

This essay first appeared in *Simply Haiku*, December 2003, Volume 1, Number 6.

The Works of Uno Chiyo Prior to and Following World War II

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Much can be learned about a culture from sources other than the usual history books. Take for example the African American spiritual, "Get on Board":

"The gospel train's a-comin', I hear it close at hand.
I hear the wheels a-rumblin', And rollin' through the land.
Get on board, little children, Get on board, little children,
Get on board, little children, There's room for many-a more."

African American slaves sang this spiritual as a way to let other slaves know that a group was about to head north for freedom. It (the spiritual) was a medium for African American slaves to express their feelings without being held responsible for those feelings. A plantation owner might not think his slaves were escaping when he heard this spiritual because to him, it was just a song. What this plantation owner didn't realize was that the songs, artwork and literature of a culture are quite revealing. (1)

In this way, the autobiographical and semi-autobiographical writings of Japanese women parallel spirituals because through the stories, their thoughts and dreams are expressed. A carefully analyzed piece of literature from a specific time period can also reveal what the social norms were and how different groups of people (such as men and women and the youth and elderly, etc.) felt about those norms. In my opinion, it would be interesting to analyze the writings of Uno Chiyo, a prominent Japanese writer before and after the Second World War. Because of advances made after World War II regarding women's rights were radical for the times yet didn't completely change the roles of women in Japanese society, I feel the author's works will reflect a change in ideas regarding topics such as marriage and independence, but will also stress a need to continue on a path of reform.

Uno Chiyo's autobiographical essay, "A Genius of Imitation" was written before the Second World War and provides the reader with accurate information regarding the status of women during this time in history. The essay focuses on the first thirty-eight years of her life and her feelings about her family and lovers as well as herself. From her early childhood, Uno Chiyo had aspirations that didn't fit into the typical Japanese woman mold. As she explains in the beginning paragraphs of her essay, Chiyo's dreams can be partially attributed to the militaristic propaganda of the times: "I grew up a child who wanted to go to the battlefields despite my sex... All the songs we learned at school were about war...It was these war songs, now that I think about it, that introduced me to literature." (2)

During this time in Japanese history, the Japanese, in an attempt to rid the country of captivity by Western nations, successfully fought wars against China and Russia. (3) As a result, it was natural for institutions such as schools to

promote honor and service for the country. Chiyo's essay then goes on to explain how some men, her father and teacher for example, were against her getting pleasure from reading. Even though an 1872 law was established mandating 4 years of elementary education for all male and female children, there was "continued dominance for the notion that females need not be literate or learned and that childbearing and child rearing were the only activities worthy of them." (4)

The purposes of education, "providing skills required for military and economic development, promoting a common sense of nationhood, and opening the way to the full realization of the intellectual resources of the country" (5) were not meant for female students and it was feared that if women became educated and could make decisions without the help of a man, the country's social order would be wrongly altered. (6)

Because of these anti-enlightening ideas, Chiyo suffered beatings from her father, a man who according to the essay was never associated with happiness or admiration. (7)

Chiyo's relationship with her father seems to be one that is typical of the pre-World War II era. The ie system which has the father as head of the family and all others subject to his orders was common at this time. There was no mutual respect between husbands and wives or between fathers and daughters and acting out the duties given by the father was how a daughter expressed love. (8)

It is quite obvious that Chiyo favored neither the ie system nor her relationship with her father. His disapproval didn't make her more loyal to her family as he had hoped; instead it made her want to pursue what he forbade even more. The true feelings of women who lived with men such as Chiyo's father came out after his death. These feelings are best expressed by the actual words of the author: "But I'm sure your life will be a lot easier now," and they even congratulated themselves on his death.... I cried bitterly, but somehow I was happy at the same time, thinking that I could now do whatever I wanted." (9)

After finishing high school, Uno Chiyo began what she referred to as her "independent life". (10) This new phase in her life had her dressing ornately, energetically teaching at an elementary school, living on her own, managing her income, and falling in love, all of which brought her great happiness. After a few years, Chiyo was not satisfied with her life, particularly with the love aspect, and decided to move to Tokyo, a place which "symbolized a chance to succeed, to put one's aspirations into action." (11) By this time, Chiyo was 26 and it was very uncommon for a woman her age to be single and have such freedoms. (12) In Tokyo, she worked many jobs, among them was a position as a waitress. This was considered a typical job for women who "Had nothing but their able bodies to work" (13), illustrating the opinion that women should focus their lives on serving and not on developing an intellect.

Uno Chiyo was not in Tokyo for long when she moved to Sapporo to get married. The diction used by Chiyo subtly suggests she was not in love with her future husband; that she was merely getting married because he sent for her and

because his stable job meant she wouldn't have to work odd jobs anymore. (14) Chiyo's marriage coincides with the traditional Japanese ideas regarding marriage. For example, financial stability and not necessarily love was an important and valid reason for a couple to get married. (15) Chiyo also says she "became a good housewife" (16), which means she did all of the housework, helped her husband dress, served tea and prepared meals for him (17), stayed home and didn't second guess her husband's choices, such as choosing to play pool after work instead of coming home. (18)

In this and many other marriages at the time, the husband was always right. Take for example, the following excerpt from the essay:

My husband returned home late one night and looked at my work (a collection of essays). "What's a 'Sukopenhauer'?" he asked. I told him it was the name of a person, Schopenhauer, and he laughed, loudly, for a long time. I put my pen down and sighed.... I drew all the curtains and knitted socks again. (19)

Here, the husband does not know the meaning of a work and instead of appreciating her explanation, he merely laughs it off, belittling her project and her knowledge and causing her to stop her writing and to continue her wifely duties. Fortunately, Chiyo didn't stop writing completely for, a few months later, she left her life as a wife and moved back to Tokyo to find out what happened to a manuscript she submitted to a publisher. The story was a success and was to be published, causing Chiyo to believe she is now a "significant woman". (20)

Life to her was marvelous and she now saw being a woman as an advantage as opposed to a curse. According to Chiyo, being a woman was what provoked the publisher to read her story and a woman waitress turned author and ultimately women in general who make dreams a reality are a rarity that should be cherished and given opportunities. (21)

The essay ends with Chiyo's account of her marriage to a writer named Ozaki Shiro. While Chiyo doesn't mention performing the typical wifely duties as she did with her first husband, she still lives by the notion that the husband continues to control his wife's actions and thoughts:

When I wrote a line, I'd turn to my new husband and ask how e would have written it.... When the result seemed to fit his taste more than mine, I felt relieved.... the pieces I wrote sat still.... how ludicrous it is that I act like a wife in my career as a writer. I should, at least, have borrowed a telescope from my husband once in awhile instead of always using his glasses. (22)

As she states in the final, highly metaphoric sentence, she is clearly disgusted with her writing because the ideas are not as broad and personal as she wants them to be; they are the narrow-minded opinions of her husband. The author is once again struggling to think on her own without the ideas of her husband shadowing her.

In conclusion, this short autobiographical essay gives the reader accurate information regarding women's status prior to the Second World War. "A Genius of Imitation" exemplifies the traditional roles of fathers and how they dominated the

family, schools and how they failed to promote female intellect, and wives and their struggle with self-motivation and independence.

Whereas "A Genius of Imitation" focused on the author in her younger years, "Happiness" looks at Uno Chiyo's senior years. This semi-autobiographical story won the Women's Literature Award in 1970 (23) and is one of the many stories that brought Chiyo financial success and "contributed to a more positive image of women writers in pre-war Japan." (24)

"Happiness" begins with the main character, Kazue, an aging women, getting out of the bathtub. From this introduction, the reader begins to see Kazue as a woman who, despite not taking the traditional road, is quite happy with the life she has lived. She has been separated from her husband for five years and in reminiscing about Kazue's thirty-year marriage, the narrator gives some interesting opinions about the institution of marriage. For example, the narrator explains that Kazue's husband had left her for a younger woman he had known for many years. (25)

A man or woman leaving a spouse for another with whom he or she is having a long-term relationship gained popularity after World War II. (26) And while this case involves the man leaving his wife, acceptance toward women leaving their husbands grew as the country began to see marriage as a "respect for individual dignity and equality of both sexes." (27)

One idea that is illustrated in this story that was common in both pre- and post-war Japan is the notion that in a marriage, the couple doesn't necessarily have to be compatible. As the narrator points out: "When you live with someone for such a lengthy period, you start to ignore the other person, almost as if the other person were not theirs. Not only did she think her husband lived by himself, but Kazue also sometimes thought of herself as living alone." (28) Uno Chiyo experienced the same loneliness and lack of meaningful conversation during her first marriage when her husband stayed out after work to play pool and she was left to work on her writing. (29)

The major difference between the two marriages however lies in the author's presentation of the husbands and wives. While Chiyo, in *A Genius of Imitation* dutifully does things for her husband, Kazue, in *Happiness*, "without giving consideration to her husband's preferences, sometimes calmly went about doing what she wanted.... She always approached matters from her point of view and unconsciously selected only those activities which pleased her or which she thought would be interesting or fun." (30)

In the latter marriage, Kazue's opinion mattered. After receiving word about possible bombings (this "flashback" part of the story puts the characters in the midst of World War II) Kazue and her husband look for a new home. When they get to the house they were interested in, the husband asked her opinion on the living conditions and was concerned if they, not just he, would be best suited in this house. This is quite a change from the husband in *A Genius of Imitation* who scoffed at Chiyo's answer to a question.

Another aspect of marriage that both time periods shared is the idea of the wife becoming part of her husband's family and therefore taking care of his aging parents. While the previously mentioned ie system had been abolished after the second world war some aspects lingered, such as the eldest son taking care of his parents until their deaths. (31) Kazue became caregiver to her in-laws because "In Japan the patriarchal family system--which stressed obedience of women to men, the young to the old, and the daughter-in-law to the mother-in-law--exerts strong pressure for the daughter-in-law to take on the role of caregiver." (32) A Genius of Imitation fails to deal with the daughter-in-law as caregiver to her in-laws, not because the notion didn't exist, but possibly because Chiyo's husbands weren't the eldest sons, his parents were already dead, or the marriage was a very unconventional one.

Happiness continues to explain the marriage of Kazue and her husband, this time dealing with his departure from their home to fight in the war, a change that undoubtedly changed their lives as well as the many families that lived through World War II. This war killed over 660,000 civilians, decreased the surplus of consumer goods and caused a lowering of the people's morale, all while the heads of households (fathers, husbands, sons) were serving their country. (33) As a result, the women of these families had to assume the leadership role temporarily; a task which they proved could be handled by a woman.

Kazue also had to deal with her husband's departure. At first she marked off each day he was gone on a calendar. Eventually she stopped doing this, symbolizing, in my opinion, an acceptance of the fact that she no longer had to think of her husband's reactions to her choices. It was at this time that she began to take on projects: "Kazue did not just sit around and wait for her husband, but did something positive even though the thought might annoy him." (34)

She began with classic female hobbies such as doll making and gardening, but after her husband returned home from the war, she eventually moved on to larger projects like moving into new homes she had designed. This latter project is one that takes great planning and requires the homeowner to give instructions to those building the home, both of which were usually handled by the man in the relationship.

In my opinion, Kazue actually took on the role traditionally assumed by husbands by building these homes and it was this reversing of roles that caused the men in her life to leave. Instead of portraying this as a failure, the narrator rationalizes, "She is not now living with anyone, and so as soon as she has an idea, she can implement it the very next day because she does not have to worry about talking to that person and having him tell her to stop doing such and such. (35)

In this way, Kazue and the post-war woman is acting out the dream to be self-motivated. However, in Happiness, Chiyo and the pre-war woman focus on the advantages of the unpredictable life and stress the fact that despite going against the norms of society, as Kazue did, a woman can be quite happy and satisfied. (36)

By examining Uno Chiyo's writings before and after World War II, one can see

how some aspects of life remained while other notions gained acceptance. Prior to the war, the traditional patriarchal system of total control by the father or husband of a family was predominant. A woman was obligated to follow the commands of her father or husband and even if the woman was as radical as Chiyo, she still found herself forced into the norms of society. After the war, women were beginning to see how they could act independently from their fathers and husbands and they came to realize how fulfilling this could be. It was writings like *A Genius of Imitation and Happiness* that got some women to reconsider the current status of women during their time period. The dreams and objections of pre-war Japanese women were published and were altered by women in post-war Japan, and while there are still dreams and objections to be dealt with among the women of Japan, literature has helped pave the way toward a greater respect for women.

Endnotes

1. Patricia Hackett and Carolyn A. Lindeman, *The Musical Classroom* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1955) 310.
2. Yukiko Tanaka, *To Live and To Write: Selections by Japanese Women Writers 1913-1938* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1987) 189.
3. Edwin O. Reischauer and Marius B. Jansen, *The Japanese Today: Change and Continuity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University press, 1995) 89-90.
4. Kumiko Fujimura-Fanselow and Atsuko Kameda, *Japanese Women: New Feminist Perspectives on the Past, Present, and Future* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1995) 96.
5. *ibid.*, 95.
6. *ibid.*, 95-96.
7. *op.cit* *To Live*, 190.
8. *op.cit* *Japanese Women*, 186-187.
9. *op.cit.* *To Live*, 190.
10. *Ibid.*, 191.
11. *ibid.*, 184.
12. Sumiko Iwao, *The Japanese Woman: Traditional Image and Changing Reality* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993) 59.
13. *op.cit.* *To Live*, 192.
14. *ibid.*, 192.
15. *op.cit.* *The Japanese Woman*, 69.
16. *op.cit.* *To Live*, 193.
17. *op.cit.* *The Japanese Woman*, 89.
18. *op.cit.* *To Live*, 193.
19. *Ibid.*, 193.
20. *Ibid.*, 194.
21. *ibid.*, 194.
22. *ibid.*, 195-196.
23. Phyllis Birnbaum, *Rabbits, Crabs, Etc.: Stories by Japanese Women* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1982) 131.
24. *op.cit.* *To Live*, 183.

- 25.op.cit.Rabbits, 134.
- 26.op.cit. The Japanese Woman, 108.
- 27.op.cit. Japanese Women, 189.
- 28. Op.cit. Rabbits, 135.
- 29. op.cit. To Live, 193.
- 30. Op.cit. Rabbits, 135.
- 31. Op.cit. Japanese Women, 221.
- 32.ibid.,217.
- 33.op.cit. The Japanese Today, 103.
- 34. Op.cit. Rabbits, 141.
- 35.ibid.,144.
- 36. ibid., 131.

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