In 1889, a young journalist named Kawata Rin’ya published a book entitled *Nihon joshi shinkaron* (On the evolution of Japanese women) in which he argued that social reform and equal rights for men and women were necessary if Japan was to enhance its authority, build a strong economy, and establish itself on equal footing with Western nations. Kawata’s strong support for women’s political and economic rights was unusual, but the fact that he wrote about the subject was not. In fact, Kawata’s book was part of a wide-ranging debate swirling through Japanese society on the proper relationship between women and the state. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, a period known as the Meiji era (1868–1912), a number of individuals, ranging from ordinary people to government officials, addressed the topic of women’s status, roles, and rights in a variety of forums, including newspapers, journals, pamphlets, and public debates. Participants wrestled with questions concerning women’s roles inside the home, what kinds of rights women should have, and the content of female education. They shared a belief that “the reform of the female sex” (*fujin kairyō*) was an “urgent problem.”

---

2. Tokutomi, “Nihon fujinron.”
This book foregrounds these multifaceted conversations about women’s roles in order to examine the centrality of gender in the making of modern Japan. It analyzes the impact of rapid social change on gender relations, the ways that gender played a key role in refashioning the political order, and how individuals used gender, specifically debates about women’s roles, to talk about their experiences of larger social transformation. One of the results of these conversations was the rise of “women” as a defining political and social category, a historically unprecedented phenomenon in Japan. This is not to say that gender did not matter before, but rather that it came to outweigh other markers, most notably status and class.

The double impact of the Meiji Revolution of 1868 (usually referred to in English-language historiography as the “Meiji Restoration”), and the revolutionary social and political ferment that preceded it, destroyed the decentralized military regime that had ruled Japan for over 260 years and replaced it with a new nation-state geared to meet the challenges of living in a competitive nineteenth-century world dominated by the West. Dramatic changes were everywhere in evidence. The shogun retired, and the emperor, who had lived in relative obscurity in Kyoto, moved to Tokyo to take up residence in the shogun’s former castle.

The revolution propelled major social transformations. To those who lived through it, it must have seemed as though the world had turned upside down. By the early 1870s, the formal status system was dismantled, and the samurai, who had heretofore occupied the top of the social hierarchy, lost their swords and many of their privileges. New ideas and technologies flooded Japanese society and generated tremendous excitement and occasional dismay. The introduction of mechanized travel in the form of the train and new methods of keeping time reshaped sensibilities. Translations of Western thought containing the novel concepts of natural rights and representative government flooded Japan, inspiring individuals to engage in political activism. In his autobiography, the activist and later politician Kōno Hironaka recalled the

3. Canning defines “gender” as “the symbolic system or signifier of relations of power in which men and women are positioned differently” (Gender History in Practice, 4). On gender history and its focus on women, see ibid., 11.
life-changing impact of reading John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* while traveling on horseback in the 1870s.⁴

The structure of the modern nation-state made it possible for the government to mobilize the populace to an unprecedented degree, nurturing loyalty to “Japan” in ways that would have been unimaginable in the past. Those who had just come to power began setting up the infrastructure of a modern centralized state and a system of local government. The state instituted primary education for all children, regardless of their status background. New ideas prompted changes in notions of taxation as well as military service; taxes began to be levied on the individual rather than the village, and all men were expected to serve in the new conscript army. Commentators deplored the past and looked to the future. Slogans such as “civilization and enlightenment” (*bunmei kaika*) and “rich country, strong military” (*fukoku kyōhei*) reverberated throughout society.⁵ Encounters with the nation-states of western Europe and the United States served to convince the Japanese that constitutional government was both desirable and inevitable if they wished to join the ranks of civilized countries and throw off the unequal treaties that Western countries had pressed upon them. Other reforms were deemed necessary as well, particularly those measures designed to make the populace more “civilized” with regard to dress, hairstyle, and customs.

The transition from Tokugawa to Meiji was neither seamless nor straightforward. Former samurai engaged in rebellions against the state through the mid-1870s, and villagers expressed resentment against the new system of education and the advent of universal military conscription. The number of peasant protests actually rose during the first few years of the Meiji era, and in the early 1880s, during a period of massive deflation, impoverished villagers engaged in uprisings. At the same time, some segments of the population harbored new political aspirations, often the result of their encounters with translations of Western texts, notably those by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Stuart Mill. They ex-

---

⁵ On the nuances of both “universal civilization” and “westernization,” see Howland, *Translating the West*, 33. On the translation and absorption of Western ideas about sex and gender in modern Japan, see Kaneko, *Kindai joseiron*. 
pressed a powerful affinity for ideas of rights and liberty, and partici-

pated in a series of movements called the “Jiyū minken undō” or Freedom and People’s Rights Movement (for the sake of convenience, I shall refer to it as the minken movement). This movement, which turns out to have been a series of loosely connected movements, grew out of opposition to the fact that power in the new government was exercised primarily by leaders from two of the southwestern domains. Participants advocated the establishment of a parliamentary system as well as a wider distribution of power. The men and women who embraced people’s rights also protested the terms of the unequal treaties imposed by the Western imperialist powers and frequently linked their call for people’s rights (minken) to the cause of national rights (kokken). In 1881, their demands were partly met when the government announced that a constitution would be promulgated by the end of the decade. By 1890, the opposition movements had largely run out of steam, brought into line through a deft combination of heavy-handed suppression and concilia-
tory measures. The Imperial Japanese Constitution was announced with much fanfare in 1889, and the following year saw the beginning of a national Diet and party politics. After over two decades of considerable flux, this period marked a new stage as the shape of the polity came into sharper relief.6

One of the main legacies of the early Meiji era, and in particular the activism of the minken movement, was a new conception of politics and political culture, notably the conviction that individuals should participate in their government and take an active interest in national affairs.7 This culture was disseminated throughout Japan via newspapers and practices such as public speaking. Of course, Meiji political culture was not created whole-cloth. The late Tokugawa period saw the development of new communication networks, an unleashing of popular energies, and the politicization of many levels of society.8 One could argue that with the onset of Meiji, beginning with the 1868 Charter Oath and

8. See Wilson, Patriots and Redeemers; Walthall, The Weak Body of a Useless Woman; Miya-
chi, Bakumatsu ishiniki no bunka; Harootunian, Toward Restoration. On the announcement of
the Charter Oath to a limited audience: Breen, “The Imperial Oath.”
its promise that “matters will be decided based on public discussion,”
these changes led to the creation of a new public sphere in which a
number of “publics” engaged in conversations about the shape of the
modern state, Japan’s place in the world, and the relationship between
people and the state.

Modernity and the Woman Question

As Japan’s leaders confronted a hostile world, they encountered an idea
with great currency in the West: that the social position of women ref-
lected a country’s level of civilization. During a trip to the United States
in 1867 on the eve of the Meiji Revolution, translator and later reformer
and educator Fukuzawa Yukichi purchased a geography textbook that
clarified Western views on the relationship between civilization and the
status of women: “Half-civilized nations . . . treat their women as slaves.
China, Japan, Turkey, and Persia are the principal countries of this
class.”9 That Western women had few if any legal rights largely escaped
the notice of Western and Japanese commentators; as we shall see,
what they perceived as women’s high status in the West was mostly
limited to the chivalry accorded to Western women. Although elites
initiated dialogue about women’s roles and rights out of concern for
their country’s reputation vis-à-vis the outside world, the conversation
soon moved to an emerging public sphere where it sparked the wide-
ranging debate that I introduced at the beginning of this chapter.

Conversations about gender and women were initiated by men in
the early 1870s—they commenced at the very center of the polity, in-
augurated by male government officials, intellectuals, and journalists in
public debates, newspapers, and other written texts. But as this book
demonstrates, over time women came to join the conversation, both
as observers and participants. Politicized by the ferment surrounding
the minken movement, these women moved from their status as objects
of reform to subjects in the new public sphere. In the process, they
demonstrated the ability to make political statements. They also learned
to position themselves as citizens and loyal subjects of the nation. In
the process, they carved out a lasting public space of their own.

But the debates about women were never just about women. One of the aims of this book is to show that such conversations were also connected to broader issues, including the shape of the new state, national rights, citizenship, the meanings of civilization, and Japan’s place in the hierarchy of nations. Discussions about women allowed the Japanese to feel as though they were moving toward a level of civilization on par with the West, while at the same time preserving their unique traditions. Indeed, the particular virtues of Japanese women are a recurring theme throughout the Meiji discussions.

These debates have not been examined on their own terms in the scholarly literature, although one finds passing references to them in translations of Meiji thought and studies of women’s political activism. Scholars have narrated the story of Meiji women in one of two ways. One approach frames the early Meiji period as a liberal time of possibility for women followed by a backlash that resulted in women’s complete exclusion from political life in 1890. This story is one of failure, where women fought against the state and lost. Another view highlights the ways that women activists collaborated with the state, particularly after 1890. I wish to move beyond the binary paradigm that characterizes women activists either as fighting against the state or else adopting the state’s line. Instead, I demonstrate the complexity of women’s position—that at the same time women cooperated with the state in certain areas, on other issues they espoused visions and goals that were quite distinct from the state’s, even when they availed themselves of similar language.

This study also provides us with the opportunity to rethink the widespread assumption that women were entirely excluded from political and public life after 1890, following a brief moment of possibility in the 1870s and 1880s spurred by contact with the West. While formal exclusion is certainly part of the story, I am uneasy with this focus since it relies on prescription rather than description and overlooks what women actually did, assuming that women were confined to the private, domestic sphere. Taking a different approach, this book argues that the

Gender order was remade following the moment of rupture ignited by the Meiji Restoration and that “a woman’s place” in Meiji Japan was characterized by contradictions and unexpected consequences, by new opportunities and new constraints.

The book ends soon after 1890, when the advent of a parliamentary system and newly minted suffrage laws granted rights to less than 1 percent of the adult male population. The woman question subsequently receded into the background. Gender was no longer a central topic of discussion, for it had already been key in guaranteeing a new conservative political order, one where only a small number of men held political power. By the 1890s, then, the general parameters of the modern gender system, while certainly not set in stone, had taken shape.11

Rethinking Women and Politics

In many areas of the world, scholars have tended to view women as entirely cut off from politics and political life prior to the granting of women’s suffrage in the first half of the twentieth century. Since the 1980s, however, some scholars have begun to suggest that, with the advent of the modern era, women were actually deprived of a certain political access they had once enjoyed. Joan Landes, for example, has argued that the French Revolution in fact intensified women’s exclusion from politics and the public sphere and inaugurated a new domesticity. In the old regime, Landes maintained, some women enjoyed high status in venues such as salons, whereas the revolution led to the exclusion of all women as women from the public sphere.12 Political theorists such as Carole Pateman have contended that liberal and republican notions of citizenship were fundamentally hostile to women and in fact built on the deliberate exclusion of women.13 Although the work of these scholars was rooted in particular historical contexts, their understanding has profoundly shaped the perspective of other scholars, who have adopted similar frameworks for analyzing the often vexed

12. Landes, Women and the Public Sphere.
relationship between women and politics in societies other than France and Great Britain.\textsuperscript{14}

More recently, however, some historians have begun to question this narrative. Scholars including Suzanne Desan have proposed that the French Revolution can be viewed from a different perspective, as a source of both new possibilities for women as well as constraints.\textsuperscript{15} At the same time that the revolution gave rise to a new emphasis on domesticity, “it also enacted laws giving women new civil rights as individuals, granted them new forms of legal and political access to the state, and generated languages and practices for criticizing gender inequities.”\textsuperscript{16} This study takes inspiration from such approaches and pursues modernity’s mixed consequences for the gender order in nineteenth-century Japan.\textsuperscript{17}

\textit{Why Gender?}

Gender was critical to many of the larger processes that define the nineteenth century, from the creation of modern law codes to the advent of modern public spheres. Historians have tended to underestimate its importance, especially with regard to high politics, a field that until recently has seemed impervious to gender.\textsuperscript{18} In fact, the operation of gender was everywhere: “The founding conjuncture of modern political meaning,” explains historian Geoff Eley, “was pervaded by binary orders of assumptions about woman and man, which became inscribed in the constitutions, codes of law, and political mobilizations, as well as the formal philosophical discourse around the universals of reason, law,

\textsuperscript{14} Desan explains “this set of ideas about French republicanism [as exclusionary] holds all the more power because historians working on other regions, such as England, the United States, Central Europe, and Latin America, have also argued that republican or liberal politics, depending on the geography, reinforced the domestic subordination of women” (\textit{The Family on Trial}, 10).

\textsuperscript{15} Desan, “What’s after Political Culture?” 190.

\textsuperscript{16} Desan, \textit{The Family on Trial}, 312–13.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 3–4.

\textsuperscript{18} By “high politics,” I mean the workings of the government carried out by appointed and/or elected officials.
and nature, embedding such talk in an ideologically constructed system of differences in gender.”

It is easier to observe the centrality of gender in the fashioning of a new political order than it is to understand why gender became so central to its formation. While it is beyond the scope of this study to answer why exactly this was the case, I would point to the striking parallels in the ways that elites responded to the “woman question” around the world. During the initial period of nation-building, the flood of requests for political rights resulted in a common response by male elites: to exclude all women (and often most men) from political rights.

From a different perspective, gender has also been central in helping individuals to make sense of more abstract and large-scale change. In her work on post-World War I France, historian Mary Louise Roberts proposes that gender often serves as an “organizing structure,” allowing people to come to grips with far more vague issues. In the case of 1920s France, Roberts points out that men may have found it “simpler to think about the dramatic shifts in their wives’s behavior or in women’s fashion” than to understand large-scale social and economic changes. In Meiji Japan as well, intellectuals and activists focused on women’s roles as they struggled to make sense of Japan’s place in the world and the nature of a modern civilized society at a time of sweeping change. Contemporary questions revealed concern for women’s roles but also spoke to the effects of social transformations, new vocabularies, and practices. If women were equal, did that mean they might refuse to marry? What kinds of professions might a woman pursue? Should women be permitted to speak in public and under what circumstances? One issue commentators shared was an unprecedented concern for gender as a crucial axis of the new order: it was important to ensure that women did not acquire male characteristics and that women did not enter men’s sphere.

This study is rooted in a period of flux, from a decentralized military society to the rise of a modern state. The transition from the Tokugawa period to the Meiji era and the rise of a modern nation-state prompted a monumental shift in the relationship between people and the state. Henceforth, the bond was to be much more intimate, as the state began to concern itself with mobilizing the populace and ordinary people began to see their lives as intertwined with the fate of the nation at a time when the nation was facing multiple threats from the West. While there were early modern visions of the nation and precursors to the modern public sphere to be sure, no direct lines can be drawn between these two periods.\textsuperscript{22} The nation-state became naturalized in the minds of individuals very rapidly, to the extent that people themselves forgot how novel many of the concepts they had so recently absorbed as “common sense” were.\textsuperscript{23} Some of these concepts emerge time and again throughout this book, most notably “rights” and “civilization.”

Conversations about the meanings of these terms were spurred by a steady stream of translations of Western texts beginning in the 1870s, notably those by John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer. However, the concepts these translations introduced had to be interpreted—meaning had to be made within the Japanese context—a process that took time. Moreover, the act of interpreting was not merely confined to an abstract realm but held concrete consequences for the gender order, spurring as it did new ideas and debates about “rights” and who should have them.\textsuperscript{24}

The rise of the nation-state, the building of representative institutions, and the influx of Western ideas also gave rise to new ways of talking about the political capacities of individuals and a new understanding of the political subject. As Douglas Howland has demonstrated, notions of political and natural rights emanating from the West

\textsuperscript{22} Walthall, “Networking for Pleasure,” 98. On early modern notions of the nation, Berry, \textit{Japan in Print}, Chapter 7.

\textsuperscript{23} For a wonderful example, see Fujitani, \textit{Splendid Monarchy}.

\textsuperscript{24} Howland proposes that these texts can be evaluated as “offering new conceptual structures that propose to transform existing sociopolitical structures.” Howland, \textit{Personal Liberty}, 8.
Gendering Meiji Japan

were translated into Japanese and took on a life of their own.\textsuperscript{25} The language of rights in Japan—as elsewhere—was riddled with inconsistencies and contradictions that were never fully resolved.\textsuperscript{26} Sometimes these rights were construed as natural and inherent in all human beings and at other times, as rooted in wealth, education, or other forms of privilege.

Another central concept, “civilization,” was truly a ubiquitous term in the Western world of the nineteenth century. To students of Japanese history, the concept is most familiar in the form of the early Meiji slogan “civilization and enlightenment,” an exhortation invoked to promote all manner of social, economic, and political reforms. In this book, I am less concerned with the meaning and practice of “civilization and enlightenment” than in the ways people expressed concern for civilization in the debates that I address, for civilization runs through the pronouncements of male and female participants. Whereas in the thought of female activists, it sometimes encompassed utopian dimensions, even holding out the possibility for a radical shift in women’s position down the road, the concept could be taken in a very different direction by conservatives and used to mandate gradualism, specifically the gradual extension of political and legal rights. In this latter view, women and most men would only acquire rights at some unspecified point in the future.\textsuperscript{27}

The meanings of civilization were also bound up with concerns about how women related to public space. From the time of the first Japanese missions abroad to the West in the 1860s and 1870s, writers commented on the fact that Western women appeared in public at mixed-sex gatherings; this was not the custom for Japanese women, particularly samurai. Learning to socialize in mixed-sex gatherings, while at the same time maintaining strict distinctions between the sexes, thus became critical to Japanese definitions of “civilization.” Many of the reforms the Japanese engaged in—putting an end to mixed bathing, establishing girls’

\textsuperscript{25} On the evolution of rights discourse and issues of translation, see Howland, \textit{Translating the West}, Chapter 5.

\textsuperscript{26} Hunt, \textit{Inventing Human Rights}, Chapter 4.

\textsuperscript{27} Civilization was also bound up with nineteenth-century notions of “progress” originating in Europe but influential in Japan. On the relationship between progress and gender relations, see Rendall, “Gender, Race, and the Progress of Civilization,” 70.
Gendering Meiji Japan

schools (on a larger scale than before), and teaching women to dance—
were designed to further this goal of socialization. Pre-Meiji Japan also
had various kinds of segregation—husbands and wives did not socialize
together, and at the village level, youth groups were sex-specific. But
the ways that the sexes were positioned ideologically in public / private
and inner / outer space became a central concern in the Meiji era as
space was reconfigured, and political space in particular was re-invented.
Western definitions of civilization envisioned a place for women on
the sidelines but not at the center of social and political life, and the
Japanese felt compelled to adopt this practice.28

Theoretical Terms: Citizenship and the Public Sphere

This study draws heavily on two analytical concepts, citizenship and the
public sphere, in order to illuminate the content and significance of the
Meiji debates about women. Along with notions of political rights came
a novel way of talking about the relationship between people and the
state, centered on what I will call the “language of citizenship.” Until
recently, scholars have understood citizenship as a status bequeathed to
individuals by the state.29 However, following recent efforts across the
disciplines to rethink the category of citizenship beyond a juridical
status, I use “citizenship” as a lens to clarify the multiple ways that
women made claims upon the state and the public, even though they
were denied full citizenship rights.

“Citizenship” does not easily translate into Japanese and there was
no word in Meiji Japan that translated unambiguously as “citizen.” In-
deed, one of the striking aspects about the Japanese case is the fluidity
of *kokumin* (usually translated as “citizen”), *jinmin* (“the people”), and
*shinmin* (often translated as “subject”) during the first few decades of
Meiji. Historian Makihara Norio has shown that at this time, the gov-
ernment was trying to exert control over the term “citizen” (*kokumin*)

28. For more on nineteenth-century Japanese impressions of Western women, see
29. According to Canning, “Citizenship can be understood as a political status as-
signed to individuals by states, as a relation of belonging to specific communities, or as
a set of social practices that define the relationships between peoples and states and
among peoples within communities” (Gender History in Practice, 201).
and replace it with the more docile “subject” (shinmin). The populace’s enthusiasm for writing petitions and engaging in political activity far exceeded what the government had anticipated or desired. Accordingly, the government’s vision of subjecthood (as opposed to an active and potentially empowering notion of citizenship) placed an emphasis on duties rather than rights and would become more fully articulated throughout the 1880s. The government worked to assure that the category of subjecthood was ultimately enshrined in the Meiji Constitution of 1889.30 As a result, scholars have tended to treat the ordinary people of the Meiji era as “subjects” rather than “citizens,” and there is no historiography of citizenship in modern Japanese history.31

Throughout this study, I attend to the ways Meiji individuals talked about citizenship by focusing on the language of the time. At the same time, I use “citizenship” as an analytic tool to shed light not only on issues of political rights and legal status but also on questions of agency. An analysis of citizenship illuminates the disparity between official articulations of women’s place and the ways in which women represented themselves. While I do not intend to overlook the ways the state defined the people, I am more interested in the ways that people defined their own positions. In other words, although the vocabulary of citizenship itself was in transition, I have found citizenship a useful tool for analyzing the kinds of claims individuals were making for particular rights throughout this period.

Discussions about rights and citizenship were carried out in the new public sphere. In the previous Tokugawa period, the term “public” (ōyake) had referred to the official realm of political power.32 This definition was a far cry from the notion of a modern public sphere identified by philosopher and sociologist Jurgen Habermas. Habermas drew on the concept of a bourgeois public sphere to refer to a historical phenomenon that emerged in the coffeehouses and salons of eighteenth-

31. In his work on nationalism in modern Japan, Doak advises that we translate kokumin as “nation.” Doak’s interest lies in how kokumin proved to be a key word in the vocabulary of Meiji nationalism, but he also occasionally uses kokumin as a translation for “citizen.” The fact that kokumin can mean both “nation” and “citizen” in Japanese demands further examination. Doak, A History of Nationalism, Chapter 5.
32. Burns, Before the Nation, 95.
century western Europe. Propelled by the rise of a commercial society, a reading public, and the proliferation of voluntary associations, the public sphere represented a site neither official nor private where men (and he meant men) gathered together to engage in “rational” discussion to promote the common good.\textsuperscript{33} The public sphere served as a space from which to critique the social order (including the state) and thus harbored democratic potential.\textsuperscript{34}

Subsequent scholarship has faulted Habermas for the limitations of his description and, at the same time, modified and extended his arguments in order to better understand other historical moments. Much of the criticism has stressed that the public sphere was marked by conflict rather than consensus and that publics were not unified but fractured and multiple.\textsuperscript{35} But if Habermas has his critics, the degree of engagement with his ideas attests to the critical importance of his work.

Feminist scholarship has engaged with and contributed to the scholarship on publics and public spheres. As historian Mary Ryan has pointed out, one of the advantages of the public sphere for the study of gender is that it permits an expansion of our notions of “politics,” allowing us to see women creating a “public and political space of their own” outside of the domestic and official realms, even when they lacked the vote and access to the formal political process.\textsuperscript{36} Moreover, some of the critiques of Habermas’s public sphere—especially the point that publics were multiple rather than singular—allow us to better conceptualize the different constituencies at work in Meiji Japan beyond male elites. For example, we might say that by 1890, Meiji women constituted their own “counter-public” and that their limited and differential access to the political sphere was contingent upon the performance of certain kinds of feminine behavior.

An examination of the public sphere also begs the question of how “public” and “private” were defined in late nineteenth-century Japan. Recent feminist scholarship suggests that the boundaries separating

\textsuperscript{33} Habermas, \textit{The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere}.

\textsuperscript{34} Eley’s “Politics, Culture, and the Public Sphere” was helpful in formulating this section.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.; Davidoff, “Regarding Some ‘Old Husbands’ Tales’”; Rendall, “Women and the Public Sphere.”

these realms are in fact a great deal blurrier than we might expect. 37 Far from transhistorical phenomena, definitions of public and private are always in flux and only meaningful when understood in particular historical contexts. Although indispensable to the study of history, these concepts more accurately denote ideals than describe the ways individuals actually move about in space. Women might be theoretically confined to the private or domestic realm but in fact move out in public, attending school, participating in public meetings, and even acting politically. 38 At certain junctures, these moves were construed as women moving in the “social” sphere or in the “civic public,” constructions that divested such acts of political overtones. Nevertheless, we should not overlook the ways that women were bridging spheres rather than remaining in “separate spheres.” 39

In thinking about how the public and political realms might be related, I find it useful to conceptualize the political realm (as well as the social and civic realms) as part of the larger public arena. Even the boundaries separating the domestic from the public were never so sharp as we shall see in cases where women ventured out into public wearing the mantle of domesticity and femininity proudly. Part of what makes this project of identifying women in politics and the public so complicated is the disparity between official prescription—women were not supposed to enter the political public realm—and lived experience. Women often did enter the public but on “differential terms” from men. 40

A Few Thoughts on the Nation

The nation is the central entity tying all of these concepts together—rights, civilization, citizenship, and the public sphere. As will become clear, invoking the nation became a powerful tool for women to justify entrance to public space, whether physical or discursive, and to constitute and position themselves as citizens (kokumin) in the public sphere.

37. Ibid., 18.
38. For a marvelous example, see Foreman’s biography Georgiana, esp. 283, 382–84.
39. For a critique of these concepts and their use in historical writing, see Vickery, “Golden Age to Separate Spheres?”
The primacy of the nation in the Meiji period simply cannot be overstated. Indeed, while men certainly enjoyed more rights within the Meiji state than did women, all rights—including those of elite men—were subordinated to the nation and its rights.

Throughout this study, I consider how the nation presents a number of paradoxes for women, offering them the promise of inclusion and a discourse to legitimize their entrance, while at the same time binding women to its mission in distinct ways. The relationship between women and the nation was overflowing with paradoxes, for it was precisely membership in the new nation that enabled women to claim political and social rights.

A Place in Public

The first half of the book examines the impact of change on the gender order and how individuals (mostly men) debated new ideas about suffrage, rights, and equality. The second half focuses primarily on how women responded to these debates and the ways they carved out a space for themselves in public, in spite of a series of laws that sought to curb certain public political activities.

Each chapter centers around several key terms in order to give shape to what was a wide-ranging and sometimes amorphous debate. Chapter 1 describes the move from status to gender as a primary mode of political and social classification. For the reformers in charge of designing the architecture of a modern state, the task of defining the role of women in a modern polity brought several issues to the fore. In the previous period, heterogeneous local customs and a status-based society meant that women lived very differently from one another, according to status and region. Women of wealth and means in some areas enjoyed limited political privileges at the local level. While status distinctions were officially abolished in 1871, differences both persisted and were recreated and reified in the years that followed. Disparities in status, wealth, and education, along with corporate notions of identity (where the head represented the household to the outside world), all informed dis-

42. Ibid.; Scott, Only Paradoxes to Offer, 16–18.
cussions of suffrage rights in the early Meiji period. By drawing attention to the legacy of older customs transformed in a new historical moment, I show how the process of centralization, coupled with the introduction of new systems of political classification, clashed with older notions of status-based privilege. In the end, gender became more central than status in defining an individual’s political, social, and legal identity, but this was a messy and by no means straightforward process.

Conceptualizing the transition from status to gender is made even more complicated by the fact that social class within a capitalist system did not become fully established until the early twentieth century, and is beyond the scope of this study. In thinking about the rise of class, I follow recent historiography that has begun to treat class as a discourse rather than an objective fact, as “a political language, the meanings of which were contested across the lines of race, ethnicity, nationality, and generation.” During the period under examination, class remained an emergent discourse, while status, although officially abolished in 1871, continued to persist, even as it underwent evolution—unmoored from its hereditary roots and increasingly defined by wealth and education. Thus, the first few decades of Meiji were a time of transition, when older notions of status rested uneasily alongside incipient notions of class within nascent industrial capitalism.

Chapter 2 addresses an expansive body of theoretical and comparative literature to reassess the meaning of “rights” and “equality” in late nineteenth-century Japan. Upon encountering rights discourse, individuals who heretofore viewed the government as something outside of themselves began to speak in terms of possessing rights and being entitled to a voice. Such demands sparked a sharp reaction on the part of those who were opposed to granting rights to anyone outside of a narrow group of men. I demonstrate that by the 1890s, Japanese critics spoke less of “equal rights” and more of “women’s rights”—taking an attitude that allowed them to reconcile ideals about human rights with the preservation of gender distinctions. The notion of “women’s rights” also went hand-in-hand with the rise of women as a defining political category.

43. Canning, Gender History in Practice, 13.
44. On “emergent categories,” see Williams, Marxism and Literature, 121–27.
Chapter 3 reconceptualizes women’s access to the public sphere. I use the “public sphere” here as an analytical tool; it was not a term used by Meiji subjects. Nevertheless, the notion of the “public sphere” enables us to see how women used the spoken and written word to forge new tools for public expression, particularly in public speeches, journal articles, letters to the editor, and petitions. Despite steadily increasing legal restrictions on women’s and men’s political activity, I demonstrate that women’s ability to write and publish gave them a lasting public voice and enabled them to forge a modern subjectivity. I also highlight their enduring mark on Meiji political culture.

Chapter 4 captures the overall state of gender relations in 1890, a time when the Diet opened and the shape of the modern gender system began to solidify. The key words here center on the vocabulary of citizenship. A case study, the chapter gauges the gendered state of the nation by examining popular responses to a series of laws that sought to expel women from political life solely on the basis of their sex, and explores how women responded to these efforts. Through an analysis of the conversations carried out in the Diet, at debate meetings, and in the media, I address the ways that various groups defined women’s citizenship in order to simultaneously make use of women’s talents and yet place limits on their public activities. I identify a consensus among intellectuals, politicians, and government officials that women should participate in the social sphere, with limited access to political life, and that their citizenship was rooted in the household and hence indirect. The flexibility of this concept of “citizenship through the household” appealed to government officials, public intellectuals, and women activists of various political stripes, for women inhabited a kind of parallel-yet-distinct position where the household was conceived of as the nation-state writ small. This was a rather rigid gender order, yet one where both sexes were empowered to carry out a particular role.

In the conclusion, I place the debates about women in a larger context by drawing parallels between Meiji Japan and other places, notably postrevolutionary France, in order to think more broadly about the impact of social change on gender relations. The story of the relationship between women, politics, and modernity cannot be framed simply in terms of progress or regress, and inclusion or exclusion, for in the end results were far more mixed. In many ways, the shape of Meiji
political culture appears even more patriarchal than the decentralized political culture of the preceding Tokugawa period. And yet, the languages of citizenship, civilization, and nationalism allowed women new kinds of agency. Moreover, the new modes of representation that women adopted in the 1880s outlived their formative historical moment. As a result, women continued to play a public role long after their formal exclusion from politics in 1890. I comment briefly on the legacy of Meiji constructions of women’s citizenship and rights throughout the twentieth century, particularly the persistence of differential constructions of women’s citizenship despite the enactment of universal suffrage in the postwar Japanese Constitution of 1946. But before we move to the individual chapters, some background is in order.

**Across the 1868 Divide**

I have already suggested that the Meiji period witnessed a fundamental reconfiguration of the gender system. As part of the process of centralization and the building of a modern citizenry, women’s duties came to be harnessed to the state in addition to the household. In order to appreciate the magnitude of this transformation—and, in particular, the rise of gender as a defining category in the modern era—let us turn to a consideration of women’s status in the late Tokugawa period, particularly during the early nineteenth century.

A simple summary of women’s position in the late Tokugawa period is an impossible task, considering the diversity that marked the lives of all inhabitants of the archipelago, whether male or female. Our job is made even more complicated by the fact that during the Tokugawa period, the state (the bakufu)—like other premodern and early modern political formations—was not for the most part interested in regulating the gender order.\(^{45}\) The contours of gender relations were quite different from the modern system where “women” constituted an all-important social, political, and legal category. This is not to deny that Tokugawa individuals at all levels of society possessed notions of proper gender behavior, for scholars and moralists expounded upon visions of ideal gen-

\(^{45}\) However, the state was active in rewarding virtuous behavior, which varied according to gender. See Sugano, “State Indoctrination of Filial Piety.”
nder norms, and the operation of gender is evident at every level of society (whether urban or rural) and certainly within the household. The period was marked by tremendous geographic diversity in attitudes toward gender. This point is worth stressing because the premodern period is often treated as a time of static “tradition.” It emerges without texture and nuance, as modernity’s other, lacking vitality or dynamism. An understanding of Meiji requires some appreciation of what came before, for it is only in the modern period that a more distinctive gender system emerged.

Until quite recently, when scholars discussed gender during the Tokugawa period, they tended to focus on (or at the very least address) the didactic text entitled Onna daigaku (Greater learning for women), commonly attributed to Neo-Confucian scholar Kaibara Ekiken (1630–1714). In doing so, they followed the same path as Meiji intellectuals and bureaucrats, who, in their efforts to justify reforms in the late nineteenth century, invoked the Onna daigaku to construct a view of the Tokugawa past as benighted. As part of their effort to “elevate” the status of women, a central component of the Meiji enlightenment project, commentators singled out the Onna daigaku for censure. The text—which among other things emphasizes women’s unique “vices” and the importance of female submission to husbands and in-laws—was taken as descriptive of all women’s lives under Tokugawa rule. Although only one of a number of Tokugawa-era moral tracts geared toward women, the Onna daigaku took on a life of its own in the modern period. Individuals invoked the text in much the same way as reformers in China did at the end of the nineteenth century with regard to footbinding—to represent the quintessence of female subordination. For modern readers, the conditions described in the Onna daigaku constituted the imaginative place from which “women” were to be raised. (Interesting tensions still pervaded these Meiji discourses, for although women’s status was to be elevated, commentators were insistent that

---

46. Some scholars believe that the text was composed between 1714 and 1729, and that Kaibara was probably not the author. Tocco, “Norms and Texts,” 199. For a fascinating analysis of this text, see Yokota, “Imagining Working Women.”

47. Duara, “Regime of Authenticity,” 298.
the boundaries of acceptable feminine behavior had to be constantly guarded).48

If we set aside the Onna daigaku and examine recent scholarship that looks at women’s lives in the Tokugawa period—rather than prescriptive texts—what do we find? To begin with, the category “woman” occupied an unstable position within Tokugawa discourse.49 In a context where multiple factors defined one’s position within the social order, status differences sometimes outweighed gender differences, even though gender certainly affected the way people appeared and interacted in public and domestic space. I am interested in women’s relationship to the status system, in part because one of the main arguments of this book is that, over the course of the early Meiji period, gender displaced status as a primary marker of identity.

During the Tokugawa period, women, too, were subjects of the status system, but status operated differently for women than men. Although status has multiple meanings, I confine myself to two: social status (mibun) and status within the household. Legally mandated social status was clearly central to the organization of the Tokugawa political order. Recent scholarship suggests that status in this sense should be conceived of not, as it has often been, in terms of the four estates (shi-nō-kō-shō), but rather as primarily centered on the legal distinction between samurai and commoners.50 Complexities nevertheless abounded, and commoners in particular were classified according to multiple variables, including residence, property, and occupational group.51 Some historians have found that differences in status and economic circumstances were often more central than gender in defining the lives of

48. Meiji critics balked at aspects of the Onna daigaku even as they embraced some of its contents and went so far as to create their own versions. For example, in his 1874 Kinsei onna daigaku, Doi Kokka [1847–1918] introduced the concept of rights, particularly “equal rights” (dōken), into the discussion. Nevertheless, he still adhered to a starkly gendered order, one where women were subordinate to men. Sotozaki, Nihon fujinronshi, 1:20–21. Apparently, Doi was not widely read. Kaneko, Kindai joseiron, 57.


51. Ibid., 26. On status and gender at the village level, see Nagano, “Kinsei sonraku.”
individual women and men, challenging the stereotype that portrays all Tokugawa women as oppressed and confined to the home. For instance, recent scholarship suggests that merchant women enjoyed more property rights than women of peasant and samurai stock.

These complexities of gender and status are illustrated by the case of the writer and thinker Tadano Makuzu (1763–1825), who is distinguished by the fact that she wrote eclectic philosophical texts in which she engaged with the major intellectual debates of the day. Her writings led some to charge that she was “thinking like a man.” And yet, her biographer suggests that she was both marked and “constrained” by her gender and that, paradoxically, her gender (and the liminal perspective it provided) made her writing possible. Perhaps some of the traditional categories we have used to study women’s history—particularly the emphasis on a common experience and sisterhood—have unintentionally obscured the relational aspects of gender. Tadano had more in common with men of her status and education—she was a member of the samurai estate—than with most women, even as she was always clearly marked as a woman in her literary endeavors. While she aspired to serve as a “model for women,” her writings leave the reader with little sense of her shared experiences or identity with other women. She was, in short, an elite woman, and her primary identification lay with those of similar status. One of the monumental changes in the modern period is that women would begin to see themselves as a group as their primary identification shifted from status to gender.

Let me state again that I am not arguing that gender was not important in the Tokugawa period. Rather, the question historians must continually ask is how gender mattered, how it did not, and how it intersected with other categories of difference. The answer may be quite different from what we assume.

54. Gramlich-Oka, Thinking Like a Man, Part 1.
55. Foreman, Georgiana, 384.
57. In formulating this section, I have been inspired by my reading of Lewis, Sacred to Female Patriotism, Chapter 5.
Gendering Meiji Japan

The second meaning of status concerns status within the household. In addition to occupational groups, individuals belonged to households, the basic unit of the Tokugawa social order. The status of an individual depended on the status of the head of household, usually a man. What about cases where households were headed by women? In my view, one of the more fruitful ways to approach the intersection of gender and status within the household can come from considering the case of female household heads, who may have comprised about 10 percent of all heads, depending on the point in time. An understanding of their position serves as helpful background for Chapter 1, where I explore the Meiji suffrage debates, for females occupied a central position in these conversations. I contend that the discursive significance of female household heads in these debates far outweighed their actual numbers.

The historical record demonstrates that female commoners sometimes served as househeads (koshū) during the Tokugawa period, and that in some areas they enjoyed limited political privileges, occasionally including the vote. (In contrast, samurai women may have assumed the de facto duties of a househead, but they never officially occupied the position until the Meiji period.) The presence of female househeads in the historical record becomes more prominent over time, to the extent that, by the early nineteenth century, we find what Anne Walthall calls “a profound change in the construction of the village social order,” for women’s duty “to participate in village affairs had come to be publicly recognized.”

Women assumed headships under a variety of circumstances. Household succession practices were varied and should be understood within the larger context of strategies for family continuity, the ultimate goal of any household. Although much of the scholarly literature on female househeads focuses on the distinct characteristics of female headship, the duties of a head did not depend on sex. These obligations included representing the household to the local community, serving as signify——


tories for petitions and contracts, taking charge of family religious rites, and overseeing family finances.60

Variations in the patterns of headship abound.61 Critics sometimes assert that women were only chosen when no male was available and that female househeads were always “placeholders” (chūkei sōzokin); often widows, they were never full-fledged heads in the same sense as men. But in fact, other scholars have identified cases where women became househeads even when there were eligible men. For instance, in his examination of merchant succession in Osaka, William Hauser observes, “The male alternatives may have been incompetent or otherwise unsuitable but to suggest that females were selected only when no males were available does not follow from the data.”62

Suffice it to say that at the most general level, the characteristics of female headship differed from male headship, and it seems that female headship was generally not considered a long-term solution by many families.63 But the most important point for our purposes is that women did assume the role of household heads. When they did, they took on the same responsibilities as male heads and their status was even more important than their gender. Such was the overarching importance of status in early modern Japan.

The lives of female and male household heads were structured by multiple factors—including the household’s place within the local hierarchy, the househead’s relationship to other members of the unit, and even individual personalities, details that usually cannot be extracted from historical sources. Certainly those closer to the top of the local hierarchy were able to exert more influence than those at the bottom, but it does not follow that those below were powerless, as Herman Ooms demonstrates in his analysis of Ken, a woman who waged a battle against village authorities in what is now part of Nagano prefecture for

several decades beginning in the 1760s. The limitations of the sources come into sharper relief when we try to gauge actual practices. For instance, some scholars point out that in situations where a son-in-law was adopted into a family to serve as the head, it is likely that the daughter “functioned as the househead even though her husband might be given the formal title in official records.” In a similar way, it is easy to imagine a different power dynamic with respect to senior women and young male heirs. In short, the circumstances in each case where women and men assumed headships were far more complicated than the usual generalizations about household heads allow, and we cannot assume that those who ran the household and those who represented it were necessarily the same person.

Nor do we have enough information to necessarily link high numbers of female households with an elevated status for women, an assertion sometimes made by demographers who are responsible for most of the research on female headship. Toleration of female headship does not necessarily indicate a generally higher status for women. High rates of female headship may in fact suggest that women were more likely to be considered candidates for succession in some areas, that women were the only possible candidates, or even that local practices favored succession by the eldest child. We could even propose that the whole unified notion of “the status of women” is a modern concept, one that went hand-in-hand with the rise of women as a central category, and that we apply it to the Tokugawa period at our peril, when status differences often superseded gender distinctions.

Change over time and regional variations are also significant factors when thinking about female househeads. As I have already suggested, scholars have unearthed cases where female household heads and/or widows voted in local elections in the late Tokugawa period. Some historians understand these trends within the context of increasing democratic tendencies at the village level in the nineteenth century, for,

64. Ooms, Tokugawa Village Practice, Chapter 1.
in some villages, in a departure from past practices, all households were now able to vote. Nevertheless, women were forbidden from participating in village governance in other regions because of their gender.

The evidence presented here suggests the need to bear in mind the complex geography of status and gender in Tokugawa Japan. Demographic analyses that chart regional variations in headship over time can be illuminating but do not reveal the whole story. We can also appreciate the fact that male dominance—over women and socially inferior men—was the norm in Tokugawa society, while still bearing in mind that “patriarchy”—which recent scholarship has begun to conceive of as a “process” rather than a fixed structure—was not the only dynamic at work. Most important of all, we can appreciate that when women assumed the position of household head, they occupied a place where status trumped—but did not erase—their gender. In thinking about Tokugawa women and, in particular, the case of female household heads, the axis of difference needs to be stretched beyond the binary concept of women and men.

I have suggested that women’s lives varied dramatically according to status, even though at certain junctures, their gender mattered more than their status. Other noteworthy variables for future consideration include age and locale. The Tokugawa period left a mixed legacy for women and men. No simple lines can be drawn charting unequivocal “progress” or “decline.” Such evaluations vary according to which group of men or women we are talking about. But we might pause to contemplate the impact of changes in the latter half of the Tokugawa period that propelled the rise of women working outside of the household, assuming headships in higher numbers, and taking a more active

70. Walthall references a case where a woman was pointedly refused entry to a meeting: “[S]he was turned back with the retort, ‘We need people with balls to handle this affair’” (“The Life Cycle,” 68).
71. The central government was almost exclusively a male preserve, with the exception of the ōoku (Great Interior), the women’s quarter of the shogun’s household. See Hata, “Servants of the Inner Quarters.” On patriarchy as a “practice,” see Desan, The Family on Trial, 2. On flexibility in household succession, see Ōtake, “Ie” to josei, 270–71.
72. Most recent scholarship in English eschews this tendency.
role in social protest, which itself was on the rise. Despite our stereotyped image of women confined to the household, many Tokugawa females were on the move—a pattern that only becomes more salient over time. They were traveling, working, signing petitions, and engaging in activities that historians have only begun to unearth and write about.

When Meiji reformers sought to capture the benighted Tokugawa past, they seized upon a particular image of the Tokugawa woman generated by their reading of the *Onna daigaku*. They aimed to enhance the status of women, which in their view was very low indeed, the result of centuries of “feudal” practices. But it would take time for the Meiji state to begin treating women as a discrete category and even longer for women to see themselves in those terms.

This discussion has aimed to impart texture to our understanding of how gender went from serving as one marker of identity and experience—sometimes more important than others—to the defining marker in the modern period. In the absence of a modern nation-state and its attendant apparatuses, actual practices in the Tokugawa period varied widely—which is perhaps the most important lesson of all.
