

Book Review by

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**Robin Kietlinski *Japanese Women and Sport: Beyond Baseball and Sumo*,
Bloomsbury Academic, ISBN 978-1-84966-340-3, 187pages.**

This book makes a valuable contribution to filling a significant and glaring gap in the English-language academic literature on sport by shedding light on the history of women's sport in Japan. Whilst the rise of feminism and gender studies across disciplines has paralleled an increasing Western academic interest in female athletes in Europe and North America, little work currently exists on Japanese women in sport. Western academic inquiry into Japanese sports has to date centred around male-dominated baseball and sumo. This lack of scholarly attention to Japanese sportswomen is problematic not only because it is indicative of the limited scope of knowledge that the existing body of literature offers but also because it reflects and reproduces the conventional stereotypes of Japanese women being submissive, inactive, frail and passive – the antithesis of the qualities that are commonly associated with successful athletes such as strength, prowess, aggression, competitiveness and confidence. The near-absence of the perspectives and experiences of Japanese women in the literature must therefore be understood in the broader context of Western constructions of women and gender relations in Japan (and in other non-Western societies and cultures). In this book, Robin Kietlinski contends that sport has served as a key avenue for modern Japanese women to attain socio-political power and status and to influence the public notions of ideals for women. By showing that the progress Japanese women have made towards increased representation in competitive sport has been more or less on par with that in other industrialised nations, her book serves more than the purposes of historical description. Indeed, as she states, the book is intended as a 'response to those works of history, sociology and anthropology that paint Japan as a restrictive and oppressive place for women.'

Kietlinski presents a rich historical narrative of women's sport in modern Japan, drawing on newspaper articles, radio and television broadcasts, popular and scholarly journals, and autobiographies and biographies of prominent female athletes. The introduction contextualises her work in the gender and sport studies in Japan, where research inquiry into women's sport remains in a nascent stage. Chapter two explores historical evidence for Japan's pre-modern sporting activities such as *kemari* and martial

arts with limited female participation as well as the origins of women's sport during the early modernisation period of the late 19th century. The chapter also presents a sketch of the rapid growth of women's sport in China and the Korean peninsula, with which Kietlinski again challenges readers to scrutinise the widely held assumption of the lasting and binding effects of Confucian ideology on women's liberation in East Asia.

The main body of the book traces the history of Japanese women's participation in competitive sport, with a particular emphasis on their participation in the Olympic Games from 1928 onwards. This begins with Chapter three, which outlines the contributions of influential early educators who laid the foundation of women's sport by advocating and developing women's physical education from the late 19th century to the 1920s. The subsequent decades of the 1920s and 1930s, which Chapter four examines, saw a shift in the attitudes of the public and mass media from reluctant acceptance of physical education for girls to a greater recognition and even admiration of successful female athletes, prompted by some pioneering athletes' highly publicised achievements at the Olympic Games. The Second World War and Occupation period that followed, as Chapter five shows, became a turning point when the status of women's sport transformed 'from an obscure and sometimes ridiculed activity to one worthy of intense praise and support.' Rather than slowing down women's involvement in competitive sport, the nationalism of the 1930s and 1940s spurred it on, despite the country's absence from the Olympic Games for sixteen years during and the after the war. Following the post-war reconstruction period of the 1950s, there was further progress towards gender equality in sport in the 1960s and 1970s, which Chapter six examines with a focus on the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, the first Olympics held in Japan (and outside of the West). Chapter seven highlights the continuing international successes of contemporary female athletes as well as the ways in which these have been intersected by the growing forces of globalisation and commercialisation, which are most evident in product endorsement by athletes, as well as the emergence of professionalisation, which previously did not exist in many sports in Japan.

In addition to presenting this detailed historical account, the book pays close attention to the athletic and post-athletic lives of a number of pioneering and contemporary sportswomen who attained national (and in some cases international) prominence and popularity, such as Hitomi Kinue, Maehata Hideko, the 'Witches of the Orient' (women's volleyball team dubbed as such due to their exceptional international successes in the 1960s and 1970s), Hashimoto Seiko, Arimori Yūko, Takahashi Naoko,

and Tani Ryōko. By tracing their life stories, achievements and struggles as well as the changing and sometimes-conflicting public and media reception and perception of these women, the book captures the subtleties and dynamics of the process by which Japanese society gradually transformed from one that upheld '*ryōsai kenbo* (good wife, wise mother)' as the ideal for women to the contemporary one with female athletes making outstanding performances at the Olympic Games and other international competitions in a diverse range of sports, including softball, figure skating, synchronised swimming, marathon and jūdō. Top female athletes today enjoy celebrity status, societal prestige, financial profit through corporate advertising and second careers in journalism, book writing, public speaking, philanthropic activities, etc., and in some cases, highly successful political careers as parliamentarians.

The final chapter of the book engages more directly with some of the overarching themes that intersect Kietlinski's historical narrative, namely, modernity, globalisation, commercialisation, spectacle/performance and femininity. It considers, amongst other things, the many impacts of the rapid technological progress on women's participation and success in sport, the positive and negative outcomes of the commercialisation of sport for female athletes, and the ways in which the fame and popularity enjoyed by leading female athletes embody both a shift in the Japanese gender ideals and the persistence of the traditional constructions of femininity.

Importantly, whilst one of Kietlinski's principal objectives is to chronicle female athletes' varied life journeys, endeavours, hardships and victories in sport – which underscores their agency to challenge the conventional gender norms and propel wider societal change, her historical lens encompasses the profound complexities and multi-dimensionality of the realities of women's sport in Japan. Elite female athletes, through their successes, fame and influence, undeniably reflect, and contribute to, the on-going redefinition of femininity, womanhood, choice and success in Japanese society. Nevertheless, such 'progress' is skewed by persisting gender inequalities, the corporate advertising logic and the neoliberal ideology of individual success and competition. The issue of femininity and sexualisation of female athletes is a case in point. On the one hand, the nation-wide celebration of the remarkable achievements of women's softball team (and perhaps also soccer team, although the book focuses more on the former) demonstrates a growing societal acceptance and appreciation of outstanding athletes who may not conform to the conventional expectations of feminine traits. On the other hand, those who do embody such traditional ideals in terms of their looks and/or the

sports they play (such as figure skating, gymnastics and synchronised swimming) continue to enjoy immense popularity and appear in advertising images that emphasise their 'feminine' attraction. Popular female athletes have often been referred to by the media and the public by their first names, which, as pointed out in this book, is an informal practice permitted normally between family and close friends. Thus, another significant contribution of the book is that it offers illuminating insights into the complex ways in which gender politics is played out in and through women's sport in Japan, thereby advancing a more nuanced understanding of Japan's gender relations.

Of additional yet notable value are the large amount of Japanese media and historical materials the book allows readers to access, most of which are only available in the Japanese language and have hence been inaccessible to English-speaking readers and researchers. Taken from a wide range of major media outlets that constitute a large part of the everyday world of the masses of Japanese people, such as popular women's magazines, national newspapers and radio broadcasts, such materials allow readers an otherwise-unattainable appreciation of Japanese sportswomen's lives, accomplishments and challenges, presented in their authentic contexts.

At the same time, owing to its reliance on media and scholarly materials, the book naturally focuses on high-profile, elite athletes, especially those who reached the status of national icons and progressed onto successful second careers as writers, celebrities and lawmakers. Necessarily missing from this angle are the voices and stories of the great many sportswomen who never make appearance in the Olympic Games, in newspapers or on television and yet daily make indelible contributions in their local clubs, tracks and grounds towards increasing women's space in competitive sport and shifting public perceptions of what it means to be a woman and athlete. This book however has a clearly-defined analytical scope and methodology, through which it offers enlightening new knowledge of a subject matter little investigated previously.

Illustrated with many intriguing episodes of renowned athletes and presented in accessible, lucid language, the book is a suitable reading for not only historians, gender scholars and other social scientists but also general readers and sport practitioners interested in women's sport and modern Japanese history.

[1,566 words excluding the title]