



Resilience, agency and activism: Viewing Yoshiko Yamaguchi through the feminist life course perspective



Alison Luke

Department of Japanese Studies, Macquarie University, Sydney, NSW 2109, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 October 2015
Received in revised form 1 May 2016
Accepted 11 May 2016
Available online 26 May 2016

Keywords:

Autonomy
Feminism
Japan
Politics
Yoshiko Otaka
Yoshiko Yamaguchi

ABSTRACT

The low number of female politicians in Japan is testament to the difficulties that women face in entering the political sphere. This paper analyses the life of Japanese actress, journalist, politician and activist Yoshiko Yamaguchi (1920–2014), in terms of her political career, to contribute to a deeper understanding of the way personal choices and characteristics, socioeconomic factors, macrosocial contexts and chance events shape life paths and possibilities. As a Japanese woman in Japan-occupied Manchuria, Yoshiko developed a unique cross-cultural identity and understanding which facilitated her movement through transnational spaces and her adaptability as she renegotiated her identity within different contexts. Yoshiko is a distinctive example as she successfully drew on these experiences to achieve her political goals of raising awareness about human rights issues and the harms of conflict. This paper suggests that women can enact agency within the political sphere but that few are able to do so effectively because they lack access to resources and opportunities through which to realise their political goals.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Women in Japan are significantly under-represented in politics and other senior management positions due to a range of structural constraints and entrenched traditional attitudes which have continued to limit women's role to the "private sphere" (Eto, 2010; Lebra, 2007; Pharr, 1990). These attitudes are reflected when female politicians are treated as transitory intruders in a male-dominated field and restricted to positions which reflect gender-role stereotypes. To overcome the limitations imposed by the political culture, patriarchal attitudes and social norms (Bochel & Bochel, 2006, 376), female politicians must have a certain level of skill and knowledge and be presented with opportunities that they can take advantage of. Exercising agency within this context becomes a fundamental method to achieve political empowerment, but the embedded nature of women's disadvantage means that only a small number of female politicians have had the ability (or inclination) to challenge the status quo and influence the direction of social change.

This paper explores 'outlier' Yoshiko Yamaguchi (hereinafter Yoshiko),¹ whose experiences as a cross-cultural film star, 'diva'

and political journalist provide a unique backdrop to her long lived political career in the House of Councilors as a member of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Her political career spanned eighteen years (1974–1992), whereas the careers of more recent female celebrity candidates are typically short-lived. The significant gender gap in both the LDP and Japan's political system remains, despite recent government efforts to address this issue, including Prime Minister Shinzō Abe's commitment to create a society where "all women shine" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015). Yoshiko is an important example as she was able to overcome considerable structural constraints and act with her own agency to shape her life course at a time when there were few female politicians.

Yoshiko's film career has been of growing interest to academics (Coates, 2014; Stephensen, 2002; Wang, 2012) and in popular culture with a novel, "China Lover" by Ian Buruma (2008), a play (1992), television drama (1989) and a long-running musical (1991–2006) inspired by her life. However, there is little scholarship on her political career and how her early experiences influenced her entry into politics. This disparity is evident in the many obituaries and tributes after her death in September 2014 which focus on her film career, particularly propaganda films, with only a cursory mention of her political career (see Japan Times Online, 2014; Macy, 2014; McDonough, 2014). Drawing on Yoshiko's recollections in her autobiography *Ri Koran: watashi no hansei* (1987) and the translation *Fragrant Orchid: The Story of my Early Life* (2015), this paper presents a close study of Yoshiko from a life course perspective to illustrate how women's choices are shaped and constrained by historical, social and cultural contexts. Yoshiko changed her name several times at important life transitions as she

¹ E-mail address: alison.jones@mq.edu.au.

¹ Due to Yoshiko Yamaguchi's cross cultural identity she has been known by several different names including Pan Shuhua during her schooling in China, Li Xianglan (Ri Koran in Japanese transliteration) during her film career in China, Shirley Yamaguchi during her American film career, Yoshiko Yamaguchi during her film career in Japan, and Yoshiko Otaka during her journalism and political career. To avoid confusion this paper will follow the same format as her autobiography and generally use the name Yoshiko unless the context clearly calls for the use of her alternate names, eg. by using her Chinese name, Li Xianglan, when referring to her persona as a Chinese film star.

renegotiated her identity in different contexts and cultures. This analysis is structured around these transitions, from early childhood (Yoshiko Yamaguchi/Pan Shuhua), as a Chinese actress (Li Xianglan), Japanese actress (Yoshiko Yamaguchi), Hollywood star (Shirley Yamaguchi) and as a wife, journalist and politician (Yoshiko Ōtaka).

Viewing Yoshiko's life course through a feminist lens, it is evident that her status as a woman led to additional challenges as various macrosociocultural contexts constrained her access to resources and opportunities. The integration of feminist and life course theories provides a distinct framework that recognises the unique gendered challenges that Yoshiko faced and illustrates her adaptability and agency as key factors in overcoming these obstacles. This analysis draws on the six main principles of the life course defined by Elder (1998): (1) cultural and historical contexts; (2) timing of lives; (3) interdependent lives; (4) human agency; (5) diversity and heterogeneity; and (6) the influence of the past on future experiences.

Human agency is particularly important because it acknowledges an individual's capacity to exert control over self-experiences, formulate and act towards long-term outcomes and influence the life course trajectory (Hitlin & Elder, 2007, 182–183). There is a level of complexity as choices are made within systems of constraint and opportunity that depend on external factors such as socioeconomic circumstances and context. To transcend these limitations one must possess resourcefulness, personal competence and the expectation or belief that one can personally achieve one's goals (Bandura, 2006, 170–171). Agency is also exercised by influencing more powerful individuals to act on one's behalf (proxy agency) or when people work together to achieve common goals (collective agency) (Bandura, 2006, 165). Cultivation of one's competency and agenic capabilities becomes a key way to determine one's future and remain resilient in the face of adversity.

Yoshiko's agency is a recurrent theme here because her ability to successfully implement strategies to shape her life path and achieve outside of prescribed social norms make her a positive role model for women in Japan. This analysis provides vital information about the importance of education and role models in supporting women's empowerment and agency. Yoshiko is a distinctive case as her early life experiences helped her develop a strong belief in self-efficacy and she overcame various structural and gendered barriers to her participation through her dexterity in enacting agency by using available opportunities for personal development and to achieve her own goals as a politician and activist.

Yoshiko Yamaguchi — the early years

Yoshiko was born in 1920 in Fushun, Manchuria, China to Fumio (father) and Ai (mother) Yamaguchi against a backdrop of political tension between Japan and China. Japanese nationalism had been increasing since the Meiji period when leaders sought to define Japan's identity as part of the modernization process (Morton & Olenik, 2005). Gender roles were clearly defined under the Civil Code of 1898 with women expected to dedicate themselves to the private sphere under the *ryōsai kenbo* (good wife, wise mother) ideology whereas men were placed as the head of the family (Patessio, 2013). In an extension of this structure the Emperor was established as the “father” of Japan under the government's *kazoku kokka* (family state) ideology (Morton & Olenik, 2005). The Emperor's divine origins reinforced national pride. As Japan's economy grew, territorial acquisition was seen as key to building an Empire. In 1895 Japan defeated China in the first Sino-Japanese War, gaining territory and international status. Tensions between Japan and China were further exacerbated by the Treaty of Versailles (1919) which granted to Japan previously German-held territories in China. Colonisation of the newly conquered territories was promoted to cement imperialist control and harness the economic potential of these areas (O'Dwyer, 2015). Fumio inherited from his father a strong interest in China and his Chinese knowledge and skills allowed him to migrate to Manchuria in 1906 to take a position at the Japanese

owned South Manchurian Railway Company (Yamaguchi & Fujiwara, 2015, 2). Here Fumio established a network of Chinese friends and associates with members of the financial and political elite. These friendships reflected Fumio's progressive view of the Chinese as equal, which was contrary to Japan's stance at the time (Tanaka, Utsumi, & Onuma, 2004).

These connections were solidified through the Chinese custom of ‘sworn kinship’ where Fumio pledged General Li Jichun and Pan Yugui to recognise each other's children as their own (Yamaguchi & Fujiwara, 2015, 19). Under this arrangement Yoshiko was given the Chinese names “Li Xianglan” (Fragrant Orchid) and “Pan Shuhua” (Yamaguchi & Fujiwara, 2015, 19), which gave her a deep visceral connection to China. Although Yoshiko was raised within a context of political tension between China and Japan, she developed a strong affinity with China and this connection became a key part of her identity. Yoshiko's elevated position as a Japanese person (conqueror) in China positively conditioned her access to education, work opportunities and social networks, placing her in a strengthened position to overcome the difficulties she faced due to conflict and entrenched Japanese gender norms. Here I analyse these aspects of Yoshiko's early life to reveal the establishment of her cumulative advantage that elevated her cultural capital and valorized her sense of agency.

Her parents' progressive influence subverted dominant gendered and racial discourse by strongly supporting her education, tutoring her in Chinese, encouraging her to excel in school, and prompting her to develop her own abilities and interests (Zhu, Tse, Cheung, & Oyserman, 2014). Lebra (2007, 180) asserts that male mentors are necessary to overcome the cultural barriers to women's participation and produce career-oriented daughters. Fumio played a key role as he encouraged Yoshiko to pursue an education and subverted gendered career norms by expressing his desire for her to pursue a career in politics or journalism, a possible self that Yoshiko visualised as a result (Yamaguchi & Fujiwara, 2015, 3). Yoshiko attended Yong'an Elementary School in 1926, where she excelled at music and Chinese. By age nine she passed the National Certification of Chinese Language, 4th class under the tutelage of her father in his adult language class where she was the only female (Yamaguchi & Fujiwara, 2015, 4).

Ai's contribution was also important as Japanese mothers are also a strong source of family socialisation through their position as role models, although this often serves to reinforce the idea of women as housewives and mothers (Lebra, 2007, 180). Ai attended Japan Women's University in Tokyo, a vital institution promoting women's education across Japan (Patessio, 2013). At a time when few women progressed to tertiary education, Ai's educational attainment meant that she acted as a role model to Yoshiko and presented an alternate possible self to the housewife model. Educational trajectories remain static for privileged social groups (Pallas, 2003) and Ai's access facilitated her daughter's. Yoshiko describes her mother as an “intellectual type,” and Ai's educational experiences influenced Yoshiko as she wanted her daughter to have opportunities for success outside of the private sphere (Yamaguchi & Fujiwara, 2015, 3). Her parents allowed her to develop her ability along her own interests (music and language) and rejected her tuition in the cultural education (flower arranging, cooking, tea ceremony) that was dominant in girls education in Japan (Patessio, 2013). This was also made possible because Yoshiko's education was carried out in Manchuria, where she had an elite status and a wider range of opportunities and choice than those available to women under the strictly controlled gender-segregated education system in Japan (O'Dwyer, 2015). Family educational support is a key factor in academic achievement and career exploration (Levine & Sutherland, 2012), and Yoshiko's parents played a profound role in supporting her advancement during this core period of her development.

Yoshiko's cultural capital frequently features in depictions of her which highlight her beauty and talent; she had “outstanding language skills and was blessed with singing ability” (Yomota, 2000, 119), and

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/375864>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/375864>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)