

# Hiratsuka Raicho: Pioneer of the Women's Liberation Movement in Modern Japan

By Nakajima Kuni

## Introduction

Hiratsuka Raicho (1886-1971) – her real name was Okumura Haru – is widely known as a pivotal figure in the history of the women's liberation movement in modern Japan.

After her death, with the aim of improving women's social status, the first World Conference of the International Women's Year was held in Mexico City in 1975, the year designated by the United Nations as International Women's Year. At the conference, the Japanese delegate Fujita Taki (a former president of Tsuda College) quoted the opening lines of Raicho's manifesto in the first issue of *Seito*, the journal she began in 1911: "In the Beginning, Woman was the Sun. She was an Authentic Person." In saying that Woman at the dawn of human history was the Sun, Raicho was urging women to think of what had become of them. The participants at the conference unanimously adopted the "World Plan of Action" which would focus on equality, development and peace from women's point of view, and strongly wished to restore Woman to her original effulgent self.

The participants also designated the next 10 years as the "International Decade for Women" and drew up the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The convention was duly ratified by various countries, including Japan, in 1985. At the World Conference on Women held in 1985 in Nairobi, the Japanese delegate Moriyama Mayumi (now the Minister of Justice) quoted a poem by Yosano Akiko that appeared in the same issue of *Seito*: "The Day the Mountains Move has Come." Yosano, already famous for her bold poems, was calling on women, who had hitherto been inert like mountains, to rise up and take action. Since its publication, *Seito* had raised various issues regarding women's liberation. It

was a journal written by women themselves, and exerted a great influence on subsequent women's movements. Raicho was at the center of it.

## Raicho's Self-Formation

Hiratsuka Raicho was born in 1886, three years before the promulgation of Japan's first constitution, which would set the course for Japan's modern political system. It was also the period that the establishment of the cabinet and parliamentary systems had been under way. Her father Hiratsuka Sadajiro, the son of a samurai from the Kishu (Wakayama) domain, was an official at the Board of Audit of the Meiji government. Fluent in German, he left for Europe and the United States soon after Raicho's birth to study accounting laws for about a year and a half, and on his return, helped to draft various accounting-related laws. Her mother Tsuya was the daughter of a physician who had been in service to the Tayasu, one of the three collateral houses of the Tokugawa lineage. Brought up in Edo (now Tokyo), she was an accomplished dancer and performer of traditional music such as *Tokiwazu*, but upon marriage was forbidden by her strict husband to practice these arts.

Raicho was the younger of two sisters. Her elder sister, Taka, was one year older than Raicho. The family circumstances were clearly different from that of other commoners; the children went to kindergarten (unusual for the time) and dressed in frocks their father had brought back from his trip abroad. Their mother, too, temporarily abandoned *kimono* and dressed in Western clothes. The family, in short, belonged to the upper stratum of society which had taken enthusiastically to the so-called "Civilization and Enlightenment" movement.

In 1892 Raicho entered primary school – at the time only 36.46% of school age girls attended. She excelled

in her studies as well as in sports and was praised by her teachers for sewing and calligraphy. She would be a skilled calligrapher all her life. Even as a child she was strong-willed and competitive, causing her parents to lament that she was not a boy. Her only drawback was her small voice, which earned her low marks in singing.

The government at the time emphasized boys' education. Under the 1879 Education Order, boys and girls were educated separately; the curriculum in middle and upper schools being substantially different for boys and girls. Only boys were eligible for higher schools; the system remained unchanged until 1947. To make up for the paucity of educational facilities for girls, Christian missionaries established small private women's schools in city areas.

The situation was improved to some measure after Japan's victory in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) and its consequent rise in world stature. Under the Girls' High School Order of 1899, public high schools for girls were established throughout the country. An equivalent law for boys had been adopted 13 years earlier. The purpose of these schools was to educate "good wives and wise mothers," since a woman was expected to marry, bear children and dutifully serve her husband and parents-in-law. This was reflected in the Civil Code of 1898, according to which a child was subject to the father's authority and obliged to obey him in all matters, including the choice of a marriage partner. A wife had to take her husband's name and was not considered legally married until the union was formally registered; her property was controlled by her husband. As such, it can be said that women at the time were regarded as being virtually "incompetent" under the law. With the stability of the family thus ensured by the uncontested transfer of authority from father to husband and thence to the oldest son,

Photo: The Autobiography of Hiratsuka Raicho: In the Beginning, Woman was the Sun (Four volumes, Otsuki Shoten Publishers)



A portrait of Hiratsuka Raicho (1886-1971)

the family would serve as the basic unit in Japan – this led to the unique ideology of the family-state based on the emperor system.

The high school Raicho entered in 1898 was held up as a model for its adherence to the prevailing educational ethos. Commonly known as Ochanomizu, the school was attached to the prestigious teachers college for women. Not surprisingly, Raicho rebelled against the school's conformist policies, and forming a "Pirate Band" with several classmates, skipped class from time to time.

In her senior year, Raicho came across *Joshi Kyoiku* (Women's Education; 1896), a book written by Naruse Jinzo who had studied in the United States. In opposition to the prevalent view that higher education was unnecessary, or even harmful, to young women, he stressed the need for women to be recognized in their own right and receive a higher education. Based on this recognition of women's independence, he argued that they would further be educated as women as well as citizens. Such an education would not only advance their intellectual and moral development but also train them physically and practically so that they could be independent professionals throughout their lives. To put his ideas into practice, he had founded Japan Women's University in 1901.

Deeply impressed by Naruse's educational philosophy, Raicho asked her father for permission to attend Japan Women's University. He refused, but thanks to her mother's intercession, she was given permission on the condition that she majored in domestic science and not English literature – her first choice. She entered in 1903 as a member of the third graduating class. (Her sister Taka was also allowed to go.) As Raicho reminisced in 1939, "despite the confusion of a newly founded college, which has only a two-year-history and has no graduates yet, the students, led by Naruse, burned with youth and ardor and the desire for knowledge and creativity."

Naruse encouraged the students, many of whom had entered in the face of parental opposition, that their choice to enter the university was correct, and harshly criticized conventional educa-

tion. He took an individual interest in the students, and spoke to them of the multitude of social problems that had to be solved; ideas, he said, proved their genuine worth only through action. Using terms like self-study, self-motivation and autonomy, he encouraged them to be self-reliant, for only then would they be strong and independent in character. He also asked them to think about such issues as the formation of self, the meaning of life, humanity and religion, the purpose for which each and every person was born. In Raicho's senior year, especially, he lectured widely on the philosophies and religions of the world.

Raicho listened to Naruse's lectures attentively and raised questions from time to time. She read voraciously in the school library, attended services in churches and temples and public lectures. Through a college friend, she also began Zen meditation at the Ryoboan temple in Tokyo's Nippori district. As graduation approached, her classmates talked about their plans, but she was still seeking answers to the larger questions of the meaning of existence.

She continued her Zen meditation after graduating in 1906, and in July of that same year, she was recognized by her Zen master as having attained *ken-sho* (more commonly known as *satori*, or spiritual enlightenment) and given the Zen name Ekun. Henceforth, Zen – quiet sitting, looking into the recesses of one's being, transcending the Self – would be the inner compass of her life.

For Raicho, the experience of *ken-sho* was liberating; it gave her the courage to defy social convention and withstand criticism. She went where she pleased, and earning money with the shorthand she had learned, she took classes in English and Chinese prose. She also joined the Keishu Bungakukai, a literary study group for women formed by the writer and translator Ikuta Choko.

One of the lecturers at the group was the writer Morita Sohei. Though married, he made an overture to Raicho. The two took long walks together, and in March 1908, left for the snowy mountains in Nagano to act out a scenario of Morita's devising: He would kill Raicho and write a novel about their affair. He lost courage at the last moment, however,

and discovered by the police, they returned to Tokyo. The incident, commonly known as the Shiobara Incident after the hot spring where they stayed briefly, was played up by the newspapers. Raicho's name was expunged from the Alumnae Association of Japan Women's University.

Hoping to put an end to the scandal, Morita's mentor Natsume Soseki suggested that the two marry. Raicho, of course, refused; she was also deeply disappointed that Soseki, Japan's leading writer who had studied in England, would propose a solution so demeaning to women. To avoid the public eye, Raicho spent the next few months in seclusion in Nagano. Morita would later write a best-selling novel based on the incident.

### Social Activities

On returning to Tokyo, Raicho resumed her Zen training, this time at the Nihon Zengakudo in Kanda. She was still at loose ends but then, in September 1911, at the urging of Ikuta Choko, she decided to start a journal; it would be edited by women and serve as a venue for women writers. The monthly journal was named *Seito* (Bluestockings), after the group of women in mid-18<sup>th</sup> century England who met regularly to discuss literary and intellectual issues. It was at this time that she adopted the pen name Raicho (snow grouse), a bird she had seen during her sojourn in Nagano. Of

Photo : The Autobiography of Hiratsuka Raicho:  
In the Beginning, Woman was the Sun  
(Four volumes, Otsuki Shoten Publishers)



The monthly journal *Seito* (Bluestockings)

the five women who helped her launch the journal, four were graduates of Japan Women's University. This fact shows that they did not care at all about the elimination of Raicho's name from the alumnae association.

*Seito* had begun as a literary journal for young women, but as some of the more controversial articles incurred public ire, it gradually turned its attention to social issues such as the oppression of women under the marriage and patriarchal family systems, and the constraints placed on women who wished to take social action. Women associated with the journal soon became known as the "New Women," and while this was meant to be a term of moral opprobrium, Raicho defiantly announced that she was proud to be a New Woman and wrote an article defending her position. She and other women continued to write on topics concerning sexual discrimination, such as female chastity, abortion, licensed prostitution, the wife's position under the Civil Code, good-wife-wise-motherhood and unfair grounds for divorce. Some of these issues are still unsolved today. Several articles deemed injurious to public morals were banned by the authorities, as was Raicho's collection of essays, *From a Round Window*. Indeed, teachers were known to lose their jobs for subscribing to the journal.

In August 1912, in the midst of the public censure of the New Women, Raicho met Okumura Hiroshi, a painter

by profession who was five years younger. (He later changed his first name to Hirofumi.) The two fell in love and began living together without formalizing their union. Indeed, there was speculation that young Okumura would leave Raicho sooner or later. But in a further act of defiance, Raicho made public her decision in an article in *Seito* titled "To My Parents on Becoming Independent." Her health had begun to suffer, however, and in 1915, she relinquished the editorship to Ito Noe. The journal, which had begun to lose subscribers, folded the following year.

Okumura's own health deteriorated, and diagnosed with tuberculosis, he entered a hospital in Chigasaki, Kanagawa Prefecture. Raicho rented rooms nearby. (In 1998, a memorial in honor of Raicho was erected in a park in the city.) With Okumura's recovery, they returned to Tokyo in 1917.

By the end of World War I, sweeping changes had taken place in Japan. Capitalism was firmly entrenched, and among educated circles, parliamentary democracy had become the byword. Women's magazines appeared one after the other, and even mass-circulation newspapers and magazines published articles related to women's issues.

One of these issues was the so-called "Controversy about the Protection of Motherhood," which centered on how to reconcile the competing claims of women's independence and their obligations as mothers. Yosano, who based her argument on the complete equality of the sexes, rejected outright the notion of the social protection of motherhood and urged women to be financially self-sufficient so that they could be truly independent. In contrast, Raicho, who had given birth to two children and been influenced by Ellen Key, the Swedish feminist who wrote on the sanctity of motherhood, pointed out the difficulty of women's financial independence and contended that mothers needed the protection of society and state. Others who joined the debate were Yamakawa Kikue and Yamada Waka.

By this time Raicho had become convinced that women would have to participate in the political process if they were to bring about social changes. This had been reinforced during a tour of textile mills in the Nagoya area in 1919, and in 1920, she recruited

Ichikawa Fusae and Oku Mumeo and formed the New Women's Association. A journal called *Josei Domei* (Women's Alliance) was also published. The immediate purpose of the association was to campaign for the revision of Article 5 in the Public Order and Police Law which forbade women from joining political organizations and attending or initiating meetings of a political nature. Because of illness, Raicho withdrew from the petition campaign in the summer of 1921, but thanks to the efforts of the members, the clause forbidding participation in political meetings was rescinded in 1922. This achievement obviously became an inspiration for later women's movements.

With Okumura's appointment as an art instructor at Seijo Gakuen, the family moved to a home in Seijo, a Tokyo suburb, in 1925. In 1930, Raicho organized a consumers cooperative, and she became the head of "Our House." A firm believer in the cooperative movement as a way of changing the capitalist system and building a new society based on mutual aid, she wrote articles to that effect. The work would take up much of her time, but she found the time to join Takamura Itsue's Proletarian Women's League and write articles for its journal *Fujin Sensen* (Women's Front Line). In 1938, with increasing government controls on goods in the wake of the war in China, Raicho withdrew from the consumer activities.

In 1941 she formally registered her marriage to Okumura and took his name so that their son, Atsubumi, when drafted, would not suffer the consequences of being an illegitimate child. In April 1942, four months after the outbreak of the Pacific War, Raicho and Okumura relocated to the countryside in Ibaraki Prefecture, where her sister's family lived. She spent the war years growing vegetables – she was a confirmed vegetarian – and studiously avoided making any public statements.

### Postwar Activities

After Japan's defeat in 1945, Raicho's old friend Ichikawa Fusae lost no time in forming the Women's League for New Japan. She invited Raicho to join, but Raicho sent only a message, saying she preferred to watch developments in the countryside. She

Photo: Shinjūjin Shimbun / Collected Works of Hiratsuka Raicho (Seven volumes plus a supplement, Otsuki Shoten Publishers)

carefully observed the movement of the occupation forces, the confusion of city life and how the prewar oppressive regulations against women were abolished.

A new constitution was promulgated in November 1946 and was quickly followed in January by a new civil code. Raicho was elated by its provisions; all that she had hoped and fought for had finally been realized. She came back to Seijo in 1947. She was 61 years old; her chief concern would henceforth be women's liberation in every sense of the word and the promotion of world peace. To this end, in 1949, she joined the World Federalist Movement and began studying Esperanto.

But the growing confrontation between the United States and the former Soviet Union was cause for alarm, and concerned for Japan's future, in June 1950, she drafted and sent an appeal to John Foster Dulles, who was visiting Japan as a special envoy. Of the eight items listed in the appeal, the first read, "We are determined to defend Japan's constitutional status as a nation that has renounced war and all forms of armaments." The appeal was cosigned by Tsuneko Gauntlett, Jodai Tano, Nogami Yaeko and Uemura Tamaki. Ironically, the Korean War broke out the same month.

A peace treaty was signed with 48 non-communist nations in 1951, but deeply worried about the implications of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty which was signed the same day, Raicho made three public statements voicing her opposition to the continued occupation of Okinawa and the presence of American military bases in Japan. She also sent a letter to the Senate.

Opposing to the Japanese government's pro-American stance and its reluctance to deal with the anti-atomic bomb movements, Raicho prepared to gather peace-loving women's organizations all over the country. In the fall of 1952, she attended a reception in honor of Kora Tomi, a member of the House of Councillors who had visited China and the Soviet Union, two countries with which Japan had yet to establish diplomatic relations. The next year, in April, she formed the Japan Federation of Women's Organizations and became its first president.

In March 1954, the nation was shocked by the death of a Japanese fish-



The members of the New Japan Women's Association – Raicho is third from the left

erman, a casualty of the American testing of the hydrogen bomb in the Bikini Islands. In her capacity as the vice-president of the Women's International Democratic Federation, she addressed an appeal to the women of the world. She also acted as the prime mover of the World Mothers Conference. (The conferences continue to this day.) In her opposition to nuclear weapons, she joined the Committee of Seven for World Peace. The other members were Shimonaka Yasaburo, Jodai Tano, Maeda Tamon, Kaya Seiji, Yukawa Hideki and Uemura Tamaki. In addition to her international activities, Raicho contributed to the expansion of grass-roots movements of Japanese women and strengthened the solidarity of women's organizations.

In 1960, despite nationwide opposition, the Japanese government under the Liberal Democratic Party renewed the security treaty and augmented the Self-Defense Forces, which had been formed as the National Police Reserve following the outbreak of Korean War. The problems of the U.S. military bases in Japan also remained unsolved. Other problems loomed – rising prices, inadequate education, the spread of infantile paralysis, the lack of childcare facilities and various restrictions on speech and activities. Convinced of the need for a new, nationwide women's organization that would work in concert with the women of the world for the welfare of women and children, in October 1962, Raicho formed the New Japan Women's Association. The association was open to everyone, regardless of religion or ideological persuasion. It would later oppose the war in Vietnam and try

to establish ties with Vietnamese women. The association has also shared a lot of problems and demands among its members and developed its activities.

By 1970, when the revisions of the security treaty were being discussed, Raicho was 84 and had been diagnosed with cancer. She nevertheless marched at the head of a group of women demonstrators. She spoke of her lasting hope for women's advancement, and as a memento, brushed beautifully the words "*Mugen Seisei* (Life Without End)" on a card. She died on May 24 of the following year.

As a young woman Raicho had encountered Zen. It had sustained her through the years, providing moments of quiet reflection, giving her courage in the face of adversity. Her goal was to achieve world peace through anti-war movements. Her writings have been collected in seven volumes, *Collected Works of Hiratsuka Raicho*. (Otsuki Shoten Publishers; there is also a supplement.) A documentary, *WOMAN WAS THE SUN; The Life of Hiratsuka Raicho*, has been made by a pioneer female director, Haneda Sumiko. The documentary was funded by many people who wished to record Raicho's life. First shown in the spring of 2001, it has since been awarded numerous prizes. In response to requests from abroad, an English version was completed in the spring of 2003. JWPI

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