Thinking like a man

Anna Beerens

In 1817 Tadano Makuzu, the 55 year old widow of a retainer to the domain of Sendai, began a political treatise. Early in 1817 she sent her manuscript to the famous author Takizawa Bakin (1797-1848) with a request for assistance in getting it published. All of this was completely out of the ordinary. There were plenty of learned women around in early modern Japan, but so far no woman had ever sought recognition as a scholar through publication. Moreover, contemporary socio-political conditions were considered a hazardous subject even for male intellectuals. Bakin initially sent her a sharp critique of her treatise and subsequently put an end to their correspondence, but the thought of her did not leave him. Six years later he wrote a laudatory essay about her. It was Bakin who claimed that she was “thinking like a man.” Apart from her political treatise Hitori kangae (Solitary Thoughts), Makuzu left poetry and essays (often of an autobiographical nature), stories and ethnographical observations, as well as a number of letters. These writings, together with Bakin’s critique and later reappraisal, are the basis for Bettina Gramlich-Oka’s thoughtful book on Makuzu.

As Gramlich-Oka rightly points out, Bakin’s heart-felt statement “illustrates well the deep-seated correlation between gender and intellectual discourse” (p.4). In the Tokugawa period (1600-1868) scholarship was a male prerogative: “to be a scholar” meant “to (have to) think like a man.” In this book Gramlich-Oka shows how Makuzu reinvented her sources with care, erudition and a thorough understanding of early-modern Japanese society, how Tadano Makuzu legitimised and defined her position as a thinking woman.

The invention of a past

Chapters one to four deal with Makuzu’s “path through life” (p.13) but they do not present a straightforward life-history. Instead we have a many-layered story of identity and self-representation, image and image-building, self-aggrandisement and self-deception. Gramlich-Oka handles Makuzu’s manuscript to the famous author Takizawa Bakin (1797-1848) without anachronistic judgments or emotional feminism. Her book is a unique insight into the intellectual discourse of the late Tokugawa period and must therefore be of interest to anyone who studies early-modern Japanese thought. However, Makuzu’s life, work and ultimate failure (her treatise was neither published, nor widely circulated) also reveal in a poignant way what it means to be a ‘first’. In order to position herself within a space that belonged to men, Makuzu had to think through and enunciate her stance as a woman without any help and without any role model. In her discussion of how Makuzu went about doing this Gramlich-Oka asks all the right questions and directs our attention to all the right issues, without anachronistic judgments or emotional feminism. Her book is a unique contribution to the field of gender studies and will certainly appeal to both ‘Asianists’ and ‘non-Asianists’.

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