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Strategic Contradictions: Ryōsai Kenbo Ideology and Women's Industrial Mobilization in Japanese Nationalism

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Abstract

This paper examines the fundamental contradiction in modern Japanese nationalism between the state-promoted Ryōsai Kenbo ("good wife, wise mother") ideology and the simultaneous mobilization of women for industrial labor from 1890-1945. Through discourse analysis of educational policies, propaganda materials, and institutional practices, I demonstrate how the Japanese state managed this contradiction not by resolving it but through strategic adaptations of gender ideology. Drawing on Hobsbawm's concept of "invented traditions" and Yuval-Davis's theory of gendered nationalism, I argue that effective nationalist ideologies operate through strategic inconsistencies rather than coherent philosophical systems. The textile industry's paradoxical dependence on female labor during the Meiji period established patterns of contradiction management that evolved through the interwar period's expansion of women's education and employment, culminating in wartime propaganda that explicitly merged maternal and productive duties as forms of patriotic service. Unlike the totalitarian gender regimes of Germany and Italy, Japan's distinctive approach involved cultural hybridity and "negotiated consent," repurposing traditional structures to serve modern imperatives while maintaining a veneer of continuity. This analysis reveals not only the historical specificity of Japanese gender constructs but also illuminates broader patterns in how nationalisms instrumentalize gender while obscuring inherent contradictions—patterns that continue to shape gender arrangements in contemporary societies.

Introduction

From the Meiji era through World War II, the Japanese state promoted the ideology of *Ryōsai Kenbo*—"good wife, wise mother"—as the definitive model of feminine virtue. This construct positioned women primarily within the domestic sphere, emphasizing maternal nurturing, moral education of children, and dutiful management of household affairs (Koyama, 2013). Yet paradoxically, as Japan underwent rapid industrialization and militarization, these same women were increasingly drawn into the industrial workforce, particularly in textiles and munitions. This fundamental contradiction—between women as domestic nurturers and industrial producers—created a profound tension within Japanese nationalism

that both venerated traditional femininity while pragmatically redefining it according to national imperatives.

This contradiction reveals much about the gendered dimensions of modern Japanese nationalism. As Miyake (1991) argues through her concept of "doubling expectations," the state's approach to womanhood was not ideologically coherent but rather strategically inconsistent, flexibly recasting women as either patriotic mothers or productive laborers depending on immediate national needs. Kiguchi (2005) further demonstrates how educational reforms rooted in *Ryōsai Kenbo* were deliberately designed to align women's domestic roles with national modernization goals, establishing gender as a foundational element of state formation.

This research investigates three critical questions: How did the Japanese state attempt to reconcile the ideological tension between domestic motherhood and industrial mobilization? What specific rhetorical frameworks and policy mechanisms bridged these contradictions? How did these tensions evolve across different phases of nationalism between 1890 and 1945?

I argue that Japanese nationalism operated through strategic inconsistencies rather than coherent ideology. The state managed these contradictions not by resolving them but by continuously adapting the image of patriotic womanhood through evolving educational policies, propaganda, and mobilization campaigns. This strategic flexibility demonstrates how gender served as a malleable construct within nationalist discourse, revealing that effective national ideologies often function through adaptation and contradiction rather than philosophical coherence.

Analytical Framework

This paper employs a combination of theoretical and methodological approaches to analyze the contradictions embedded in the Japanese state's gender ideology from 1890 to 1945. Central to this analysis is the concept of "selective traditionalism", as articulated by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983), who argue that many so-called "traditions" are not inherited but invented to legitimize authority or social order. *Ryōsai Kenbo* exemplifies this process: though promoted as timeless and natural, it emerged in the Meiji era as a state-engineered ideal tailored to modern needs, especially in nation-building, moral education, and social discipline (Gluck, 1985). Carol Gluck's work specifically applies this theory to Japan, demonstrating how such invented ideologies created a mythic continuity between premodern values and modern governance.

To further unpack this ideological construction, the framework draws on Nira Yuval-Davis's theory of gendered nationalism, which reveals how women's roles—especially their reproductive and symbolic functions—become central to national identity. Yuval-Davis (1997) argues that women are simultaneously biological reproducers of the nation, cultural transmitters of tradition, and symbols of national boundaries. In the Japanese case, this helps illuminate why *Ryōsai Kenbo* endured rhetorically even as women were industrially mobilized: their national role shifted between domestic and productive identities based on state necessity, not ideological consistency.

This analysis is enhanced by Sheldon Garon's (1997) examination of state management techniques in modern Japan. His concept of "social management" provides insight into how

the Japanese government deployed what he terms "moral suasion" (kyōka) to reconcile contradictory gender roles without appearing to abandon traditional values. Garon's work on how the state mobilized women's associations, savings campaigns, and "daily life improvement" movements offers concrete mechanisms through which ideological contradictions were managed in practice. This perspective helps bridge the gap between state ideology and on-the-ground implementation of gender policies.

Methodologically, this paper applies discourse analysis to interpret how gender was constructed and manipulated in state rhetoric, education, and wartime propaganda. Vera Mackie (2003) provides a model for such analysis in the Japanese context, emphasizing the intersection of embodiment, citizenship, and state power in feminist historiography. Her approach informs this paper's reading of primary sources including Ministry of Education curricula guidelines (1890-1941), Women's Patriotic Association publications, textile factory regulations, and National Spiritual Mobilization campaign materials. These sources reveal how the state's rhetorical framing evolved to accommodate the growing contradiction between domestic ideology and industrial necessity.

By combining these theoretical tools, this framework enables a critical analysis of how Japan's nationalist project both invented and revised traditions of womanhood to serve changing political and economic agendas. It allows us to see not only what roles women were assigned, but how those roles were justified, contested, and strategically redefined in a shifting ideological landscape.

Historical Context: Evolution of Ryōsai Kenbo (1890-1945)

A. Origins and Development (1890-1910)

The ideology of *Ryōsai Kenbo*—"good wife, wise mother"—emerged during the Meiji period as part of Japan's strategic modernization efforts, establishing a gender framework that would later create fundamental contradictions when women were mobilized for industrial labor. The 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education laid the moral foundation for this ideology, emphasizing loyalty and Confucian virtues that positioned women primarily as domestic nurturers. As Nolte and Hastings (1991) observe, the Rescript synthesized traditional moral education with modern state objectives, creating a blueprint for gendered citizenship that would define women's relationship to the state.

The 1899 Girls' High School Ordinance formalized the *Ryōsai Kenbo* ideology within Japan's education system. According to Kiguchi (2005), this ordinance explicitly defined girls' education as preparation for motherhood, stating that "the marriage and becoming the good wife and wise mother will be the work of large majority when the future." The resulting curriculum emphasized domestic skills and moral education designed to produce mothers who could raise patriotic sons while remaining firmly within the private sphere—a position that would later conflict directly with industrial needs.

The education system became the primary vehicle for institutionalizing this gendered division of labor. Girls' high schools implemented curricula heavily weighted toward home economics and ethics rather than technical or industrial skills. As Gordon (2003) notes,

these institutions created a female ideal of an educated domestic manager who could support Japan's modernization from within the home—establishing the ideological foundation that the state would later need to circumvent during industrial and wartime mobilization.

B. Expansion and Codification (1910-1930)

During the Taishō period (1910-1930), *Ryōsai Kenbo* was incorporated into broader nationalist discourse, further entrenching the ideology that would later clash with economic imperatives. The state elevated motherhood from a private family matter to a national duty, creating a powerful nationalist framework around women's domestic roles. Women's education expanded but remained strictly gendered, reinforcing domestic skills even in higher education institutions (Kiguchi, 2005), further limiting women's preparation for industrial roles they would later be expected to fill.

Women's organizations played a crucial role in codifying and disseminating the ideology. State-sponsored groups like the Ladies' Patriotic Association legitimized women's participation in national affairs solely through the lens of maternal duty (Nolte & Hastings, 1991). These organizations normalized the connection between domesticity and national service through activities such as supporting military families—creating structures that the state would later leverage to mobilize women for production while maintaining the fiction of maternal service.

Japan's approach exemplified what Gluck (1985) terms "selective traditionalism," where the state selectively emphasized aspects of traditional gender roles while adapting them to modern purposes. Unlike Western iterations that sometimes permitted women's public influence, Japanese *Ryōsai Kenbo* emphasized women's containment within the home as essential to social order—setting the stage for the ideological gymnastics required when industrial needs demanded women's labor outside the home.

C. Wartime Transformation (1930-1945)

The militarization of Japanese society from the early 1930s forced a transformation of *Ryōsai Kenbo* ideology to accommodate the central contradiction between domestic ideology and industrial necessity. As Uno (1993) argues, this period marked not the abandonment but the strategic adaptation of *Ryōsai Kenbo*, transforming it into a tool of mobilization that attempted to reconcile reproduction and production for the state.

The concept expanded to incorporate sacrifice for the nation as a fundamental maternal virtue, with propaganda urging women to support the empire not just through childrearing but through industrial labor. According to Miyake (1991), this created a "doubling of expectations" where women were required to excel both as mothers and as workers without diminishing either role—a contradiction managed through rhetorical rather than substantive reconciliation.

The traditional emphasis on women's reproductive role was increasingly supplemented by productivity demands while maintaining the fiction that women's industrial labor was merely an extension of maternal patriotism. This ideological flexibility masked the fundamental contradiction between domestic ideology and economic necessity: while the state increasingly

relied on women's labor in war industries, it continued to promote a domestic ideal that defined women's identity through home and family (Uno, 1993).

These tensions revealed how nationalism operated through strategic inconsistencies rather than coherent ideology—precisely the contradiction that this paper explores. The wartime transformation of *Ryōsai Kenbo* demonstrated the state's capacity to redefine patriotic womanhood according to national needs, providing the historical foundation for understanding how Japan managed the fundamental contradiction between domestic ideology and industrial mobilization throughout the period from 1890 to 1945.

Early Industrial Contradictions (1890-1914)

A. The Textile Industry Paradox

The emergence of Japan's modern textile industry created a fundamental contradiction in the application of Ryōsai Kenbo ideology. While state rhetoric emphasized women's domestic roles, Japan's economic development depended heavily on female industrial labor. By 1900, women constituted nearly 60 percent of the industrial workforce, with the vast majority concentrated in textile mills (Tsurumi, 1990: 85). This feminization of industry represented a pragmatic compromise between economic imperatives and gender ideology.

The textile industry specifically targeted young rural women, typically between ages 12 and 20. These women were often sent to factories by impoverished agricultural families, creating a direct contradiction between economic necessity and feminine ideals (Hunter, 2003: 52). Factory recruiters approached rural families, emphasizing the temporary nature of employment and promising that daughters would return with enhanced domestic skills.

Factory dormitory systems attempted to reconcile industrial labor with traditional expectations. As Molony argues, these dormitories functioned as pseudo-family structures, with female supervisors serving as surrogate mothers and enforcing strict moral discipline (Molony, 1991: 220). This arrangement created controlled environments that simultaneously served industrial capitalism while claiming to preserve traditional gender roles.

B. Rhetorical Management Strategies

The state and industry developed strategic rhetoric to manage this contradiction. Primary among these was framing factory work as a temporary phase before marriage rather than a permanent vocation. Official discourse consistently emphasized that female workers would eventually return to their "natural" domestic roles, presenting industrial employment as preparation for, not an alternative to, family life.

Industrial labor was further legitimized by positioning it as an extension of filial duty. Young women's factory work was characterized as sacrifice for family welfare—sending wages home demonstrated filial piety, connecting industrial labor to traditional virtue (Faison, 2007: 375). This rhetoric transformed potentially disruptive economic activity into an expression of traditional values.

Molony notes that factory educational programs strategically reinforced domestic skills alongside industrial training. Evening classes in cooking, sewing, and moral education en-

sured that even as young women gained economic independence, they were simultaneously being prepared for future roles as wives and mothers (Molony, 1991: 223).

C. Institutional Responses

Companies created environments that mimicked domestic structures while maximizing labor extraction. Factory compounds often included shrines, gardens, and ceremonial spaces reinforcing traditional values. Tsurumi documents how factory owners presented themselves as paternal figures responsible for both moral and professional development of female employees, aligning industrial capitalism with Confucian paternalism (Tsurumi, 1990: 140).

"Motherhood" programs and competitions within factories reinforced domestic ideals in industrial settings. Annual competitions for cooking, cleaning, and childcare simulated domestic responsibilities while creating a surrogate family environment. According to Molony, these activities served as public demonstrations that factory girls were developing, not neglecting, the skills necessary for their future domestic roles (Molony, 1991: 225).

The teaching of domestic skills alongside industrial labor represented the most direct institutional response to this contradiction. Hunter describes how factory schools typically devoted significant time to both industrial skills and domestic education, creating a "dual curriculum" that prepared women simultaneously for production and reproduction (Hunter, 2003: 126). This approach allowed the state and industry to maintain that industrial employment enhanced rather than detracted from women's preparation for their eventual domestic roles.

Interwar Adjustments (1914–1931)

A. Impact of WWI Economic Expansion

The economic boom triggered by World War I significantly reshaped Japan's labor landscape. As Margit Nagy notes in her analysis of middle-class working women, wartime demand for industrial and bureaucratic labor led to a surge in female employment, particularly in urban centers (Nagy in Bernstein, 1991: 200-202). Middle-class women increasingly entered white-collar roles such as teachers, nurses, and office workers, a shift distinct from the earlier dominance of factory labor. This period saw a "marked increase" in professions like nursing, which grew fourfold between 1911 and 1926, alongside the rise of typists and department store clerks (Nagy in Bernstein, 1991: 204–206). The visibility of working women reflected both economic necessity and the gradual erosion of rigid class boundaries, as skilled laborers' daughters accessed middle-class jobs. However, these gains were tempered by societal anxieties about women's roles, as working women remained a minority in the labor force and faced scrutiny over their "feminine virtue" (Nagy in Bernstein, 1991: 200).

B. Educational Adaptations

Educational reforms during the interwar period reflected Japan's dual expectations of women. Girls' higher schools expanded, blending domestic training with vocational skills like typing,

aimed at preparing women for temporary employment before marriage (Nagy in Bernstein, 1991: 207). Barbara Sato underscores that curricula emphasized *shūyō* (self-cultivation), balancing modern aspirations with traditional roles (Sato, 2003: 115-117). While higher education opportunities grew, they maintained a domestic emphasis, as seen in social work programs at institutions like Japan Women's College, which trained women for roles aligned with state goals (Nagy in Bernstein, 1991: 208). This duality mirrored policy tensions: education aimed to equip women for economic contributions without destabilizing the *ryōsai kenbo* (good wife, wise mother) ideal.

C. Media and Policy Representations

Media played a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of working women. Magazines like *Shufu no tomo* celebrated the "working daughter" as a filial contributor to household budgets, normalizing women's economic participation (Sato, 2003: 135). Yet, as Miriam Silverberg highlights, the "Modern Girl" (*moga*)—depicted in Western attire and embracing leisure—embodied cultural anxieties about shifting gender norms (Silverberg in Bernstein, 1991: 240–264). Government policies oscillated between pragmatism and conservatism: surveys acknowledged women's labor necessity, but campaigns like the *Seikatsu Kaizen Undō* (Campaign to Improve Livelihood) sought to rationalize homemaking, discouraging long-term employment (Nagy in Bernstein, 1991: 214). Andrew Gordon contextualizes these tensions within broader social upheavals, noting how interwar labor movements reflected contested visions of modernity and gender roles in Japan's industrial democracy (Gordon, 1991: 128-131).

These interwar adjustments represented both evolution and entrenchment in the state's management of gender contradictions. As Japan moved toward militarization in the 1930s, these tensions would intensify, requiring even more elaborate rhetorical and policy mechanisms to reconcile women's expanding economic roles with increasingly nationalist iterations of the Ryōsai Kenbo ideal.

Wartime Reconciliation Strategies (1931–1945)

A. National Spiritual Mobilization

During Japan's Fifteen-Year War (1931–1945), the state orchestrated unprecedented efforts to reconcile women's domestic roles with wartime labor demands. As Sandra Wilson (2006: 87-89) documents, even in the early phase following the Manchurian Incident, government campaigns reframed women's labor as direct patriotic service. The Meiji-era ideal of *ryōsai kenbo* ("good wife, wise mother") was strategically expanded to encompass national, not just familial, duties. According to Yoshiko Miyake's analysis, women's reproductive and productive roles were ideologically merged under the concept of *kokkateki bosei* ("motherhood-in-the-interest-of-the-state"), positioning childbearing and factory work as equally vital to imperial survival (Miyake in Bernstein, 1991: 270). Garon's research on women's associations reveals how the government propagated the concept of a "home front," deliberately blurring divisions between domestic and industrial spheres through neighborhood associations and

women's patriotic groups (Garon, 1997: 25-27). This rhetoric transformed mundane tasks—sewing uniforms or rationing food—into acts of patriotic sacrifice, embedding militarism into daily life and illustrating what Miyake terms the "doubling expectations" placed on women (Miyake in Bernstein, 1991: 267).

B. Visual and Rhetorical Analysis Through Secondary Sources

Scholars have analyzed how wartime propaganda navigated contradictions between women's traditional and wartime roles. Miyake (1991: 272-274) highlights imagery in state publications showing women as both nurturing mothers and industrial laborers. Propaganda posters depicted housewives in aprons emblazoned with patriotic slogans entertaining soldiers—symbolizing maternal care for the nation—while simultaneously portraying young women in factories, their labor framed as an extension of familial duty. Gordon (1991: 243) argues that such imagery resolved tensions by positioning women's labor as an extension of their "natural" capacity for self-sacrifice. Tipton's analysis of media representations demonstrates how women's magazines participated in this rhetorical reconciliation, publishing articles that simultaneously celebrated domestic efficiency and factory productivity as equally patriotic feminine virtues (Tipton, 2002: 142-145). These academic analyses emphasize how propaganda leveraged maternal tropes to justify exploitation: women's unpaid domestic labor and underpaid factory work were both glorified as "service," masking systemic inequality in what Gordon (1991: 246) characterizes as "patriotic exploitation."

C. Labor Conscription and Its Justifications

The 1943 *Joshi Teishin Kinrō Rei* (Women's Volunteer Labor Corps Ordinance) institutionalized the conscription of unmarried women aged 12–40 into factories and mines. The state justified this through emergency rhetoric, framing labor as a "temporary sacrifice" for national survival. Widows and rural women were prioritized, deemed less critical to family cohesion than married mothers (Miyake in Bernstein, 1991: 276-278). Propaganda depicted factory work as a civic duty akin to soldiering, with slogans like "Every Woman a Producer, Every Home a Munitions Plant." Yet working conditions were grueling: 12-hour shifts, hazardous tasks, and punitive absentee policies. Faison's research on textile workers documents how this conscription system operated in practice, with factory managers receiving quotas for recruiting young women from rural areas through promises of patriotic service and future marriage prospects (Faison, 2001: 110-112). As Gordon (1991: 250-252) documents, the state downplayed these realities by invoking maternal symbolism—factory dormitories were termed "patriotic households," and managers styled as surrogate fathers. This ideological sleight-of-hand transformed exploitation into a moral imperative.

D. Policy Analysis

Strategic industries like munitions and textiles relied on policies that explicitly linked patriotic motherhood to production. According to Miyake (1991: 280), the 1937 *Mother-Child Protection Law*, ostensibly aimed at supporting single mothers, doubled as a pronatalist measure to ensure future labor reserves. Gordon (1991: 255) notes how the 1941 *Outline*

for Establishing Population Growth Policy mandated five children per household while conscripting women into factories, illustrating the state's dual demand for reproductive and productive labor. Hastings' analysis of professional women during this period reveals how education policies were similarly contradictory, expanding technical training for women while restricting their employment after marriage (Hastings, 1993: 181-183). State publications from the Welfare Ministry framed women's industrial work as an extension of maternal care through slogans that compared nurturing children to producing weapons (Miyake in Bernstein, 1991: 281-282). Wilson (2006: 120-122) traces how these contradictory expectations evolved from the early 1930s, when nationalist women's organizations first began framing domestic efficiency as national defense.

Theoretical Analysis and Implications

A. Patterns of Contradiction Management

The Japanese state consistently employed *strategic syncretism* to manage ideological contradictions, particularly between modernization and tradition. During the Meiji era, the slogan "Western technology, Eastern ethics" reconciled industrialization with Confucian values, while wartime propaganda framed imperial loyalty as a timeless virtue to justify militarization. As Thomas (2001: 26) argues, this approach created a "cage of nature" that naturalized modern developments by linking them to ostensibly ancient traditions. Rhetorical frameworks evolved from explicit nationalism (e.g., *kokutai* ideology) to subtler appeals to cultural uniqueness (*Nihonjinron*), ensuring continuity amid shifting political goals. Gluck (1985: 38-42) demonstrates how this process involved "inventing traditions" that appeared timeless despite their recent origins. State efforts were largely effective due to institutional penetration: schools, media, and grassroots organizations normalized contradictions by embedding state narratives into daily life. Sheldon Garon's analysis underscores this "everyday governance," where the state co-opted civil society to disseminate ideologies without overt coercion, ensuring public compliance through social peer pressure rather than brute force (Garon, 1997: 20-21).

B. Comparative Insights

Compared to interwar Germany and Italy, Japan's management of contradictions was distinctive in its reliance on *cultural hybridity* rather than radical breaks with the past. While Nazi Germany emphasized racial purity and motherhood as biological duty (Koonz, 1987: 196-198), and Fascist Italy's "demographic battle" mobilized women primarily as reproducers of soldiers (de Grazia, 1992: 72), Japan uniquely fused Shinto symbolism and emperor worship with modernization, avoiding the explicit rejection of pre-modern traditions. Unlike Europe's top-down totalitarianism, Japan's state-society collaboration involved *negotiated consent*: traditional structures were repurposed to advance state goals, creating a veneer of continuity. Uno (1993: 299-301) notes how this approach allowed Ryōsai Kenbo ideology to survive despite Japan's changing economic needs. This strategy mitigated resistance, as seen in the handling of women's roles—promoting education for "good wives, wise mothers"

while mobilizing female labor when necessary. Molony (2004: 112-115) characterizes this as "gendered citizenship" that reconciled contradictory demands of tradition and modernity. The result was a resilient ideological framework that adapted to external pressures while maintaining internal cohesion, distinguishing Japan's nationalist project from its European counterparts.

Yet understanding the state's strategy is incomplete without examining how individuals and communities navigated, negotiated, or contested these gendered contradictions. The following discussion expands the analysis along these dimensions.

Discussion: Navigating Contradictions – Agency, Diversity, and Economic Forces

While this paper has focused on state management of contradictions between Ryōsai Kenbo ideology and industrial needs, three critical dimensions deserve further examination: the evolution of women's agency, variations across geography and class, and economic drivers of ideological adaptation. These elements reveal how contradictions in gender ideology were experienced, negotiated, and sometimes contested.

Women's Agency: Evolution from Meiji to Wartime

Women's strategic responses to contradictory state expectations evolved significantly from 1890 to 1945. During the early Meiji period (1890-1910), women's agency often manifested in subtle forms within highly constrained environments. Factory women developed informal support networks within dormitories, creating what Uno (1993: 240) terms "small-scale resistances" that challenged managerial control while avoiding direct confrontation. These individualized strategies represented early forms of negotiation with industrial demands and domestic expectations.

The Taishō period (1912-1926) witnessed more organized expressions of agency. Hunter (2003: 162) documents how female textile workers increasingly participated in labor disputes, with strikes involving women workers rising dramatically between 1914-1921. Simultaneously, middle-class women formed organizations that strategically appropriated Ryōsai Kenbo rhetoric to advocate for expanded rights. As Molony (2000: 651) notes, the New Women's Association (Shin Fujin Kyōkai) justified women's political participation by arguing that fulfilling maternal duties required greater public engagement—effectively turning state ideology against itself.

As militarization intensified in the 1930s, women's resistance became more coded and indirect. Silverberg's (1991: 252) research on "modern girls" reveals how consumer choices and fashion functioned as political statements against increasingly regimented gender expectations. During the Pacific War (1937-1945), women in munitions factories engaged in what Tsurumi (1990: 176) identifies as "everyday resistance"—deliberate slowdowns, absenteeism, and subtle sabotage that challenged labor exploitation while avoiding detection.

This evolution demonstrates women's remarkable adaptability in navigating contradictory expectations, showing that even as the state refined its management of gender inconsistencies, women developed corresponding strategies of negotiation and resistance.

Geographical and Class Variations

The implementation and experience of Ryōsai Kenbo ideology varied significantly across Japan's diverse regions, colonial territories, and social classes. Brooks (1997: 46) demonstrates how the ideology functioned differently in Taiwan and Korea, where it simultaneously served as a "civilizing" tool and a mechanism of ethnic differentiation, creating what she terms "differentiated domesticity."

Within Japan proper, rural women's experiences diverged sharply from urban patterns. Agricultural labor requirements created different relationships with domestic ideals, with women's productive work remaining essential to household economies throughout the prewar period. This created persistent gaps between ideology and practice that were less pronounced in urban settings.

Class dimensions further complicated these patterns. Faison (2007: 380) shows that working-class women faced the most acute contradictions between ideology and economic necessity, while elite women could better approximate the domestic ideal through household help even while participating in approved public activities. These variations reveal that Ryōsai Kenbo's impact was neither uniform nor universal, but mediated through existing social hierarchies and regional economies.

Economic Determinants of Ideological Adaptation

The relationship between economic conditions and ideological adjustments represents a crucial dimension in understanding how contradictions were managed. Gordon's (1991: 260-263) analysis suggests that shifts in Ryōsai Kenbo rhetoric closely tracked Japan's changing economic needs, with the state adapting gender ideology to support successive phases of industrialization.

During the interwar recession, state campaigns for domestic frugality intensified, positioning women's household management as key to national economic recovery. Garon (1997: 165) documents how savings campaigns specifically targeted housewives as "managers of household economies," directly linking domestic practices to national fiscal health.

The wartime economy most clearly revealed this economic-ideological relationship, as severe labor shortages necessitated rapid ideological adjustments. Miyake (1991: 284) observes that state rhetoric about women's proper roles shifted dramatically between 1937-1945, with propaganda evolving from emphasizing exclusive domesticity to celebrating industrial productivity as labor shortages intensified. This pattern suggests that economic imperatives often drove ideological adaptations, with the state retrospectively justifying necessary economic measures through flexible reinterpretations of traditional values.

These considerations of agency, variation, and economic determinants reveal the complex reality beneath state rhetoric about gender roles. While the Japanese state developed sophisticated mechanisms for managing ideological contradictions, these contradictions created spaces for negotiation, resistance, and alternative practices that complicated the seemingly coherent narrative of the "good wife, wise mother" ideal.

Conclusion

Revisiting the Central Argument

The ryōsai kenbo ("good wife, wise mother") ideology emerged as a nationalist gender framework that managed contradictions through what Hobsbawm terms "invented traditions," positioning women as essential to Japan's modernization while reinforcing their subordination. As Kathleen Uno demonstrates, this represented a dramatic shift from the Tokugawa era when women in farming households engaged extensively in productive labor alongside reproductive work (Uno, 1991: 17-18). The evolving management of these contradictions—from early industrial adaptations through wartime mobilization—reveals how the state continuously reinterpreted gender ideology to serve changing national priorities while maintaining the appearance of continuity with tradition.

Broader Implications

This case illuminates nationalism's reliance on malleable gender ideologies to serve state interests. By framing motherhood as a civic duty, Japan instrumentalized women's labor without granting substantive equality. As our discussion has shown, however, this process was neither seamless nor uncontested. Women actively navigated and sometimes resisted contradictory expectations, experiences varied across geographical and class lines, and economic imperatives often drove ideological adaptations. These dimensions reveal nationalism not as a monolithic force but as a contested terrain where gender served as a key site of negotiation. As Vera Mackie argues, Japanese feminists had to navigate the contradictory relationship with the state, "marching as citizens but calling for the state to protect them" (Mackie, 1995: 125)—a pattern that illuminates the complex interplay between state power and women's agency.

Legacy for Contemporary Gender Politics

The postwar era retained ryōsai kenbo's echoes, particularly in expectations of women as primary caregivers. Despite legal reforms promoting equality after 1946, the cultural residue of "wise mothers" perpetuated structural disparities in workplace dynamics and domestic responsibilities. As Koyama Shizuko demonstrates, these nationalist gender constructs proved remarkably durable, adapting to new political landscapes while preserving core contradictions (Koyama, 2013: 215-218). Understanding how these contradictions were managed historically provides insight into contemporary gender politics in Japan, where tensions between women's productive and reproductive roles continue to shape policy debates around work-life balance, declining birthrates, and female labor participation. The legacy of these strategic inconsistencies reminds us that effective social change requires addressing not just formal equality but the underlying contradictions that structure gender relations in both public and private spheres.

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