

Migration and Colonial Experience of Ozaki Kouko: A “Middle Class” in Pursuit of Dreams within the New Woman Thought Movement

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explore the migration experience and trace the footsteps of Ozaki Kouko, a Japanese female poet with colonial experience, from the perspectives of gender and social stratification. The paths, motivations, images and significance of the migration of middle-class Japanese women from the Russo-Japanese War until the 1920s are examined.

Born in 1897 to a merchant family of the old middle class in Fukushima, Kouko witnessed the decline of her family business following the Russo-Japanese War, leading to the diaspora and migration of the family. A relative that left for Taiwan would become a pioneer for Kouko, who later migrated to Taiwan herself. During World War I, Kouko became one of the numerous youth who, against the backdrop of emerging industrialization in metropolitan areas, left the countryside for Tokyo to seek their livelihood. Kouko herself became a working woman. Owing to her merchant family background, she lacked cultural capital and hence sank into the mid to lower working class in the developing capitalist metropolis. After getting married, her social class changed once again as she became the new middle class. From the rural to the metropolitan; from a working career to marriage life, Kouko already had rich experience in geographical migration and social mobility long before her departure for Taiwan.

After marriage, Kouko's life became more stable. Despite opposition from her family, she headed for Taiwan for self-actualization and in pursuit of her dream in becoming a writer. Kouko's existing family networks, her teenage reading experience in the 1910s, the New Women Thought Movement, and boom in literature after the expansion of female education were driving forces behind her migration to colonial Taiwan.

In colonial Taiwan, Kouko focused on composing tankas, founded a female social group, with livelihood in mind, independent of any other official women's groups, and formed a circle of middle-class women. Colonial life, experiences and nature nurtured the creative talent of Kouko and enriched her writing. Taiwan was where her dreams were fulfilled, a foreign land that became her home and the launch pad of her writing career. Her male relatives who went over to Taiwan all obtained informal employment within the colonial government system, revealing the formation of the colonial new middle class.

Kouko, as a case in point, illustrated the commonality of the colonial experience of middle-class women: migration supported by social connections and rare interaction with Taiwanese society. Colonial Taiwan served only as a platform for self-enrichment and upward movement on the social ladder. In contrast to women that assisted men in opening up new territories under imperial expansion; Kouko's migration was not only beyond the framework of "wise wife and good mother", but also independent of the "nation". Kouko's case was a woman figure influenced by the New Women Thought Movement opted to migrate and leave home in pursuit of self-actualization and personal aspirations.

Keywords: Japanese Colonial Era, Migration, Middle Class, Ozaki Kouko, New Women, Japanese in Taiwan