

*Modern Japanese Girls Flying into the Sky: Gender Norms and Aviation Fashion
in the 1920s*

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Abstract

This paper examines how aviation refashioned women's clothing and the female gender norm in Japan in the 1920s. Central to this refashioning were female aviators who fought against gender inequality with the very system of patriarchy. I will first shed light on Katherine Stinson, an American aviatrix who came to Japan in 1916. She performed barnstorming of the *furisode*, a traditional Japanese garment for young women. The performance, I suggest, helped change Japanese women's ideas of female bodies. Furthermore, pioneering Japanese female pilots contributed to the shift in female clothing. By examining newspapers and magazines, this paper argues that female gender norms in Japan were significantly refashioned by the air-mindedness of female pilots who changed the, beforehand exclusively, male realm of air space.

Keywords: Gender studies, Girlhood Studies, Japanese Studies

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Introduction

In 1952, the year of the end of the US occupation of Japan, the Japan Women's Association of Aviation (JWAA) was founded. It presented a milestone in Japanese aviation history. The sky was hitherto a predominantly male sphere. During World War II, men alone became soldiers and flew into the sky. Most women (except for nurses and "comfort women") stayed at the home front. Japanese women could not fight on the war front because of the Military Service Law enacted in 1927¹, and there were no female military pilots. Even so, when peace came, women decided to fly planes, and they established the JWAA. Some members had flown planes before the war. Historians such as Hiraki Kunio, Kano Mikiyo, and Matsumura Yuriko have significantly recovered the history of prewar Japanese female fliers. However, their research remains mostly biographical. They narrate a story of pioneer female fliers such as Hyodo Tadashi, who became the first aviatrix in Japan. Historians laud the historical significance of female fliers because these audacious women deviated from traditional female gender norms.

This essay is less interested in how they departed from gender norms than how Japanese women aviators refashioned literally, or ideologically, such norms. I will examine the development of women's aviation in the 1920s that significantly created a new nexus between the female body and speed. Specifically, I will analyze the photographs and images of newspapers. The air-minded age helped refashion female gender norms in patriarchal Japan.

Katharine Stinson and Flying in *Furisode*

The first airplane flight in Japan took place in 1910. In the 1910s, girls did not have the opportunity to ride planes because the aeronautic field was a military and male sphere. This changed when American barnstormers came to Japan for air shows. According to the *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* dated March 12, 1916, when Charles Niles, an aviator, came to Japan for exhibitions, a school girl sent a blood-sealed letter to ask him to give her a ride on Niles' plane. girls in general did not think that they wanted to fly a plane themselves.² When the aviatrix Katharine Stinson arrived in Japan in December 1916, however, their mindset changed radically.

Katharine Stinson performed aerial acrobatics and became widely known as a flying "school girl" because she looked young, wearing ribbons in her hair. She somehow looked more Japanese than Westerners. Newspapers and magazines noted that she looked like a Japanese school girl because she wore Western clothes and boots that were schoolgirls' uniform fashion in Japan at that time. She was immensely popular among Japanese schoolgirls. Many girls went to see her performance in various places throughout Japan and sent letters as her admirers. The episode that fascinated Japanese girls the most was that she performed her flight in the *furisode*. *Furisode* is a

¹ An old Japanese law that imposes mandatory military service on male Japanese citizens. It was enforced on December 1, 1927.

² Joseito ga Kesshosite Chugaeri Shigan [The Girl Who Sent The Blood-sealed Letter to Get on the Plane]. the *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* dated (1916, March 12) the *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun*. p. 5.

long-sleeved kimono for unmarried women, so the *furisode* was (and still is) recognized as a girl's symbolic garment. The Japanese media used to claim that females were not suitable for flying precisely because of their kimono garment. The *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun*, dated February 10, 1916, carried a picture titled *Hone no Oreru Onna Dojo Hiko* [Troublesome female plane riding]. The picture shows a woman being carried by a man into the cockpit. She could not climb into it by herself because she wore a kimono. The female kimono was a hindrance to flying. Stinson proved that the garment had nothing to do with aeronautic skills. Her flight in *the furisode* was hence important in changing the Japanese girls' mindset. Katharine's flight was a crucial trigger in propelling girls' air-mindedness into the sky. However, in the end, *the furisode* did not become an aviation outfit. Girls had to wear pants-type pilot suits, which meant breaking the gender code in fashion.

Pants-style Fashion in Female Culture—Pilot Suits

Women's clothes did not change easily. In the 1920s, women dressed in Western clothes were dubbed "modern girls" and criticized by male critics and writers. However, interestingly enough, after the Great Kanto earthquake disaster occurring in 1923, women began to be allowed to wear Western clothes. This was because people realized that kimonos would not let them move quickly and freely when the earthquake occurred. Hence, the Western clothes were justified as they permitted freedom of movement to ensure women's lives and survival, which was more important than gender decorum in the case of a disaster. Public opinion agreed with women wearing Western clothes. The *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* dated December 6, 1923, observed that Japanese women wearing Western clothes increased in number after the disaster and they learned to walk in western clothes. According to an article of the *Yomiuri Shimbun* dated September 21, 1924, a wife of the principal of a girls' school recommended girls wearing Western clothes.³ Western clothes thus began to be recognized as wardrobe for Japanese girls. The safety of life was more of a priority than classic femininity. Western clothes for women and girls gained credibility in the public sphere thanks to the Great Kanto earthquake.

A similar historical factor enabled changes in school girls' fashion. When school uniforms were introduced into Japanese girls' schools, they often included a *hakama* or jumper dress. Initially, in the late nineteenth century, school girls wore kimonos, but in 1899, students in a girl's school in Tokyo began to wear *hakama*, which is a traditional Japanese long-skirt type clothing because it allowed freedom. Such freedom was indispensable for the health of girls (Namba, 2012, pp. 143-149). Girls' bodies were an apparatus to support a patriarchal system. Girls would become mothers and needed exercise to stay healthy. *Hakama* was initially for aristocracy, so some opposed that girls wore *hakama* as a school uniform. However, teachers and the minister of education endorsed it because they thought that girls would need more physical exercise. Therefore, *hakama* spread in girls' schools throughout the country. *Hakama* gained credibility, replacing the classic image of aristocracy, and it refashioned the way girls moved, at the turn of the twentieth century.

³ Shinsai no Nigai Keiken kara Yoso to natte Sono Koka o Toku Miyata Shu Fujin [A Wife of Mr. Osamu Shu, Explains The Benefits Of Wearing Western-Style Clothing After The Disaster]. (1924, September 21) the *Tokyo Yomiuri Shimbun*. p.11.

In the 1920s, girls' school uniform once again changed and girls began to wear a jumper dress. In 1919, when a school in Tokyo adopted a jumper dress, there arose some controversy. However, people finally accepted Western-style uniforms because they allowed freedom of movement, and they were more economical than Japanese *hakama-style* uniforms. Scholar Namba Tomoko (2012, pp. 143-149) observed that it was troublesome to mend Japanese style uniforms. Mothers had to mend or wash clothes when their daughters damaged or soiled them. Maintenance was difficult, and mothers did not like *hakama* uniform for their daughters. Additionally, *hakama* was tied tightly at the waist, and occasionally, girls fainted when they exercised hard. Gradually, the Westernized girls' school uniform spread in the 1920s.

During the 1920s, when school girls changed to Western-style uniforms, pants-style fashion alone did not spread, although they allowed more freedom of movement than jumper dresses. According to scholar Murakami Nobuhiko (1956, p. 196), in 1930, school girls skied in skirts. In 1929, the *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* carried a photograph of a skiing class. In the picture, school girls wore skirts even in snow.⁴

Nevertheless, pants finally made inroads into women's spheres via aviation. Skiing and climbing in pants did not spread, but a pants-style pilot suit was accepted. Some female pilots wore a pants-style pilot suit, but they were not criticized as unwomanly women for that. Murakami claims that flying was connected with the army, so women's pilot suits were justified. However, there is more to this story. Women were allowed to wear pants-style pilot suits to protect their female bodies from a male gaze, not just to keep safety on the plane. The kimono was too tight to handle planes, and western skirts were too short to cover the legs. Female pilot Nishizaki Kiku (1975, p. 46) recalls in her autobiography that when she wore a skirt in aviation practice, she was teased about her legs by male colleagues and was nicknamed "neri-chan" after her "feminine" legs. She was heavily shocked and turned to pants. Female pilot Kibe Shigeno (1953, p. 14) said in the magazine *Katei Yomiuri* that she had to wear pants not to be looked down as female in the male gendered aeronautic realm. It was inconvenient for her to be a womanly woman in the aeronautic field in the 1920s. Additionally, sometimes they would have to evacuate a plane with parachutes, so skirts were not suitable for flight. Skirts and kimonos, female clothes in Japan, lost their power in the aeronautic realm.

Owing to their unique status, female pilots succeeded in paving the way for the acceptance of the pants-style female image.⁵ Women's aviation pants gained credibility through a double process of women seeing other women wearing pants and female pilots in pants being seen by other female pilots.

Female pilots in pants were favorably viewed as long as they supported patriarchy. Within that constraint, they were exempt from criticism even when they wore unwomanly clothes. An article of the *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* in 1916 introduced a

⁴ Akakura no Yuki wa Ni-shaku, Kappatsu ni Shizun Kitaru [Snow in Akakura piled up 2 meters, Season for Skiing Has Come]. (1929, December 28). The *Asahi Shimbun*, p. 2.

⁵ Nishi, M. (1975). Koyoku to Takukon no Ki [Autobiography of Nishizaki Kiku]. pp.46-47.

Japanese female pilot, Nanchi Yone, who trained in the United States but wanted to get married and be a wife. She was not criticized even when she wore pants-style pilot suits because, as the article suggests, she abided by patriarchal logic. Moreover, magazines for younger ladies and those for girls presented female pilots in a favorable light with a story that suggests that they were good daughters who would obey fathers (and then husbands, in the future).⁶ *Shojo no tomo* (Girls' Friend) featured the first female pilot in Japan, Hyodo Tadashi, telling the reader that she was a good girl who dearly loved her father, in 1920.⁷ The magazine focused on the bond between the daughter and father. Female pilots in pants who were good daughters were not criticized but admired by the people.

It was dangerous for women in the air to behave as they did as women on the ground. As mentioned above, Nishizaki Kiku was made fun of for her feminine legs. They did not have to dress to be recognized as women in the air. In fact, early female aviators were expelled from the aeronautic circle the moment they fell in love with men and were criticized by the media as a "woman." Both Hyodo Sei and Nanchi Yone had to give up flying because of gossip with men.⁸ Ironically, to eliminate their womanliness and protect themselves from harsh criticism, they had better wear pants-style suits in the air, if not on the ground, so that they would not be recognized as the weaker sex.

Pilot pant-style suits played an important role in refashioning girls and ladies' norms. Finally, more girls and ladies began to fly by gliders in the 1930s with jump suits.

Conclusion

In 1937, the glider club of the Japan Aeronautic Women's Association was established. The club practiced like an army, and women were allowed to fly a glider in the air.⁹ Female pilots and their unique pants-style had been approved in public by the 1930s.

During wartime, the aeronautic field became male-gendered and female air-mindedness was suppressed, the air-mindedness of females did not vanish. When the war ended, the JWAA was founded by women aviators who contributed to refashion women's gender norms in the prewar period, and who were now determined to make the sky gender equal.

⁶ Joryu-hikoka no Muko-erami [Female Pilots Finding Her Future Husband]. (1913, October 28). The *Asahi Shimbun*, p. 3.

⁷ Chichi no Ato wo Tsuide Aoki Sora e [Flying Into the Sky to Tread in Father's footsteps]. (1920, March). *Shojo no Tomo* [Girls' Friend], 13. Tokyo: Jitsugyo no Nihon sha. pp.18-24.

⁸ Yuriko, M. (2013). *Ojosan Sora wo Tobu* [Ladies Flying Into the Sky]. Tokyo: NTT Shuppan. pp.155-170.

⁹ Otabe, Y. (2007). *Kazokuke no Joseitachi* [Ladies Who were in Court Noble]. Tokyo: Shogakukan. pp.155-170.

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