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Critiquing Concubinage: Sumiya Koume (1850-1920) and Changing Gender Roles in Modern Japan

Marnie S. Anderson

Abstract: This essay introduces the life of Sumiya Koume (1850-1920), a geisha who was a concubine before becoming an activist and social reformer. I use her story to examine two major shifts in women's roles in Meiji Japan (1868-1912)—the decline of concubinage and a heightened divide between different categories of women: women based in households and those available for hire. I introduce Sumiya's 1893 essay 'I Recommend Against Becoming a Geisha or Concubine', the only known piece written by someone who had worked as a concubine. After situating her essay within debates about concubinage and legal changes, I turn to the reception of her work. Sumiya's life sheds light on the transitional nature of the early Meiji era, specifically the period of flux between the formal abolition of concubinage in 1882 and the advent of the state-sponsored 'good wife, wise mother' (*ryōsai kenbo*) paradigm in 1899.

In 1893, Sumiya Koume (1850-1920) wrote an essay for the prominent women's journal *Jogaku zasshi* (Women's Education Magazine) entitled 'I Recommend Against Becoming a Geisha or Concubine' (*Geisha to tekake to ni susumezu*).¹ In it, she

¹ Sumiya, 'Geisha to tekake'.

critiqued both roles and exhorted women who were serving as geisha not to become concubines. She did not mention that she herself had worked as both a geisha and a concubine (*tekake* or *mekake*).² By the time she wrote her essay, she had also served as a political activist as well as a social reformer and missionary.³

This essay introduces the life of Sumiya Koume to examine two major shifts in women's roles in Japan during the Meiji period (1868-1912)—the decline of concubinage and a heightened divide between different categories of women: women based in households and those available for hire. I introduce Sumiya's 1893 essay—the only known piece written by someone who had worked as a concubine—and suggest that it provides a new perspective on the changing practice of concubinage.⁴ After situating her text within debates about concubinage and legal changes, I turn to the reception of her work.

Sumiya remains a largely unknown figure in the scholarly literature on Japanese history; she appears in passing in some treatments of the Freedom and People's Rights Movement (*Jiyū minken undō*) and in accounts of the Okayama Orphanage (Okayama *kojiin*) where she worked closely with founder Ishii Jūji (1865-1914).⁵ The only extensive treatment of Sumiya can be found in the scholarship of historian Yoshizaki

² Geisha were entertainers who were indentured to geisha houses through a contract system whereas concubines had a 'stable, ongoing sexual relationship' with a man of the household but occupied a position below the wife. In Japan, concubines were registered as part of the household until 1882. On the challenges of defining terms like 'concubine' and 'mistress', see Nagata, 'Mistress or Wife', 287-289.

³ I use the terms 'activist' and 'social reformer' to describe Sumiya's work after leaving concubinage. She was a working woman, but it is not clear that she was compensated.

⁴ On concubinage, see Lublin, *Reforming Japan*; Mihalopoulos, *Sex in Japan's Globalization*; and Fuess, *Divorce in Japan*. For records by former prostitutes and geisha, see Davis, 'The Unprecedented Views', and Masuda, *Autobiography*.

⁵ Hosoi, *Ishii Jūji to Okayama kojiin*; Maus, *Ishii Jūji*.

Shihoko.⁶ Yoshizaki adopts a biographical approach to Sumiya's life, chronicling her departure from her patron's home and characterizing her as a 'woman of service' (*hōshi suru onna*) for the remainder of her life.

Sumiya's life sheds light on the transitional nature of the early Meiji era, specifically the period of flux between the formal abolition of concubinage in 1882 and the advent of the state-sponsored 'good wife, wise mother' (*ryōsai kenbo*) paradigm in 1899. In exploring Sumiya's life, one is struck that her past as a geisha and a concubine did not prevent her from carving out a later identity as a pillar of a local church and a central figure in running the Okayama Orphanage. Yet her mobility should not surprise us given that in the late Edo period (1603-1868), a number of discourses circulated about women who engaged in sex work ranging from praise to censure; moreover, experience with sex work was no barrier to marriage.⁷ But what was the fate of this set of cultural understandings in the subsequent Meiji period? We know a lot about prostitution in the late Edo period as well as the anti-prostitution movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but less about what happened to women in the intervening years.⁸ Specifically, we need to understand more about Meiji women who did not marry and/or who engaged in sex work, especially those who worked as concubines. Indeed, concubinage itself in the period after the Meiji Restoration has not received much

⁶ Yoshizaki, 'Sumiya Koume to Kageyama (Fukuda) Hideko'; Yoshizaki, 'Hōshi suru onna'. Yoshizaki is listed as the author of this section of the edited volume. I list her here to highlight her pioneering work on Sumiya. See also Ōta, 'Nakagawa Yokotarō, Sumiya Koume.'

⁷ Stanley, *Selling Women*, 144 and *passim*.

⁸ An exception is Stanley, 'Enlightenment Geisha'. On prostitution in the Edo period see Stanley, *Selling Women*. The literature on the antiprostitution movement is extensive. See Mihalopoulos, *Sex in Japan's Globalization*, Lublin, *Reforming Japan*, and Garon, *Molding Japanese Minds*.

scholarly attention except in passing when it is lumped together with prostitution.⁹ For this reason, I address it here at some length.

While scholars normally frame the experiences of Meiji women in terms of the ‘good wife, wise mother’ paradigm, I show that this model does not apply to Sumiya’s case since her major life transitions occurred before modern gender roles were established. Her life reminds us that ‘good wife, wise mother’ as a state-sponsored ideology took hold around the turn of the twentieth century and that the preceding decades were characterized by more fluidity in gender roles than scholars normally acknowledge. As historians Sharon Nolte and Sally Hastings observe in their now classic article ‘The Meiji State’s Policy Towards Women,’ ‘good wife, wise mother’ as an ideology for women began to be promoted by the government in the late 1890s. As they clarify, ‘in 1899 the term defined government policy in only one area, education, and for only one class, the middle’.¹⁰ By the time the government began to apply this philosophy to girls’ higher education, Sumiya was 49 years old. Her own experience of higher education took place two decades earlier in the 1870s. Still, textbook portrayals tend to apply the ‘good wife, wise mother’ paradigm to the whole of the Meiji period. In particular, scholars erroneously associate the term with Nakamura Masanao’s 1875 essay in *Mei roku zasshi* ‘Zenryō naru haha o tsukuru setsu’ (Creating Good Mothers), although as Sekiguchi Sumiko has shown, the term does not appear once in this essay.¹¹

⁹ Exceptions include Hayakawa, ‘Sexuality and the State’; Ishizaki, ‘Kindai’, 162-163. See also brief discussions in Fuess, *Divorce in Japan*, 56-57; Burns, ‘Local Courts, National Laws’.

¹⁰ Nolte and Hastings, ‘The Meiji’s State’s Policy’, 158. Koyama, *Ryōsai kenbo*.

¹¹ See Sekiguchi Sumiko, “‘Onna’” to kindai Nihon’, 48, note 13; Sekiguchi Sumiko, ‘Confucian Morals’, 108. Nakamura’s article appeared in *Mei roku zasshi* 33 (1875).

To be sure, Sekiguchi clarifies that ‘good wife, wise mother’ was not merely a new idea borrowed from the west; it drew on older Confucian notions, specifically the phrase *kenpu kenbo* (wise wives, wise mothers) that had circulated in the late Edo period. Early Meiji texts such as Nakamura’s essay simultaneously include older and newer ideas in highlighting the importance of wifedom and motherhood. Nevertheless, the slogan ‘good wife, wise mother’ was not promoted by the government in a systematic way until the turn of the twentieth century. The distinction I am making here is between ideas that circulate in various registers—as ideas about motherhood and wifedom had in the late Edo and early Meiji periods—and the state-sponsored ideology of ‘good wife, wise mother’ that began in 1899 and eventually became hegemonic for middle-class women. In Sumiya’s later years, as my discussion of her 1893 article will show, she held up monogamous marriage and wifedom as ideals in her critique of concubinage. Still, we should bear in mind that her views were not synonymous with ‘good wife, wise mother’.

In the end, I use the extant sources in English and Japanese to ask what Sumiya’s life tells us about broader changes in women’s roles in modern Japan.¹² I propose that the late nineteenth century, particularly the period between 1882 and 1889, constituted a moment of transition when perceptions about women were undergoing a major shift and modern gender ideals had not yet been established. Given the legacy of Edo period discourses on women and sex work, late nineteenth-century Japanese individuals generally viewed past experience as a ‘woman for hire’ as unremarkable, especially given

Examples that attribute the phrase to Nakamura: Sievers, *Flowers in Salt*, 22 and McClain, *Japan*, 258.

¹² Here I have been inspired by Ryan, ‘The Public’, 16. In Japanese, see Sekiguchi Sumiko, *Goishin to jendā*; Sekiguchi Hiroko ed., *Kazoku to kekkon*; Sōgō jōsei shi kenkyūkai, ed., *Nihon jōsei no rekishi*.

the turmoil surrounding the Meiji Restoration and the dislocations that followed. Only in subsequent decades did such markers—experience as a geisha or concubine or even a prostitute—become more fixed and central to one’s identity—or at least central to textual representations of it.¹³

A brief history of Sumiya Koume

Sumiya was born in 1850 to a lower-level samurai family in the Nodayachō district of Okayama City, a castle town in southwestern Japan. Her father had worked as a temple administrator not far from Okayama castle, but her parents died when she was very young, and her maternal grandmother and uncle raised her.¹⁴ She started learning to dance and to play the *shamisen* when she was five, and by her late teens, she was an accomplished teacher who had several students. Out of necessity, she was indentured as a geisha at the ‘Matsu no e’ restaurant (*ryōtei*).¹⁵ After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, one of her patrons bought out her contract and made her his concubine. This man was the local notable and famously eccentric Nakagawa Yokotarō (1836-1903).¹⁶ She began living with Nakagawa and his wife Yuki, and in 1877, Sumiya gave birth to a daughter named Toyo. In the mid-1870s, Nakagawa—a bureaucrat who was interested in all things novel and an advocate of ‘civilization and enlightenment’ (*bunmei kaika*) projects—developed an interest in Christianity. As early as 1875, he brought western missionaries affiliated with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM),

¹³ I have in mind women like Masuda Sayo whose life in the 1930s and 1940s was in many ways defined by her work as a geisha: Masuda, *Autobiography*.

¹⁴ On Okayama in the early twentieth century, see Young, *Beyond the Metropolis*.

¹⁵ On *ryōtei*, Dalby, *Geisha*, 193. Sumiya’s guardian no doubt received a sum of money at the time she was indentured.

¹⁶ Ōta, ‘Nakagawa Yokotarō, Sumiya Koume’, 272.

the missionary branch of the Congregational Church, from nearby Kobe to his house to deliver sermons.

From a larger perspective, the 1870s marked a time when Japan's leaders were attempting to attain parity with the western powers by overturning the unequal treaties, and 'civilization and enlightenment' was the slogan of the day. The term referred to all manner of social, political, and economic reform. Of particular interest are the links between Christianity, local notables, and the enlightenment project at the local level, for the primary advocates of 'civilization and enlightenment' in places like Okayama were local men of influence like Nakagawa. Christianity was associated with all things modern and western at this particular moment, and Christian membership jumped nationwide in the mid-1880s.¹⁷ Okayama had a relatively high concentration of missionaries early on and by 1880, they had worked with local converts to establish the Okayama Church.¹⁸ Nakagawa, referred to by locals as an 'enlightenment eccentric' (*kaika kijin*), served as a leader in promoting new ideas in Okayama that extended beyond Christianity and included hygiene, Western medicine, and education for girls.¹⁹ Nakagawa never actually converted to Christianity.

Sumiya's first exposure to Christianity came through the sermons she heard at Nakagawa's home. She no doubt became aware of some of the schools that Protestant missionaries were establishing around the country for women and girls. In 1878, she went to study at one such school in Kobe, the Kōbe Eiwa Jogakkō (the predecessor of Kobe Jogakuin, present-day Kobe College), an institution set up by the ABCFM. We do not

¹⁷ Lublin, *Reforming Japan*, 44.

¹⁸ Cary, *A History of Christianity*, 146.

¹⁹ On Nakagawa, see Hōgō, *Okayama no kijin henjin*, 120-126.

know for certain, but it seems likely that Nakagawa paid her tuition. However, Sumiya's time in Kobe was short-lived—under one year—and she was called back to Okayama by Nakagawa.²⁰ In addition to her brief educational experience in Kobe, Yoshizaki suspects that Sumiya had some education at a temple school during her youth, for there were two academies in her district.²¹

Perhaps the most important legacy of Sumiya's time at Kobe is that it nurtured ties with Eliza Talcott (1836-1911), a missionary and co-founder of the college. One lesson Sumiya surely took away from her time at Kobe College was that Talcott and the other missionaries abhorred concubinage.²²

Sumiya returned to Nakagawa's home at his request in 1879, but she no longer wished to be a concubine.²³ In coming to this view, her encounter with Christian ideas decrying concubinage at Kobe College was important, but she may also have been influenced by some of the contemporary debates in the press about the rights of concubines, for as we shall see, by 1882, concubines had lost legal standing.²⁴ With the help of Talcott, Sumiya departed the Nakagawa house in 1880, leaving her daughter Toyo behind at Nakagawa's insistence, a practice common in Japan at this time.²⁵ The following year, Sumiya was baptized at the Okayama Church during the second round of baptisms. At this point, Sumiya was in a difficult situation for she lacked the means to

²⁰ Yoshizaki, 'Hōshi suru onna', 107. It was not unusual for women to leave women's colleges without graduating. N. Ishii, *American Women Missionaries*, Chapter 5.

²¹ Yoshizaki, 'Hōshi suru onna', 105-106.

²² N. Ishii, *American Women Missionaries*, 90-92.

²³ Ibid. The historian is forced here to rely on missionary records from 17 years after the events to reconstruct her departure.

²⁴ Mackie, *Feminism*, 17.

²⁵ Her daughter Toyo disappears in most records of Sumiya's life after this point; they were reunited two years later in 1882. Pettee, 'Two Personalities', 397-398.

support herself. She was hired by the local missionary's wife, Isabella (Belle) Wilson Pettee (1853-1937), as a translator and a Japanese language teacher to help spread the gospel. In 1882, Sumiya became involved in the Okayama Women's Friendship Society (Okayama Joshi Konshinkai, hereafter OWFS), the first women's political group formed in Meiji Japan. The group comprised a few dozen women who came together twice a month to discuss political ideas, give speeches, and found a school.²⁶ How exactly Sumiya came to join the group remains unclear, although the ways that local Christian and people's rights networks overlapped in Okayama no doubt played a role. The following year, at the age of 33, Sumiya delivered a speech to the OWFS entitled 'The Cherry Blossoms in the Valley' (*Tanima no sakura*) at a local temple. The event was not religious but rather made use of an available public space, a common practice during the people's rights era.²⁷

In 1886, Sumiya worked with local missionaries to open a school in Okayama (the Fujin Eigakusha). Sumiya filed the application with the local authorities and identified the school's aim as to educate interested women of all ages and 'boys under the age of fifteen'.²⁸ The school remained open until 1890 and had 90 students registered at one point; it closed in the midst of a wave of anti-western sentiment.²⁹ While running the school, Sumiya began assisting Ishii Jūji with the Okayama Orphanage in 1887. Sumiya also proselytized and raised money for the Okayama Church throughout the country.³⁰ Her time in Tokyo put her in contact with Christian networks. It seems likely that she met

²⁶ Anderson, 'Women and Political Life.'

²⁷ San'yō shimbunsha, ed., *Okayama-ken rekishi*, 559.

²⁸ Saitoh, 'Meiji-ki Okayama-ken', 1-2; Yoshizaki, 'Meiji no shijuku', 28.

²⁹ Yoshizaki, 'Hōshi suru onna', 111.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

up with writers for Tokyo-based *Jogaku zasshi* by means of these networks. She later wrote an essay ‘I Recommend Against Becoming a Geisha or Concubine’ for the journal that I turn to in the following section.

For the next two decades after this essay was published, Sumiya played a central role at the Orphanage and carried out missionary work. In 1912, the Orphanage had become an administrative office when most of the institution was transferred to Miyazaki prefecture, though it did not close until 1926.³¹ At the same time, she continued to participate in networks surrounding the Okayama Church.³² Until her death, Sumiya resided in Okayama, though she traveled to Miyazaki to visit Ishii on his deathbed.³³ Six years later in 1920, Sumiya died at the age of 69.³⁴

Comparisons: Sumiya and Other Meiji Women

The best way to situate Sumiya may be to place her alongside the famous activist Fukuda (Kageyama) Hideko (1865-1927).³⁵ Not only were both women born to lower-class samurai families in the same district of Okayama City, but both shared an interest in liberal people's rights thought and participated in the OWFS in the 1880s. Sumiya, however, was fifteen years older than Fukuda. Sumiya's story stands out in part because of her life as a geisha and concubine prior to her engagement in people's rights politics.

Other aspects of Sumiya's story command attention and invite comparison with other Meiji-era geisha, though it is worth bearing in mind that her time as a geisha was

³¹ Maus, *Ishii Jūji*, 238.

³² Onoda, *Sumiya Koume shi tsuikairoku* (hereafter *Tsuikairoku*). See especially pp. 63-99..

³³ Yoshizaki, ‘Hōshi suru onna’, 114.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 117. She died after becoming ill on a trip to Kyoto..

³⁵ Yoshizaki ‘Sumiya Koume to Kageyama (Fukuda) Hideko’, 367–71.

limited to a few years, probably two. Sumiya's interest in people's rights thought is not surprising given that recent scholarship has shown how some geisha had an interest in people's rights ideas and were involved in activism in ways that went beyond serving as companions to male activists, an assumption that pervades older scholarship.³⁶ Some geisha formed groups, part of the upsurge in associational life in the 1880s. They gave money and supported activists who had been imprisoned. In the mid-1880s, a geisha named Aikichi attended the prefectural assembly in southwestern Kōchi. Aikichi wrote to the local paper to complain of the way people's rights-affiliated papers treated geisha using disparaging terms and called for geisha to be treated equally with other women.³⁷ But Sumiya was different from Aikichi and other activist geisha of the 1880s, in part because she was a generation older. At roughly the same time as Aikichi was writing letters to the editor, Sumiya had left her work as a geisha and a concubine behind, set up her own household, and become involved in the OWFS.

Sumiya's situation also brings to mind examples of other women who left sex work and pursued different careers before and after Sumiya's time. First is the case of Naitō Masu (1823-1901), daughter of a samurai family that had fallen on hard times, forcing Naitō to work as a prostitute in the late Edo period until a sympathetic merchant redeemed her contract. She later married, and in the mid-1870s, founded a school for girls and published a monthly newspaper for women and a textbook on women's education.³⁸ A better known case is that of Yamada Waka (1879-1957) who worked as a prostitute on the west coast of the United States. She later escaped and returned to Japan

³⁶ Sotozaki, *Ueki Emori*, 58–59.

³⁷ On Meiji geisha, see Stanley, 'Enlightenment Geisha'. Anderson, 'Women's Agency'.

³⁸ Kawata and Katō, 'Life History of Naitō Masu'.

to become a prominent reformer and advocate of maternalism in the 1920s and 1930s.³⁹ However, Yamada's husband urged her to hide her past as a prostitute, and she never mentioned her experiences in her essays and speeches.⁴⁰ By comparing Sumiya to these women, we see the extent to which time period matters in constructions of sex work, for there is no indication that Naitō and Sumiya felt obliged to hide their past in the late nineteenth century in the way that Yamada would in the interwar period, suggesting that modernity brought a hardening of the divide among women.⁴¹

Concubinage and the Law

We turn now to the decline of concubinage in the Meiji period. Sumiya does not address legal matters directly in her essay, but we should bear in mind that by the time Sumiya wrote in 1893, concubines lacked legal status. This was a sharp departure from the past, for in the late Edo period and early Meiji periods, concubinage was acceptable and legal.⁴² Indeed, Anne Walthall reminds us that before the modern period, concubines were common 'outside of Christendom'.⁴³ The nature of early modern concubinage varied widely according to context, and scholars debate whether concubines were more akin to servants since they often had contracts, or secondary wives.⁴⁴ Whatever the case, Seki Tamiko points out that concubinage provided economic opportunities for women in

³⁹ On Yamada, see Rodd, 'Yosano Akiko', 176; 195 and Yamazaki, *The Story of Yamada Waka*.

⁴⁰ Yamazaki, *The Story of Yamada Waka*, 146-147.

⁴¹ Ibid. For a literary depiction of concubinage, see Enchi Fumiko's *Onnazaka*. The novel is set in the Meiji period and discusses the pain that female household members suffer as a result of concubinage.

⁴² Fuse, *Kekkon to kazoku*, 58-59; Nagata, 'Mistress or Wife', 304-305; Seigle and Chance, *Ōoku*, 134-135.

⁴³ Walthall, 'Introducing', 13.

⁴⁴ Ōtake, 'Edo jidai no mekake', 509-511; Nagata, 'Mistress or Wife,' 304-305.

the early modern period.⁴⁵

By the 1880s, the Japanese government's quest to overturn the unequal treaties with the western powers and attain legal parity with the west would make the legal abolition of concubinage a necessity—western governments refused to revise the treaties until Japan attained what westerners regarded as an appropriate level of civilization. The path to abolition was far from straightforward. In the early Meiji period (1871), the *Shinritsu kōryō* (Outline of the New Criminal Code), a code informed by Chinese legal practices from the Ming and Qing dynasties, dictated that concubines and wives were to be listed together in household registries, granting concubines and their children legal recognition.⁴⁶ For the rest of the 1870s and continuing to the early 1880s, the proper place of concubines occupied intellectuals in the pages of newspapers and journals. For instance, in *Meiroku zasshi*, commentator Mori Arinori (1847-1899) portrayed the practice as a sign of Japanese society's low level of morality, lack of concern for bloodline, and the generally low place of women in Japan.⁴⁷ Meanwhile government officials debated the advantages and disadvantages of the practice from the perspective of Japan's place in the world.⁴⁸ As a result of these debates and the government's quest to overturn the unequal treaties, concubines 'disappeared' from household registries with the Criminal Code of 1882 as evolving definitions of 'civilization' necessitated a change

⁴⁵ Seki, *Edo kōki*, 30; Formanek, *Written Texts*, 84.

⁴⁶ On the code, Ch'en, *The Formation of the Early Meiji Legal Order*. Nagata, 'Mistress or Wife', 288-289; Fuse, *Kekkon to kazoku*, 58-59.

⁴⁷ Mori, 'On Wives and Concubines' (*Saishōron*).

⁴⁸ Some officials were concerned that concubinage needed to continue at least for the emperor in order to ensure the continuity of imperial line. Koyama, 'Meiji keimōki no shōrongi to haishō'; Ishizaki Shōkō, 'Kindai', 162.

in which conjugal practices were deemed legally acceptable.⁴⁹ An 1883 Dajōkan directive (Grand Council of State) confirmed that concubines were no longer to be listed in household registries ‘since they are not recognized by the law’, underscoring that they were not legally considered a part of families.⁵⁰

The practice of keeping concubines persisted—much to the dismay of members of the Japan Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (JWCTU)—and the government seems to have done nothing to stop it, for outright abolition was never the intention of officials. Nor were there legal sanctions for those who kept concubines.⁵¹ Still, there was no turning back. No one advocated that the system of legal concubinage should be revived. Even among the elite *kazoku* (peerage), the numbers of concubines declined around the turn of the century.⁵² The framework for understanding concubinage—from normal to unthinkable from the perspective of the law—had undergone a sweeping transformation.⁵³

In 1898, five years after Sumiya’s essay appeared, monogamy was formally instituted in the Meiji Civil Code of 1898.⁵⁴ Even though the Code dictated monogamy, it allowed for a measure of flexibility; fathers could still declare children born to women

⁴⁹ Burns, ‘Local Courts, National Laws’; Fuess, *Divorce in Japan*, 56-57.

⁵⁰ Ōtake, *Ie to josei no rekishi*, 249. Burns, ‘Local Courts, National Laws’, 308.

⁵¹ Fuess, ‘Adultery and Gender Equality’, 120; 124. The legal disappearance of concubines in 1882 made it impossible for patrons to sue concubines for infidelity.

⁵² Ishizaki, ‘Kindai’, 162-163.

⁵³ Changes in social practices followed. Concubinage was no longer practiced in the imperial household and among the peerage after the Meiji era. Morioka, *Kazoku shakai*, 390; By the 1920s, ‘monogamy within marriage was gaining considerable social leverage’ among the middle class. Tanaka, ‘Don’t Let Geisha Steal’, 123; Michiko Suzuki, ‘The Husband’s Chastity’, 332.

⁵⁴ Fuess, ‘Adultery and Gender Equality’, 115.

other than their wives legitimate.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the larger picture that emerges is one of concubinage on the decline by the early twentieth century though the practice persisted in some quarters until the end of World War II.

This discussion points to the need for further clarity in the existing English-language scholarship about concubinage—specifically opposition to concubinage—in the Meiji period as it relates to legal history. For example, scholars writing about the JWCTU frequently mention the group’s opposition to concubinage.⁵⁶ But what exactly were members protesting if concubinage did not legally exist? It turns out that the JWCTU opposed the lingering consequences of concubinage, including the question of whether the children of a concubine could inherit property.⁵⁷ Moreover, the JWCTU objected to the one-sided definition of adultery in Meiji law where only married women involved in extramarital relations could be charged with it. At the same time, members wished to broaden the legal definition of adultery to include relations with concubines and prostitutes (unlike concubinage, prostitution was legal). In sum, the JWCTU aimed to enact legal sanctions for men who engaged in relationships outside of marriage and hoped to prevent children born outside of monogamous marriage from inheriting property.

To sum up the complicated legal history: the 1898 Civil Code did *not* in fact put an end to concubinage, for this had already been accomplished with the 1882 Criminal Code. It is not the case that the government permitted concubinage after 1882; rather, as

⁵⁵ Hayakawa, ‘Sexuality’, 34; Fuess, *Divorce in Japan*, p. 52.

⁵⁶ Examples include Mihalopoulos, *Sex in Japan’s Globalization*, 68; Lublin, *Reforming Japan*, 59.

⁵⁷ This conversation was tied to the debates around classifying children as legitimate or otherwise. Burns, ‘Local Courts, National Laws’, 295-296.

we have seen, there were no sanctions for those who kept concubines. We are left with a messy picture of change and continuity as the practice fell by the wayside.⁵⁸

‘I Recommend Against Becoming a Geisha or Concubine’

Let us turn now to Sumiya’s essay. Sumiya left few sources in her own hand, and the only extant source from this period is the essay she wrote for *Jogaku zasshi* in 1893. *Jogaku zasshi*, ‘Japan’s first mass-circulation periodical designed for women’, aimed to enlighten educated men and women about the importance of women’s education and also encourage activism centered around opposition to prostitution and concubinage.⁵⁹ Sumiya’s goal—one she shared with other *Jogaku zasshi* writers devoted to social reform—was to enlighten a sympathetic audience. And yet her focus in the piece is rather narrow, as she primarily addresses geisha who might consider becoming concubines (not normally the audience we associate with this journal). For Sumiya, working as a geisha is the first step on the path to becoming a concubine. While Sumiya’s title includes both geisha and concubines, the essay centers on critiquing concubinage and my analysis here reflects this.⁶⁰

Scholars have noted what public intellectuals, government officials, and female reformers thought about concubinage, but as I have suggested, Sumiya’s essay is unusual in that it is the only available source written by someone who had actually worked as a concubine. It is reasonable to assume that her views expressed here reflect in part lessons

⁵⁸ Fuess, *Divorce in Japan*, 56-57.

⁵⁹ Brownstein, ‘Jogaku Zasshi’, 319. Copeland, *Lost Leaves*, 24-25.

⁶⁰ Over 75 percent of the text focuses on concubinage. Scholars have interpreted the title differently. Ōta views the title as a recommendation against geisha becoming concubines whereas Yoshizaki sees it as critical of geisha and concubines. Ōta, ‘Nakagawa Yokotarō’, 272, 282; Yoshizaki, ‘Hōshi suru onna’, 114-116.

learned at Kobe College and the views of Japanese Christians more broadly. However, her first-hand experience makes the essay unique. She does not mention her past directly, but her given name ‘Koume’ (Little Plum Blossom) would have struck readers as sounding like a geisha name.

A side note about the definition of concubine (*tekake* or *mekake*) in Sumiya’s essay— she does not make a distinction between concubines who live in households with the wife and children and those who reside in separate quarters. She mentions both situations and sees them as equally problematic.⁶¹ Even more troubling in her view is a third category of ‘secret concubines’ (*naisho gakari* or *kage tekake*), ‘spineless women’ kept by ‘vulgar men’. Sumiya exhibits particular distaste for this group because they try to hide their actions from others.

Overall, however, Sumiya’s tone is mostly devoid of judgment regarding concubines. Although Barbara Molony has pointed out that ‘many accounts of the antiprostitution movement stress the middle class feminists’ disdain for prostitutes’, Sumiya’s essay reminds us that not all women who opposed prostitution and concubinage saw themselves as superior or viewed women for hire as belonging to a lower order.⁶² Rather than relying on moral categories to judge concubines or wives, she focuses on enumerating the concrete and practical problems that arise with the presence of a concubine. Whereas some vocal critics associated with the JWCTU worried about the impact of concubines on ‘legitimate’ family members, Sumiya’s views are rooted in the

⁶¹ Sumiya, ‘Geisha to tekake’, 6.

⁶² Molony, ‘Review’. Molony notes exceptions to this trend including Lublin’s book and the work of Manako Ogawa.

painful experiences *all* members of the household face when a concubine is present.⁶³

Occasionally she makes harsh pronouncements about concubines, but her overall argument is that the system of concubinage is untenable and drives individuals to behave in undesirable ways.

The question of proper roles for women constitutes a central theme of the essay. Time and again, Sumiya stresses women's natural role as wives and mothers and states that 'becoming a concubine goes against women's nature'.⁶⁴ Sumiya goes on to declare, 'In the world, women's roles are as follows: to be wise wives (*kensai*) and wise mothers (*kenbo*); to help husbands and educate the children; to run households and to help benefit the state. But there is something that damages good women, ruins households and causes confusion to the state. It is geisha and prostitutes'.⁶⁵ It becomes clear that while Sumiya does not approve of geisha or prostitutes—and she displays a more general aversion to sex work—her primary focus is on concubinage and advising geisha that they should *not* become concubines after their contracts have ended. While she recognizes the attractions concubinage holds for geisha, she endeavors to show how the practice works against social harmony and harms all concerned. Indeed, in perhaps the most memorable line of the essay designed to shock potential concubines out of their complacency, she declares, 'that which kills without a knife is a concubine'.⁶⁶

Sumiya understands that becoming a concubine may appear a desirable step for geisha and prostitutes as they age and need a degree of security. Though some women

⁶³ Compare with the view of WCTU member Yuasa Hatsuko in Lublin, *Reforming Japan*, 59.

⁶⁴ Sumiya, 'Geisha to tekake', 12.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5. Sumiya's mention of motherhood is noteworthy, for motherhood did not figure prominently in discussions of women's roles in the preceding Edo period.

⁶⁶ Sumiya, 'Geisha to tekake', 6.

change course and move on to marriage, others ‘fall into a trap of uncleanness’ from which they cannot escape and become concubines. Sumiya draws attention to the negative aspects of concubinage that may not be evident. Specifically, she illuminates the particular problems that arise when wives and concubines live together. These problems continue even if the concubine has her own living quarters, Sumiya warns. In fact, separate quarters can make the situation worse for the wife, since the distance prevents her from assessing the state of the relationship between husband and concubine. The presence of a concubine affects all members of the household negatively, including the children and the husband. Once a concubine arrives, the trouble begins, although it may take awhile to manifest. No one behaves well and everyone suffers. Sumiya explains the bad behavior of all parties (husbands, wives, concubines) in terms of inevitable structural problems. For instance, she points out that the husband, in the process of going back and forth between two women, ‘loses his freedom’.⁶⁷ Her insight into how the situation affects men negatively is unusual, but remains congruent with her argument about the negative effects for all involved. She also addresses prospective concubines who may imagine they will enjoy a high social status, but they deceive themselves, she points out, for their men cannot even take them out in public.⁶⁸

Although Sumiya judges concubines quite harshly at certain moments—for instance, at one point she declares that their lives are steeped in ‘sin’ (*tsumi*)—she expresses a degree of understanding for women who find themselves in unfortunate situations where they have no other means to support themselves. At one point, she

⁶⁷ Ibid., 12.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 11.

exclaims, ‘What a pity to become someone's toy’.⁶⁹ Characterizing concubinage in terms of sin never becomes a dominant theme in her essay. Instead, Sumiya is sympathetic on occasion to all parties and even allows for some good intentions, stating that a concubine may initially not wish to cause trouble for the wife although that is surely what will happen, for the presence of a concubine inevitably interferes with the husband-wife relationship.⁷⁰ To imagine otherwise is to ‘deceive’ oneself.⁷¹ One of the only situations where Sumiya expresses no sympathy is in cases where concubines maneuver and become the main wife, in effect stealing other women's husbands.⁷²

Most of the time, Sumiya separates the situation concubinage produces from the individuals involved. She recognizes the full variety of human beings—deceptive concubines, concubines with good intentions, foolish wives, and wives who terrorize concubines when their husbands are absent. All individuals, through no fault of their own, are caught up in a system that will not work no matter the arrangements and intentions of the individuals. (One is reminded here of early modern female philosopher Tadano Makuzu’s (1763-1825) ‘unsolved puzzle’ concerning ‘the way concubines create disorder in a house’).⁷³ The only other group—besides concubines who become the main wife—that Sumiya targets unsparingly is the ‘parents and brothers’ who sell their daughters and sisters in the first place, especially those who do not work themselves.⁷⁴ She notes how families and concubines use the language of obligation to justify the practice, but has no patience for such logic. Instead she suggests that one’s livelihood need not harm others

⁶⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 7.

⁷¹ Ibid., 13.

⁷² Ibid., 6, 11.

⁷³ Tadano, ‘Solitary Thoughts’, 22.

⁷⁴ Sumiya, ‘Geisha to tekake’, 5.

and that ‘it is better not to eat’ than to cause others trouble’.⁷⁵ Strikingly, she does not address the root causes of concubinage such as poverty, a strategy used by contemporary British reformers.⁷⁶

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the essay is that Sumiya puts the burden on concubines or potential concubines to leave men rather than calling on men to stop procuring concubines or for the government to halt the practice. Concubines, writes Sumiya, should think of the greater good and not be swayed by any pressures from men to stay in the household: they ‘should think of other women’s hearts and the future of the descendants. Even if they are despised and hated and told they do not know the meaning of obligation, concubines should leave the men’.⁷⁷ Although a man may start to detest his former concubine, ‘most people [involved in the situation] will be happy’. In general, Sumiya sees it as ‘women’s job to reform men’s lustfulness and uncleanness’ for men cannot control their desires. Nor does she think wives have much power in the situation. Given that men lack control over their desires and that wives are largely powerless, she concludes that the concubine must be the one to take the initiative and leave. Toward the end of the essay, Sumiya writes that if women can manage to clean up the household—presumably by ‘women’ she means both concubines and wives here, although each group has a different task—it will result in the ‘happiness of the household as well as benefit to the state’.⁷⁸

From a larger perspective, this period marks the beginning of a decades-long debate concerning the extent to which women are responsible for men’s sexuality and

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷⁶ See Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*.

⁷⁷ Sumiya Koume, ‘Geisha to tekake’, 10.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

how they should go about keeping men in line. In 1893, Sumiya put the burden on women, particularly geisha and concubines, to ensure men's upright behavior. By the 1920s and 1930s, the conversation would move to how wives could learn from geisha and waitresses to keep their husbands from straying, a subject that remains beyond the scope of this essay.⁷⁹

Sumiya's Essay in Context

I have suggested that Sumiya's views represent an unusual contribution to contemporary critiques of the practice. But how exactly did Sumiya's perspectives depart from the mainstream of the JWCTU, the group best known for its promotion of monogamy in Meiji Japan? Let me clarify that Sumiya was a member of the Okayama Women's Temperance Society, a group that transformed into the Okayama WCTU in 1889 before merging with other local chapters into a national body—the JWCTU—in 1893.

In contrast to the petitions and articles by prominent JWCTU members from this period, Sumiya was less concerned with legal issues such as the question of inheritance, and she makes no mention of unfair adultery laws. Moreover, Sumiya did not rely on the language of nationalism to make her case, a common strategy deployed by JWCTU members.⁸⁰ In fact, Sumiya's invocation of the national interest is limited to the observations that women should help the state by serving in the household and that unstable households do not serve the state. Sumiya also differs from the JWCTU

⁷⁹ Tanaka, ““Don't Let Geisha Steal””, 134-136.

⁸⁰ Lublin, *Reforming Japan*, 175 and passim. Even before the JWCTU was formed, activists Kishida Toshiko and Fukuda Hideko critiqued aspects of women's status. See Sievers, *Flowers in Salt*.

mainstream in that she concerned herself with the greater good of all household members rather than confining her analysis to the needs of middle and upper-class women. On this point, Bill Mihalopoulos argues that

petitions and public meetings were a double-pronged strategy by the members of the JWCTU to force men from the same social strata as themselves to commit to premarital chastity and marital fidelity. In fact, the call for universal monogamy by the group was part of an overall strategy to secure property and inheritance rights of married women in high-status families.⁸¹

Mihalopoulos' contention that JWCTU members were looking out for their own interests may be on target, but Sumiya's essay raises the possibility that other motivations came into play to oppose sex work based on concern for all members of society. Her essay suggests that not all JWCTU members were entirely motivated by self-interest.

Sumiya does not shy away from denouncing the practice of concubinage itself. She ends the essay by declaring: 'There is nothing in the world that gives others as much unhappiness as becoming a concubine'.⁸² We have limited clues as to how the text was received by concubines but Yoshizaki states that 'thanks to Koume's persuasive [text], it is said that many geisha and concubines quit'.⁸³ Given how Sumiya lays out the situation, the claim that many concubines left their lives behind after hearing Sumiya's message seems plausible, though unfortunately our documentary evidence is limited to an

⁸¹ Mihalopoulos, *Sex in Japan's Globalization*, 68.

⁸² Sumiya, 'Geisha to tekake', 13.

⁸³ Yoshizaki, 'Fukuda Hideko to Sumiya Koume', 370.

anecdote in the 1941 *Sumiya Koume shi Tsuikairoku* (Remembering Sumiya Koume) where her acquaintances recalled how on one occasion—much to everyone’s surprise—Sumiya persuaded a famous Okayama geisha to give up the profession. Sumiya also negotiated a ‘clean break’ for the geisha, one that did not require the latter to pay consolation money.⁸⁴

In sum, Sumiya’s essay imparts a new view on concubinage, one less weighed down by notions of sin and impurity than other Meiji critiques of the practice associated with women’s groups. Moreover, in contrast to the debates among government officials, intellectuals, and even JWCTU members, Sumiya’s comments were directed at other women. Her essay both calls upon women to reform men—whether by leaving men or ‘cleaning’ them up—but also limits proper women’s role to wifedom. For Sumiya, wifedom is women’s destiny and the only acceptable role. On one level, this is an interesting stance in light of her own status as an unmarried woman. Yet on another level, her perspective is not surprising given that in Edo period society, the society into which she was born, social norms dictated that nearly everyone should marry eventually.⁸⁵

Although Sumiya does not touch on her case in this essay, her experience no doubt informed her critique. As I have suggested, her essay represents a case where a woman’s life experience—and concern for the well-being of all individuals—drove her to oppose the system.

Reactions to Sumiya’s Essay

⁸⁴ Onoda, *Tsuikairoku*, 9-10. This original source uses the term *tegirekin* which appears to be a mistake since the geisha broke the contract rather than the patron. Instead, the term should be *zenshakkīn*. I thank an anonymous reviewer.

⁸⁵ Walthall, ‘Masturbation and Discourse’, 11.

I turn now to an analysis of various responses to Sumiya's essay. Reactions to Sumiya's work touch on different aspects of her life, her work at the Okayama Orphanage and her faith. The editor of *Jogaku zasshi*, Iwamoto Yoshiharu (1863-1942), introduced her essay to readers by mentioning her work for the Orphanage; he neither referenced her past experience as a geisha nor as a concubine. The purpose of the article, Iwamoto explained, was to educate readers. Many people in the anti-prostitution movement had no first-hand knowledge of geisha and concubines, so he imagined this piece would serve as an invaluable reference. Iwamoto's introduction is worth quoting at some length for the way he introduced Sumiya as well as for what he identified as the value of the essay:

The essay that follows is written by Sumiya Koume, the assistant (*joshu*) to Ishii Jūji, founder of the Okayama Orphanage. In a straightforward way, she sees the truth and cuts to the heart of it. Thanks to Sumiya's proselytizing (*dendō*), not a few people have quit being concubines. I have no doubt that this message does not apply to any readers of this magazine. But there are many readers who wish to urge geisha and concubines to quit. Such people are very noble-minded but do not know the situation of geisha and concubines . . . reading this essay will help them understand a number of things. It would be even better if they read it and talked about it [with others].⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Iwamoto, 'Untitled', 5.

Iwamoto was deeply opposed to concubinage and yet his views on the subject were far from straightforward.⁸⁷ Lublin observes that as early as 1886, he had ‘identified licensed prostitution and concubinage as the greatest social evils women had to address’.⁸⁸ As the passage above suggests, he seems not to have considered that his readers may include concubines or geisha, an assumption fairly typical for the time. In some of his writings, he demonstrated compassion for prostitutes, as in his 1885 essay entitled ‘Our Sisters Are Prostitutes’, suggesting that in his mind, compassion and prejudice combined in complicated ways.⁸⁹ With regard to Sumiya, it is possible that Iwamoto knew about her past but judged it unimportant given that Sumiya had been saved by her faith in Christianity. Whatever the case, we should bear in mind that in any society, individuals might possess ‘multiple understandings about sex and be divided within themselves’.⁹⁰

A very different reaction to Sumiya and her essay can be found in the miscellaneous news section of the daily newspaper *Yomiuri shimbun* in 1893. The *Yomiuri*, like other Meiji newspapers, used scandal to boost circulation.⁹¹ The article, entitled ‘Geisha and Concubines’, summarized Sumiya's essay. The author critiqued her efforts and suggested she had stepped out of line. He claimed that by ‘breaking apart the inner curtain on geisha and concubines and dissecting their subjective feelings . . . she [Sumiya] relates the immoral and impure aspects of their lives’.⁹² The author aimed to

⁸⁷ On Iwamoto, see Copeland, *Lost Leaves*, Chapter 1.

⁸⁸ Lublin, *Reforming Japan*, 28.

⁸⁹ Iwamoto, ‘Warera no shimai’, 162-164.

⁹⁰ Horowitz, *Rereading Sex*, 8. Quoted in Walthall, ‘Masturbation and Discourse’, 2.

⁹¹ Karlin, *Gender and Nation*, 30; Huffman, *Creating a Public*, 196.

⁹² ‘Geisha to tekake’. I conclude the author was male given that female reporters were rare during this period.

cast doubt on Sumiya personally by exposing her past and suggesting that Sumiya had no business relating what went on in the lives of geisha and concubines to outsiders. Unlike other Japanese-language representations of Sumiya from this period, the author recounted her personal history: ‘Now she is an assistant (*joshu*) at the Okayama Orphanage but in her youth, she worked in that area as a popular geisha flirting with many customers. Later she became a concubine and was bought by a wealthy family’. While he aimed to blunt the force of her critique, his reasons for doing so are difficult to pinpoint. Perhaps he meant to suggest she was fickle given that she had engaged in such work. Or maybe he thought she had no right to judge such situations. In the end, he pronounced and dismissed her work as a form of *zange*, a term with religious roots that according to Christine Marran can be ‘translated variously as “repentance” or “confession”’.⁹³ While a number of writers produced *zange* around the turn of the century, the only group of women associated with the genre were ex-convicts. Given that Sumiya did not touch on her own past in her essay—and that she had no criminal record—it is surprising that the author chose to categorize her work in this way. Whatever the author meant by *zange*, his aim was clear—to discredit Sumiya and her critique.

Significantly, the author seems to have opposed not Sumiya's ability to leave the geisha life behind—nor her work as a geisha and a concubine—but that she had confused gender categories by exposing details about the lives of concubines that should not be exposed. Perhaps he objected to her lifting the veil on men's privacy as well.⁹⁴ In highlighting a divide between genteel women and geisha and concubines, the article

⁹³ Marran, *Poison Woman*, 66-7. *Zange* was used in Christian discourse. *Nihon kokugo daijiten*, vol. 6, 286.

⁹⁴ Thanks to an anonymous reader for making this point.

demonstrates that some contemporaries upheld a division between good women in households (*shinsō no joshi*) and women who could be bought.

Conclusion: Meiji Mindsets

Clearly Sumiya possessed a capacity to transition between roles, from geisha to concubine, to social activist and missionary. The larger historical context that enabled these transitions deserves brief elaboration. The dislocations caused by the 1868 Meiji Restoration made it necessary for women like Sumiya to find work. Lower-level samurai were particularly hard hit, and Sumiya's family belonged to this stratum. Even many samurai daughters of higher ranks became geisha and concubines.⁹⁵ Others went on to work in the new textile factories as the country industrialized in the 1870s and 1880s. However, Sumiya may have been too old to take advantage of this opportunity given that factories in Okayama appeared in the mid-late 1880s when she was already in her mid-thirties and workers tended to be in their teens and 20s.⁹⁶ Working as a geisha before being installed as a concubine may well have been Sumiya's only option and preferable to working as a prostitute.

By the time the Orphanage opened its doors in 1887, Sumiya was in her late thirties. Her status as an unmarried older woman gave her more freedom, for she did not have to run a large household, and her role at a Christian institution imparted status and respectability within her community that she may not have had otherwise given her

⁹⁵ Yamakawa, *Women of the Mito Domain*, 144.

⁹⁶ Tsurumi, *Factory Girls*, 28-37.

unmarried state.⁹⁷ I have suggested that for Japanese observers at the time, the path from geisha to concubine to social activist and worker was not remarkable and that in Meiji Japan, experience as a geisha and/or concubine did not leave an indelible mark in the way we might expect in later periods, suggesting a shift in consciousness over subsequent decades. This is not to say that geisha and sex workers in subsequent periods could not take up other careers or paths, but the label ‘former sex worker’ would come to stick in a way it simply did not for Sumiya.

Sumiya’s mobility in the 1870s and 1880s makes sense within the context of gender roles in transition at a time when ‘cognitive templates’ were changing rapidly.⁹⁸ Surely others besides the *Yomiuri* writer knew of her past—they simply did not need to highlight it. Scholars of Meiji Japan have demonstrated how some women moved between roles and in and out of households—beginning as a factory worker, political activist or speaker and becoming a wife and mother (and sometimes simultaneously playing several roles)—but Sumiya’s multiple ‘careers’ command attention. This ability to move around disappeared as gender categories hardened and divisions among women—those based in households and those available for hire—became more articulated as we saw in the case of Yamada Waka. The consolidation of gender categories followed the rise of ‘good wives, wise mothers’ as the state’s policy for middle-class women around the turn of the twentieth century.

This moment came on the heels of the decline of concubinage. I have suggested that Sumiya’s first-hand perspective on why concubinage is not a desirable practice—not

⁹⁷ On age as a crucial variable in relation to gender, Walthall, ‘The Life Cycle’, 66; Nenzi, *Excursions*.

⁹⁸ On ‘cognitive templates’, see Canning, ‘Introduction’, 18.

only for women but for families and society as a whole—constitutes a valuable and unusual addition to our understanding of this disappearing institution, one that departs significantly from other contemporary critiques in its practical emphasis, an emphasis born of her experience.

Other aspects of Sumiya—the geisha turned concubine turned activist, social worker, and missionary—remain to be explored. Sumiya may have been a wise mother, but she was never a wife, though by the 1893 she regarded wifehood as both the natural and ideal role for women. Over the course of her lifetime, concubinage had started to disappear.

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