persistence of the ideology of “good wife, wise mother” through periods of rapid modernization. The problems posed by periodizations, such as the use of that slippery term “modern,” arise precisely from the untidiness of such historical process in which discontinuities are never absolute.

As Barbara Sato’s discussion made clear, our interest in change or resistance to change across time and space focused specifically in how historical understandings of gender and sexual difference change or — more often it seemed — resist change. Harald Fuess’s discussion took as its starting place the norm of the “good wife, wise mother” and explored the question of changes in the way the role of the father was constructed in a women’s magazine. Almost all the other papers focused on the struggle over female social roles, whether in the form of challenges from feminists and intellectuals, discussions in new religions or the variety of instruction and entertainment which sought to create desirable femininity in the popular magazines. Despite the figure of the modern girl or the battling feminist, what struck me was the persistence of two elements in these debates. The absolute assumption of sexual difference and

the inequalities of power between men and women.

Such generalizations, however, are dangerous. As we were reminded both in the subject matter of Ulrike Wöhr's paper and in a certain defensiveness about the nature of our subject, Japanese culture is not monolithic — anymore than other contemporary cultures are. The split between high and low culture, the disdain of intellectuals for what they saw as ordinary housewives' failure to understand their own self-interest, these suggest that even in the same location at the same historical moment there are cultural discontinuities as well as links and common threads.

Such apparent contradictions should not surprise the student of women's magazines, for the magazine is a form which simultaneously claims that each number is new and different and that each number is the "same" as the last. This double identity which offers the reader both stability and transformation has, I would argue, made the magazine particularly suitable for the work of femininity. Femininity in the woman's magazine is always already taken as grounds for the identity of the readers and yet is always something for which they have to strive — with the magazine's help.

Like the journals which are the object of their study, the papers in this volume are characterized both by common interests and by a rich diversity of approach. I have learned much from them and I am delighted that they are made available now in a form which others, too, can enjoy and learn from.