Women in Edo Japan: Contemporary Cinematic Representations


Keiichi Hara’s *Miss Hokusai* and Masato Harada’s *Kakekomi Onna to Kakedashi Otoko* are both set in Japan in the later part of its early modern Edo period (1603–1868).¹ Under the reign of the Tokugawa shogunate, the flourishing of print culture enabled ordinary people to come into contact with the arts and knowledge that had been previously exclusive to wealthy people of high rank. This dissemination of print culture is one of the subjects dealt with in both films.

The animation film *Miss Hokusai* provides a feminist perspective on the history of early modern Japan. The heroine is a twenty-three-year-old *ukiyo-e* (woodblock print) artist, Katsushika O-Ei (Ōi, c.1800–57), whom recent scholarship has rediscovered as not only an essential contributor to the later works of her eccentric but celebrated father, Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), but also a groundbreaking artist in her own right, notable for the contrast in her works of light and darkness. Her works have been featured in a number of recent exhibitions,² while the first collected edition of O-Ei’s paintings was published in 2015,³ exemplifying efforts in Japan to reevaluate women artists active before

---

¹ *Miss Hokusai* won the Jury Award in the Annecy Festival in France (June 15–20, 2015), and received its North American premiere as the opening film of this year’s Fantasia International Film Festival (Montreal, Canada, July 14–August 4, 2015). Releases are also planned in France, Belgium, the UK and elsewhere in Europe. Director Masato Harada presented the international premiere of his *Kakekomi Onna to Kakekomi Otoko* on the opening night of the Toronto Japanese Film Festival (June 11, 2015).

² O-Ei’s paintings, such as “Courtesans Showing Themselves to the Strollers through the Grille” and “Three Women Playing Musical Instruments” (held in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), have been included in numerous recent exhibitions during 2014–15 in Tokyo and throughout Japan.

the twentieth century. Further examples include two linked exhibitions held in Tokyo from May to June 2015: “Uemura Shoen and Splendid Japanese Women Artists” at the Yamatane Museum of Art, and “Splendid Japanese Women Artists in the Edo Period” at the Kosetsu Memorial Museum on the campus of Jissen Women’s University in Shibuya (see review by Tomi Suzuki in this issue). The former exhibition included Tamako Kataoka’s painting Oei, Hokusai’s Daughter (1982), which emphasized O-Ei’s striking eyes, indicating that O-Ei had captured this contemporary female artist’s imagination.

The director Hara, together with the scriptwriter Miho Maruo, adapted Sarusuberi (Crape Myrtle, 1983–88), the manga short stories of Edo expert Hinako Sugiura (1958–2005), one of the first works in which O-Ei is featured. Sugiura vividly described the everyday life of the young O-Ei who lives with Hokusai and fellow artist Zenjiro (Keisai Eisen, 1790–1848) in her thirty short stories that deftly depict Edo customs and the world of ukiyo-e.

Miss Hokusai constitutes a year in the life of O-Ei. She spends each day not only assisting her father as a ghost painter, but also seeking out her own idiom as an independent artist, experiencing her first love for fellow painter Hatsugoro (Totoya Hokkei, 1780–1850) as well as her grief over the illness of her sister, O-Nao. In contrast to Katherine Govier’s novel, The Ghost Brush (2010), which provides an account of her entire life, in Hara’s film version, O-Ei always assumes that she will never attain the same level of accomplishment as Hokusai, to whom she owes her career. While she watches her younger sister playing in the snow, O-Ei remembers that Hokusai encouraged her to paint when she was the same age as O-Nao by providing her with a pen and a sheet of paper. At the same time, in the episode in which she undertakes a commission to paint a vision of Hell,

---

4 One of the pioneer works on Japanese female artists active before the twentieth century is Patricia Fister, Kinsei no Josei Gakatachi: Bijutsu to Gender (Japanese Women Artists in The Modern Era: Arts and Gender) (Kyoto: Shibunkaku, 1994).

5 O-Ei is represented also in a number of novels and plays. Masayo Yamamoto’s novel Ōi Tantanroku (1984) depicts O-Ei from her forties onward; based on Sei-ichi Yashiro’s play Hokusai Manga (1977), Kaneto Shindo made a film with the same title in 1981 in which O-Ei is simply represented as a dutiful daughter to Hokusai. Starting in December 2014, Makate Asai has been serializing a novel in which the fifty-two-year-old O-Ei looks back at her past, Kurara, in Shosetsu-Shincho published by Shinshosha Press.

the publisher Manjido visits O-Ei and Hokusai to inform them that the painting’s realism is tormenting the lady of the house with frightful illusions, which have made her ill. She recovers only after Hokusai adds a Buddha elect to the painting. Despite this acknowledgment of her almost supernatural artistic talent, the film begins and ends with O-Ei’s monologue about her great father.

In Miss Hokusai, O-Ei’s only visible achievement is a fictional portrait of O-Nao, which O-Ei draws at the end of the film, although her actual later work, “Courtesans Showing Themselves to the Strollers through the Grille,” is shown during the closing credit roll (Figure 1). The episode of O-Nao’s portrait, which is not in Sugiura’s story, was added by Hara, who presents it as O-Ei’s first own drawing, created thanks to the father’s encouragement at the very beginning of her entire career as an independent artist, not as his assistant.

Although Miss Hokusai does not represent in detail O-Ei’s later achievement as a mature artist, it succeeds in calling attention to the existence of an as-yet not widely known female artist during the Edo period by foregrounding O-Ei’s high self-esteem as a professional painter. At the beginning of the film, O-Ei, who lives and works with Hokusai, visits her mother, Koto. In response to
Koto’s concern about her daughter, O-Ei confidently avers that she and her father can make a living with “two brushes and four chopsticks.” In this scene, O-Ei gazes at a tree of sarusuberi (crape myrtle) blooming in riotous profusion; this crimson plant, featured in the film’s Japanese title, appears to function as a symbol of O-Ei’s irrepressible passion as an artist.

In Miss Hokusai, O-Ei derives her ability to grasp the essence of things from her father. Only O-Ei and Hokusai can see the courtesan’s neck moving around her bedroom at night when she, together with Hokusai and Zenjiro, visits Yoshiwara, the pleasure district of Edo (in Sugiura’s original story, O-Ei is absent from this episode). Thus, the film emphasizes Hokusai and O-Ei’s resemblance in having great—and in this instance even supernatural—insight. She also inherits from him her power to imbue life to the objects in her paintings, as, for example, when she must paint a dragon for Hokusai’s commission because she has accidentally dropped an ember from her pipe on his completed work. At first, O-Ei finds herself unable to sketch this imaginary creature. Yet she patiently waits for the moment of inspiration, which comes at midnight, when the dragon’s limb suddenly appears from behind the clouds. In making use of the medium of animation, this film succeeds in demonstrating her ability to visualize supernatural beings by vividly depicting moments when her pen brings the objects of her paintings to life (Figure 2).

According to Harumi Fuuki, the composer of the music for Miss Hokusai, the director requested her to create a rock-theme soundtrack for the film to dramatize O-Ei’s energetic way of life.7 Indeed, Fuuki’s lively rock music functions as one of the bridges between the Edo period and the present. It is thus appropriate that this film about an early modern female artist is enhanced by powerful music composed by a young female artist of contemporary Japan.

Masato Harada’s Kakekomi Onna to Kakedashi Otoko (hereafter Kakekomi) describes women seeking asylum and divorce in the Toukei-ji Temple in Kamakura. Toukei-ji, a Zen temple for women established in 1284 by Kakusan-ni, wife of the eighth regent of Hojo regency, Hojo Tokimune, was a kakekomi dera in the Edo period, one of two asylums for women that were officially approved by the Tokugawa shogunate. The successive chief priests of the temple were women, including, for example, an imperial princess of the Emperor Godaigo, and

---

7 See Official Guidebook of Sarusuberi (Miss Hokusai) (Tokyo: Maggarden, 2015), 92 and the liner notes for the film’s original soundtrack.
Tenshu-ni, a great-granddaughter of the first shogun, Tokugawa Ieyasu. Women seeking asylum often traveled by foot to the temple, located about fifty kilometers from the center of Edo (now Tokyo). In Govier’s novel, it takes almost a day for O-Ei to arrive at the temple when she seeks to divorce her husband (217–28). Wives spent two years there as trainee nuns, after which time they were able to obtain the letters of divorce even from resisting husbands.

*Kakekomi and Miss Hokusai*, in fact, share important features; for example, Fuuki also composed the soundtrack for *Kakekomi*. More substantively, in his post-screening presentation at Tachikawa Cinema City, Tokyo, on June 6, 2015, the director Harada revealed that he is a great admirer of Sugiura’s *Sarusuberi*, on which *Miss Hokusai* was based, and that he asked Hikari Mitsushima, who plays O-Gin, one of the two heroines in *Kakekomi*, to read *Sarusuberi* to familiarize herself with Edo culture. He also mentioned that he hoped to direct a film of *Sarusuberi* with Mitsushima as O-Ei. In addition, both *Kakekomi* and *Miss Hokusai* include O-Ei’s fellow painter, Keisai Eisen, and feature many artists to emphasize the importance of the arts. In particular, the director of *Kakekomi* called attention to the Tokugawa shogunate’s censorship, resisted by the writers and artists. One of the film’s main protagonists is a young writer as well as a
doctor (Nakamura Shinjirou, the kakedashi otoko), who happens by the gate of Toukei-ji when the two main female protagonists (O-Gin and Jogo) seek asylum.

The linked short stories by Hisashi Inoue (1934–2010), Toukei-ji Hanadayori (2010), on which Kakekomi is based, recount the experiences of different women seeking asylum, narrated by the character of the young writer. Basing his film on Inoue’s work, Harada, the writer as well as the director of Kakekomi, created a story of ordinary people who, though constrained in various ways, nevertheless lived without losing their dignity. In particular, his film calls attention to various issues that affected women during the Edo period, such as domestic violence and the abduction of girls, who were forced to pay their way out of bondage.

Harada succeeds in portraying women’s vitality, in particular, by foregrounding the twenty-one-year-old sword-maker, Jogo, a working woman, a role rarely represented in a jidaigeki or period film. The character, based on O-Kin in Inoue’s novel, works as a skillful craftsman trained by her grandfather, while her husband abuses her, both verbally and physically, and has taken a mistress. Kakekomi portrays Jogo’s transformation during her sojourn in Toukei-ji from a person of few words to an eloquent speaker who is able to reconstruct her sense of self and embark on a new life by marrying Shinjiro. In the film’s closing scene, she leads him to a place where she plans to open a new hospital, the house of her old acquaintance Kyokutei Bakin (1767–1848), one of the greatest writers of the day whom Shinjiro admires. The plot uniting Jogo and Shinjiro, developed by Harada, is not present in Inoue’s novel, in which O-Kin returns to Toukei-ji after her training.

Jogo also functions as a key figure of female solidarity by expressing her deep sympathy toward other unfortunate women. After listening to the story of O-Tane, a fisherman’s daughter whose tongue is burned by a samurai for protesting against her parents’ murder, Jogo responds with a line that encapsulates the lives of the women featured in the film: “So many women in this world suffer misfortunes.” One of the best examples of the close relationship that develops among women in the film is the one between Jogo and O-Gin, the mistress of a rich merchant, who seeks to separate from him (another plot developed by

---

8 Inoue appended an informative historical essay, “What was Toukei-ji?,” to the paperback edition of the novel, stating, for example, that the temple was licensed to lend money—favoring those in particular need—during the Edo period and was the forerunner of banks.
Harada). The two women help each other from the very beginning, Jogo carrying the injured O-Gin so that they reach Toukei-ji together (Figure 3). When O-Gin leaves the temple due to a fatal illness, she calls Jogo “my treasure,” and Jogo responds, “Thanks to you, I have been able to achieve happiness.”

*Kakekomi* represents women as leaders through the roles of Gen-emon, Shinjiro’s aunt, and Hoshu-ni. In Inoue’s novel, Gen-emon, the owner of one of the two inns attached to Toukei-ji who interviews women before they enter the temple, is a man, but Harada assigned this role to a female actor without changing the character’s masculine name. In the film, she is not only the owner of the inn but also the head of her family. She is in charge of making decisions on the disposition of the women entering Toukei-ji, and takes on the responsibility of acting as an advisor to them even after the conclusion of their two-year training in the temple. Harada represents Hoshu-ni, the chief priest of Toukei-ji, who supervises the women living in the temple, as a clandestine *Kirishitan* — a Christian in feudal Japan where Christianity was banned — perhaps in order to emphasize her oppositional agency.

Figure 3: Jogo (Erika Toda) and Ogin (Hikari Mitsushima), *Kakekomi Onna to Kakedashi Otoko*. ©2015 “KAKEKOMI” Film Partners. Courtesy of Production I.G
Gen-emon and Hoshu-ni are both represented as compassionate and discerning for their flexibility in enforcing the temple’s rules and regulations. For example, Gen-emon allows O-Sen, who was forced to become a courtesan in Yoshiwara after having been kidnapped as a child, to enter Toukei-ji as her sister, O-Mitsu. Since even Toukei-ji cannot break a courtesan’s bond, O-Mitsu concocts a plan to switch identities with O-Sen. Gen-emon notices this trick during the interview, but she silently allows the plan to go forward.

Hoshu-ni’s flexible application of the temple’s rules is evident in the episode with O-Yuki, a trainee nun who has suffered violence at the hands of her drunken husband. Although the rule stipulates that O-Yuki cannot obtain a letter of divorce until she finishes her two-year training in the temple, when she confesses her affection for her husband, Hoshu-ni allows her to return to her family with a letter of divorce to deter her husband from drinking.

Gen-emon and Hoshu-ni’s humane compliance contrasts sharply with the ossified tyranny of the Tokugawa shogunate, which sought rigid control over the arts. For instance, the opening scene of the film features the arrest of the female performers of gidayū, a style of dramatic narrative, who are forced to parade around a village. The film also emphasizes the strict censorship of novels and works of ukiyo-e. In a scene at the film’s end, even an innocent owner of a sushi shop is sentenced by shogunate officials to be executed for violating the sumptuary laws that prohibited eating sushi, regarded a luxury. Hoshu-ni declares, “The rules of the temple exist not for itself. The temple, as well as its rules, exists for the people who suffer,” calling attention to the severity of the predominantly male shogunate officials, who fail to consider the welfare of their subjects. Generally, women have been thought to be marginalized from the center of political power during the Edo period. Yet through the characters of Gen-emon and Hoshu-ni, Kakekomi succeeds in presenting the possibility of positive female leadership. The box office success of the film perhaps indicates contemporary audiences’ support of such a possibility.

Both Miss Hokusai and Kakekomi focus on female subjectivity in early modern Japan: Miss Hokusai powerfully dramatizes the creativity of a woman who is proud of herself as a professional artist, while Kakekomi vividly presents the vitality of women and their enormous potential. The success of these films, set in early modern Japan, demonstrates the interest of contemporary audiences in the historical antecedents of women’s negotiations within patriarchal society.

Hanako Nadehara
Tokyo Woman’s Christian University