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Below: Japanese and Korean shoppers in Hommachi, central Seoul, c.1930s.

Right: Volume 17 of the Yanagawa Girls' High School yearbook, 1924.

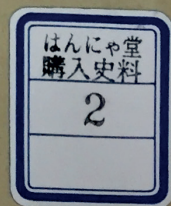
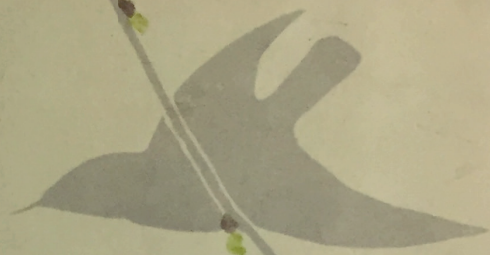


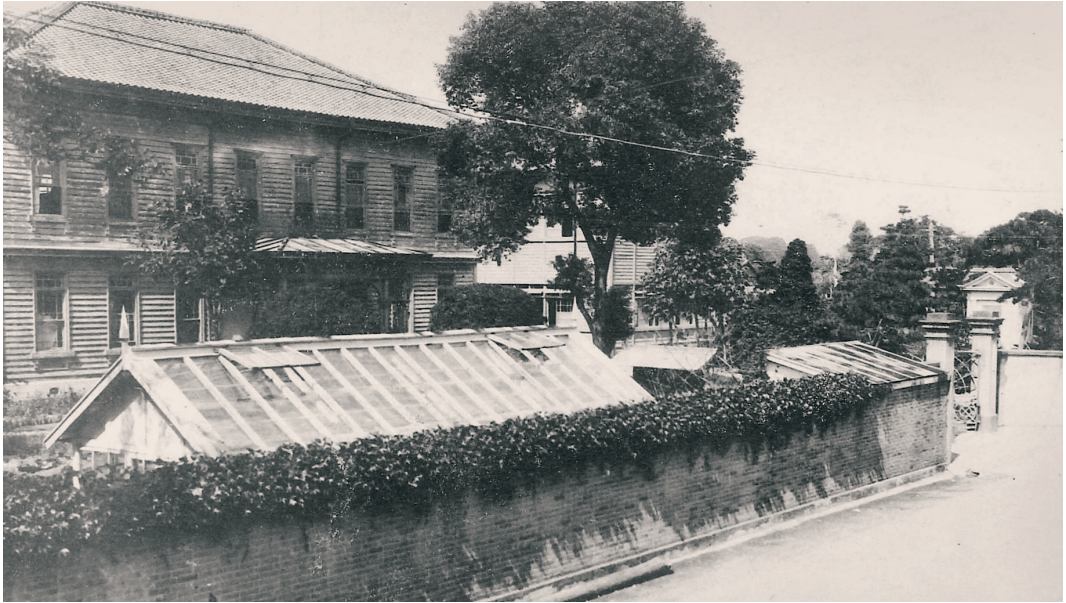
WRITING HOME

Japan's vast Asian empire became home to more than a million female settlers, who told their stories in an effort to keep in contact across the colonies. *Hannah Shepherd*

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At the end of the Second World War, around six and a half million Japanese were overseas. Just over half of them were civilians, living as settlers and government officials in colonies in Korea, Taiwan, China, Manchuria, Micronesia and Sakhalin. The rest were in the military, spread across the Japanese empire and war zones in the Asia Pacific. The process of Japan's decolonisation was swift. By the end of 1946, over five million Japanese had already been repatriated. The representative images of this event are of settler women and children, often carrying the ashes of deceased family members among their belongings, arriving on the crowded quays of Japanese ports. Former settler women were seen at the time as pitiable victims who had made treacherous journeys home, but their histories were soon submerged in the postwar rush to rebuild Japan and forget its imperial collapse.

Japanese women feature only infrequently in the ephemera of empire – member lists of settler organisations or picture postcards, for example – as a single female name on a list of hundreds of

men; a blurry figure in a kimono photographed on a Seoul or Taipei street scene, or holding a baby on a station platform in Manchuria. But this absence belies the large numbers of women abroad in the colonies at their peak: over half a million women in Korea by 1942, over 100,000 in Taiwan in 1939 and over 600,000 in Manchukuo in Japanese-occupied Manchuria by 1937. The exoticised and orientalist 'native' women of Japan's various colonies appear much more prominently in contemporary media than their counterparts back home.

When Japanese women in the colonies *were* the subject of contemporary discussions, as the historian Barbara Brooks has written, they were either figures of official admonishment – the spendthrift modern girl enjoying Seoul's department stores, the lower-class 'companions' for lonely colonial officials – or symbols of national pride: prostitutes who acted as a vanguard for Japanese imperialism in Asia's port cities and the Patriotic Ladies' Associations and their wartime works. How close these images came to bearing any resemblance to the reality of most women's lives in the colonies is debatable.

After Japan's defeat in the Second World War, any nostalgia for empire similar to that which led to the British 'Raj Revival' of the 1980s onwards seems unlikely. In Britain the images of women who lived in the colonies have become a part of our shared culture, often through their representation in literature and film. In the case of Japan, however, as Lori Watt discusses, the predominant social image is an ambivalent one. Viewed from defeated Japan, former settlers were labelled 'repatriates', a term that avoided mentioning the lost empire. Female repatriates had a particularly tainted image – not least because of the large numbers of settler women who had suffered sexual violence at the hands of Soviet troops in Manchuria. In private memoirs and reminiscences, former colonial Japanese who suffered economic hardship and discrimination upon repatriation often saw their childhood in the colonies through rose-tinted glasses. But how did women in the Japanese empire view their lives abroad at the time?

Women apart

Japan's imperial rule over Taiwan began in 1895, and over Korea in 1910. Through its railway concession Japan also had control over parts of north-east China from 1905 and encouraged migration to the puppet state of Manchukuo, founded in 1932. Just as the British Empire was disproportionately staffed by Irish and Scots, so Japan's settlers were often from the home islands' poorer regions, hoping for better opportunities to succeed abroad. Unlike the British case, this was also a question of geography. For those from the south-west island of Kyushu, it was quicker to get to Korea via ferry than it was to get to Tokyo.

The Kyushu town of Yanagawa was located in Fukuoka, a prefecture that saw the number of 'pioneers' it sent abroad to the empire and to North and South America as a badge of pride. While researching materials on prewar Fukuoka, I came across yearbooks of Yanagawa Girls' High School from the mid-1920s.

They contain messages from former students to their old teachers and friends, sent from their new homes across Japan, its colonies and beyond. While obviously limited in their scope, these letters offer a window into the everyday lives of interwar, middle-class women living in the Japanese empire. They are important records of life in Japan's colonies, written by those who rarely make it into the history books.

In her letter in the 1926 yearbook, Tokyo-based Tomi Ogata lamented the limited networks of married women and expressed the need for a way to keep in touch with those overseas: 'Seeing how much my husband enjoyed meeting up with his Old Boys' Club, I mentioned that women should have Old Girls' reunions too, but even if we picked a day, and visited a botanical garden or somewhere like that, there are many who have left the country whom we still couldn't meet.'

For women in colonial cities with large Japanese communities, fellow school friends and former teachers from Yanagawa formed important networks. Kahoru Sakuragi, writing in 1925, described her life in the capital: 'Until last year we lived in Taihoku [Taipei], and I often called in on Mrs Yoshinaka (née Hosoda Hiroko) and talked of the old days at school. She has two daughters now, but still looks just the same fresh-faced teacher as in the old days. Some other students from her homeroom class, Mrs Befu (née Nakano), Mrs Otsuka (née Koga) and Mrs Ukai (née Kobayashi) live here, too, and whenever we meet I get to hear some school gossip. Once you have children, it's always a long time between meetings.'

For those outside urban centres, however, life in the colonies could be an isolating experience, despite the privileges their positions as Japanese gave them. The distance of their current home from Japan, and the sense of loneliness this evoked, is a common refrain in their letters. For many, the yearbook was their only contact with their old friends.

Tamiko Takayama, aged 20, working as a teacher at a school for Korean children,

Below: volume 19
(1926) volume of the
Yanagawa Girls' High
School yearbook.

Following spread:
Japanese settlers
attend a performance
in Taipei's New Park,
postcard, c.1930s.

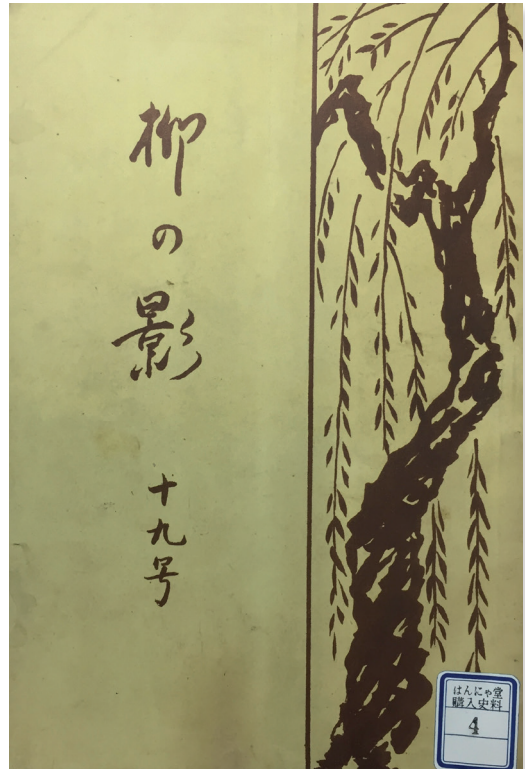
wrote in her letter of 1925 that 'it is only via the yearbook that I can tell you all that Tamiko is in the northern peninsula working hard for the sake of the children'. Mitsuki Noda, who moved to the border city of Sinuiju in Korea in 1925 to live with her brother and his family, wrote how 'now I live in a place where there is no one to even pass on school gossip, at the very top of the peninsula in the north. My only pleasure is hearing your news through the yearbook.'

Married with children

The majority of alumni who sent letters to the yearbook were in their mid '20s. Most were married with children, after graduating from school at 16. Their husbands' jobs required them to move abroad. Masuko Ukai, 24, writing from colonial Taipei, described how 'having never had a job, my student days remain my strongest memory. The school grounds and classrooms often come into my mind'. For many, school was a brief interlude between childhood and married family life and the friends they made there remained important networks outside of the home.

The yearbook letters are written for these female friends, who would understand the common experiences of life as an imperial housewife. Many women wrote of the difficulty of dealing with illness and death in the family while overseas. Fumiko Okazaki, 23, living in southern Manchuria, wrote of her child's illness: 'When your family is healthy, living in a colony is no different to living back in Japan, but once you get ill, everything changes, and you feel very alone and a long way from home.' Several of the women who wrote in to the yearbook had suffered the deaths of their husbands. Some, such as 33-year-old Umeko Tsumura, living in the Chinese city of Tianjin, maintained a stiff upper lip, despite losing her husband and raising her two children alone: 'I must be thankful that I am able to live comfortably like this overseas.'

Takeno Nakamura also put a brave face on her situation. Her family was living in government quarters at an outpost of the



Imperial customs office in Longjing, Manchuria, near the border with Korea, where Japanese troops had carried out violent reprisals against local Koreans in retaliation for the activities of Korean independence fighters:

This place is known as a nest of Korean malcontents and bandits, so I was very worried before coming here. However, upon arrival it doesn't seem as dangerous as we imagined and we are living peacefully. When we arrived there wasn't a railway line. We crossed the mountains, arriving at night. There were no streetlights, only lamps. It was like we'd gone back in time, and I felt miserable. However almost as soon as we arrived, the railway opened. At the end of last year streetlights were put in too. It has got much more convenient.

We have also got used to living here now, and don't feel it to be uncomfortable. My two girls, two and four years old this year, keep me busy from dawn to dusk with their laughing and crying. Even though I'm in a foreign country, I don't have time to feel sad, and watching the little ones grow is my chief pleasure in life these days. It is still cold here, but once we enter April the snow will melt and buds will form on the trees. When it warms up I'm looking forward to planting vegetables and flowers.

For others, writing to their old friends appears to have offered a chance to let their guard down. Sueno Koga, aged 25, living in Keijo (colonial Seoul) wrote in 1927 about her *annus horribilis*:

Last year I contracted typhus, and was hospitalised, then almost immediately after I recovered from that, I lost my dear mother; all in all, I had a truly horrible year. Luckily now, I am feeling much stronger.

Here in Keijo the cherry blossom is in full bloom, and the zoo and Nanzan Park's nightly illuminations are full of crowds mixing with the white-clothed Koreans. Compared to two or three years ago, thanks to urban reforms and huge new buildings, Keijo is no longer an

embarrassment as the capital of Korea. By all means, please arrange a school trip from Yanagawa and come and visit! I would be happy to show you around if you came. Since I lost my two babies I stopped almost all communication with my fellow classmates, and have no idea what you are all doing these days. I feel as though I have been completely left behind here in Keijo.

In 1926, Mrs Yoshinaka, the former teacher who had moved to Taiwan, died unexpectedly of kidney disease, while she was still nursing her youngest child. Masuko Ukai, aged 24, wrote her first letter to the yearbook to communicate the news to her old classmates:

Her funeral was held at the Nishi Honganji temple. As representatives from Yanagawa, Mrs Matsuo, Mrs Sakuragi and I saw her off on her final journey, under the damp chinaberry blossoms at the Sanbanbashi Crematorium. Seeing her two daughters brought tears to our eyes, thinking about what they must be going through.

While some Japanese wives abroad may have used their improved economic situation to employ a battery of servants and nannies, these were not within the reach of all. The women of Yanagawa wrote their letters hastily in moments snatched between child-rearing and housekeeping and often apologised for the length of time between communications. The prewar Japanese feminine ideal of 'good wife, wise mother' held sway even in the colonies. Fusako Otsuka, living in Luodong, Taiwan, gives us an idea of the expectations society held for middle-class women, such as her and her classmates: 'After giving birth to my son, I haven't taken part in the Old Girl's Association and only met with two or three school friends before moving to this island. My dear classmates, I'm sure you have all changed considerably, too. As wives and mothers I can imagine each of you putting all your energies into creating the ideal home,



The Band Stand, Taipeh.
堂樂音園公新北台





TAIHOKU * FORMOSA * IN TAIHOKU

Postcard showing
Japanese settler
women and children,
Taipei, 1930.

and raising and educating your children. I also am kept very busy with my five-year-old son and three-year-old daughter.'

Even if they were not raising their own families, female Japanese settlers were kept busy with 'women's work', as teachers and nurses for the imperial subjects that formed the 'family state' of the Japanese empire. Tamiko Takayama, the young primary school teacher, described her life in Korea as 'playing house' and her feelings for her Korean pupils as 'like a mother's love'. Japan's *mission civilatrice* in Korea required large numbers of Japanese teachers, many of them women, to work in colonial schools. After the nursing profession, teaching accounted for the highest number of employed Japanese women in the Korea colony.

Wives of Japanese colonial officials also had a semi-official role to play, as heads of volunteer organisations and as representatives of their gender. Colonial publications, wanting a female perspective, often chose the wives of high-ranking officials to write articles on subjects such as hygiene and housekeeping. The management of the Pusan Branch of the

Red Cross consisted entirely of the wives of officials of the municipal government. Charity work and impending motherhood provided Shizue Aoki, 23 and living in the Manchurian city of Harbin, with a good excuse for her late and brief response to the yearbook: 'I wanted to be able to give you a taste of what it's like out here, but the settler wives were organising an international bazaar to celebrate Easter, and preparations for the birth of my child meant that I simply haven't had a chance to pick up my pen.'

These settler women, privileged in terms of both their class and nationality, appear to have socialised among themselves and the absence of native populations in many of the women's letters suggests a thoughtless indifference to their existence. When they are mentioned, they appear as a faceless threat, as in Nakamura's letter above, or as exotic foreigners, such as Koga's 'white clothed' Koreans. Mitsuki Noda's description of her journey from Kyushu to northern Korea is an example of the unthinking superiority mingled with fear of the unknown that defined Japanese attitudes towards colonised Koreans:



Postcard showing
the customs station
at the Yalu bridge, on
the China-Korea border,
c.1920s.

I came across to Korea last year in October, when those in Yanagawa were still in summer clothes. It was very hard leaving behind my familiar hometown, and my friends from the Young Women's Association. Alone, I left from Shimonoseki on the morning of the ninth. I watched the coastline getting further and further away, feeling more and more miserable. Crossing the unfamiliar Genkai straits, with no one I knew on board, I felt truly miserable.

At twilight on the ninth, we arrived in Pusan. The lights on the pier were as beautiful as illuminations. Seeing the many Koreans in white clothes milling around on the pier made me realise I was in a strange land, and I felt dispirited. A little afraid, I boarded the Mukden train. Everything I saw and heard was strange to me. Around Keijo the new day dawned. Until then, the majority of passengers had been metropolitan Japanese, but after Keijo most passengers were Korean. Due to this, the carriage started to stink. I suddenly felt exhausted and my head began to hurt. However, I recovered my spirits and after a day and a night aboard, the train finally arrived in the

northernmost city of Korea, Sinuiju. I was met by my big brother and his family at the train station and was so happy to see him I could have burst into tears.

About the weather

The weather of their new homes was a pet topic for many of these settler women, but as natives of sub-tropical Kyushu, the cold of northern Korea seems to have been harder to adapt to than the heat of Taiwan. Kahoru Sakuragi arrived in Taiwan in 1922, aged 19:

It was nothing like I imagined as a child, or at school – the truth was the exact opposite, very comfortable. My illusions were swept away the instant I arrived in Keelung Port. I'd imagined intense heat, but it didn't feel that different from back home. The streets are wide, the buildings large, and the sanitation facilities all completed. The roads compare favourably even to Tokyo! As is well known, Keelung is famous for its rainy climate – the second rainiest in the world. From October until the following April it is almost



Formosa - Japanese Children

P.378

Postcard showing
Japanese settler children
in Formosa (Taiwan),
early 20th century.

constantly raining. Every month on average it rains for twenty days. The biggest problem is laundry.

Mitsuki Noda, writing from Sinuiju in May 1926, describes a winter she was totally unprepared for:

It will be getting warmer and warmer from now on. I don't know how hot it will get, but the cold was truly exceptional. It got down to minus 34 degrees, and the Yalu River itself froze over. People travelled across it on sleds. From December until the beginning of March we had to keep the stove lit continuously. In the cold, apples, oranges, eggs – everything – froze solid. Fish looked like blocks of dried bonito. Potatoes and daikon radishes rang out like they were made of metal.

Writing letters to their former classmates allowed these women a rare chance to reflect on their lives. Those who had married men involved in the work of empire would have had little say in their posting to the colonies. Other women, as nurses and teachers, had dedicated themselves to the imperial project. For the schoolteacher Tamiko Takayama this seems to have offered some relief from her homesickness: 'I lost my only older sister in January, but being with the children helps me to forget my loneliness. I believe that this is the path that has been given to me and I am earnestly devoting myself to it.'

Thinking back over the years that had passed since graduation left some women with a strange sense of where life and the empire had taken them. Yuki Yasuda, writing from Tainan, was another widow living in the colonies: 'Thinking of all your familiar faces and that time, when I never even imagined that days like this would come, is a strange feeling. It's now half a year since my husband passed away. I feel as though things will start to get back to some kind of normality soon though. May all of you keep well until we speak again.'

Mitsuki Noda discussed the strange sensation of living on the Asian continent, a place that she

had learned about through classical literature and patriotic songs:

As I'm sure you all know, across the biggest railway bridge in the Orient is Manchuria's Andong county. On a Sunday or warm afternoon, one can take a stroll all the way across ... I've reminisced about my old schooldays whilst standing on top of the railway bridge. Back then we often used to sing along to The bor-der of Chi-na and Ko-re-a. Now, standing in the very place from that song myself, I feel that our paths in life are truly strange.

The history of Japanese women and imperialism remains an understudied subject, but the glimpses of everyday life in the empire seen in these letters offer us pointers for future work on the topic. Whether metropolitan or colonial, Japanese women were constricted by social expectations. Despite their privileges as colonisers, life for many in the empire was isolating and often interspersed with loss. Their lives were, however, more settled and privileged than lower-class women and the native populations of the Japanese empire. We need to continue searching for alternative sources to gain a more rounded view of women in Japan's colonies and to offer a corrective to the overwhelmingly male-dominated histories written on the subject so far.

Hannah Shepherd is a doctoral candidate at Harvard University researching Japanese colonial history.

Further Reading

Barbara Molony and Kathleen Uno (eds) *Gendering Modern Japanese History* (Harvard University Press, 2005)

Jun Uchida *Brokers of Empire: Japanese Settler Colonialism in Korea, 1876-1945* (Harvard University Press, 2012)

Lori Watt *When Empire Comes Home: Repatriation and Reintegration in Postwar Japan* (Harvard University Press, 2009)

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