

Gendered Ideals and Class Realities in Edo Japan: How Greater Learning for Women Shaped the Lives of Peasant and Samurai Women

Yifei Cui

Abstract:

This study examines the divergent impacts of *Greater Learning for Women*, a Confucian-inspired text by Kaibara Ekiken, on the lives of samurai and peasant women in Edo Japan. While the text prescribed rigid moral and behavioral norms—such as obedience, restricted public presence, and stigmatization of divorce—its influence varied significantly across social classes. Samurai women, constrained by financial hardships and class expectations, largely adhered to these ideals, embodying subservience and domesticity. In contrast, peasant women, particularly those from wealthy families, exercised greater autonomy in marriage, divorce, and public life, often rejecting or adapting the text's teachings to their practical needs. Through analysis of historical records, travel diaries, and case studies, this study reveals how economic realities and class dynamics shaped women's responses to Confucian ideals, highlighting a tension between prescribed norms and lived experiences. The findings challenge monolithic portrayals of Edo-period gender roles, demonstrating that peasant women carved out spaces of independence within a patriarchal framework.

Keywords: Greater Learning for Women; Edo Japan; Gender Roles; Samurai Women; Peasant Women

Introduction

Said to have been written by Kaibara Ekiken in the early eighteenth century, *Greater Learning for Women* was a highly influential work in Edo Japan aimed at women's education. The book is based on Confucianism and provides moral and behavioral norms for

women, reflecting societal expectations of women's roles in Edo Japan. It elaborates on the responsibilities of women, including serving their husbands and in-laws and managing household chores. It emphasizes the virtues and etiquette that women should possess, such as frugality, obedience, and chastity, and quickly became classic reading material for women's

education in Edo Japan. It was used as a guide for family education and adopted as a textbook by schools for girls. The influence of the book was not limited to cities, but also extended to rural areas. Overall, *Greater Learning for Women* played an important role in women's education during the Edo period, profoundly influencing the values and lifestyle of women at that time.

However, many studies have shown that the actual lives of women during the Edo period did not correspond to the moral concepts portrayed in *Greater Learning for Women*. *Greater Learning for Women* claims that "a woman, once married, and then divorced, has wandered from the way, and is covered with great shame" (Kaibara, p. 398). Nonetheless, Tadashi Takagi proposes that divorce was not initiated only from the husband, but was the result of coordination by two families on both sides. After divorce, many women experienced remarriage (Yabuta, p. 2). What is more, *Greater Learning for Women* insists that a woman should not go to temples and other public places frequently "till she has reached the age of forty" (Kaibara, p. 400). But after examining over 160 travel diaries written by women in Edo Japan, Keiko Shiba directs our attention to traveling as a common part of the lifestyle of Edo-period women (Yabuta, p. 3). One way to explain these contradictions is that *Greater Learning for Women* probably affected different social classes differently, since there existed great discrepancies between the lives of peasant women and samurai women in Edo Japan. This paper argues that while *Greater Learning for Women* strongly influenced the lives of samurai women, peasant women exhibited greater independence and flexibility in marriage, divorce, and public life, revealing a divergence between the Confucian ideals of *Greater Learning for Women* and the social realities of Edo Japan.

Women's lives and *Greater Learning for Women*

In this section, I will enumerate several moral principles from *Greater Learning for Women* and analyze, through concrete examples, how women's actual behaviors aligned with or rejected those principles.

1. Marriage

Greater Learning for Women states that "however low and needy her husband's position may be, she must find no fault with him" (Kaibara, p. 397). It highly emphasizes women's obedience to their husbands under any conditions. Written by Yamakawa Kikue, *Women of the Mito Domain* records the lives of Kikue's mother, Chise, who was born in a lower-ranking samurai household in late Edo Japan. The book provides valuable insights into the lives and traditions of samurai women. When women got married, the bride would be dressed in white from head to

toe, indicating that she would abandon all aspects of her personality after marriage and brought no style of her own into her husband's household (Yamakawa, p. 101). She was like a blank sheet, ready to be molded into the ways of her husband's family and displaying obedience to her husband. Women like Chise were exposed to the norms of *Greater Learning for Women* from a very young age, thus forming a concrete memory of them. Girls like Chise daily rehearsed passages from the book from the age of ten "like acolytes in a temple chanting the sutras" (Yamakawa, p. 106). The influence of *Greater Learning for Women* would expand to every aspect of their future lives. As a rule, they were reticent and uncomplaining, taking care of the household chores and never disobeying their husbands.

However, things were quite different for peasant women in their marriages. One of the most important differences was the popularity of male adoptions. Wealthy peasant families that did not have a son needed a male heir to maintain their position. Meanwhile, samurai families were often so poor that only the eldest son could take a wife, and the younger sons would only become a burden to the family. As a result, wealthy peasant families often adopted a son-in-law into the family. In this way, the adopted son gained independence and a livelihood in society, and the peasant family could have a male heir. Regardless of the initial intention behind male adoption, it guaranteed women's status in the family to some extent. At least women did not have to face many of the difficulties of a young bride entering a new home and having to get along with a new family. Studies have even shown that when a daughter stayed in the family, she "functioned as the househead even when her husband might be given the formal title in official records" (Walthall, p. 55). For example, Hirose Chiyo from Eshima in Harima province had an adopted husband, yet she was the one in charge of both domestic work and the family cloth-making business (Walthall, p. 55). She had authority to make decisions in both realms like a modern career woman. In wealthy peasant families with a son-in-law, instead of obeying their husbands, women thus held a certain measure of autonomy.

Another important variance was the working mode of peasant families. While the samurai family relied on a fixed stipend, peasant women worked side by side with their husbands in farming or the family business, which implies that they made half of the contributions to the family's income. This enabled peasant women to demand a more equitable position in the family and even to talk back to their husbands, as did Tomi from Sagami-hara in 1846. When her husband asked her why she had been absent previously, she replied, "None of your business." The couple then started shouting and quarreling so loudly that

the neighbors interfered (Walthall, p. 58). This demonstrates that in peasant households, women held more authority than the Confucian model prescribed. In contrast to the rigid expectations imposed on samurai wives, peasant women seem to have been less restrained by the emphasis on women's obedience in *Greater Learning for Women*.

2. Divorce

In *Greater Learning for Women*, a chapter named "Seven Reasons for Divorce" specifically points out that women could be divorced for numerous reasons, including disobeying their husbands, being jealous, and failing to bear children (Kaibara, p. 398). According to the text, if a woman was divorced, "shame shall cover her till her latest hour" because she has wandered from "the way" (Kaibara, p. 398). Divorce implied that the husband's family had found unforgivable fault in the wife and was thus regarded as the ultimate disgrace. Sometimes a woman could even be divorced only due to the wish of her mother-in-law instead of any particular fault. Among Chise's close relatives there was a case in which the mother-in-law forced the divorce of several wives in succession, and the husband always obediently followed the command to divorce his current wife (Yamakawa, p. 112).

However, divorce was not only initiated from the side of husband in peasant families. In 1857, a woman named Nobu appealed to the local government office for a divorce because her husband was a heavy drinker (Walthall, p. 60). Women could also seek divorce by going to an "enkiridera", a temple for severing marital relationships. Buddhist temple officials could serve as divorce brokers. They would go to the husband's village and force him to agree to an amicable divorce. In the last half of the Edo period, about two thousand women sought the services of one such temple, Tōkeiji, in Kamakura (Walthall, p. 61). Peasant women's marital life was secured in some way by these institutions, and they could initiate a divorce by themselves.

Moreover, in wealthy peasant families, women seldom got divorced because they could not bear children. Instead of a fertile womb, peasant households paid more attention to women's skill in running the household. One example is the marriage of the wealthy Suzuki Bokushi in 1792 to a girl named Mine. Although she was good-natured and gave birth to a boy within the first year of marriage, Mine had grown up without any training in household management. The Suzuki family had to divorce her in the end (Walthall, p. 58). Among wealthy peasant families, women's dexterity in household chores could maintain the family's fortune and reputation, thus being more important than women's ability to bear children. Presumably, many

samurai families divorced infertile wives simply because the family was too poor to take additional concubines.

After divorce, neither were peasant women covered with shame. Peasants did in fact remarry, sometimes as many as three or four times. After the divorce, the authority over the woman's fate no longer belonged to the husband's family, but returned to her own family. A woman could decide for herself with which family to form a new union after weighing the pros and cons. In Amy Stanley's historical account *Stranger in the Shogun's City*, Tsuneno, a peasant woman whose family was in charge of the village temple, divorced and remarried three times in her early years. But due to its prestige and wealth, her family was able to carefully select a new husband for her each time, trying to secure the daughter's future (Stanley, p. 40-48). Contrary to the norms expressed in *Greater Learning for Women*, peasant women were often offered broad choices to begin a new marriage after divorce. Divorce and remarriage were merely part of peasant women's life experience rather than a lifelong disgrace.

3. Travelling and public appearance

Greater Learning for Women decrees that a woman should only go to temples and other public places sparingly until she reached the age of forty (Kaibara, p. 400). This is reflected in *Women of the Mito Domain*, which asserts that "it was unusual to see a woman from a samurai house on the street." What is more, whenever a woman went out, she had to take servants with her instead of walking on the street on her own, or else it was considered unseemly and would harm her husband's reputation (Yamakawa, p. 16). Women were not supposed to express their opinion in public either, since they were discouraged from becoming the center of attention.

Among peasant women, there seem to have been fewer restrictions on public appearance. Keiko Shiba studied over 160 travel diaries written by women in Edo Japan, and directs our attention to travel as an integral part of the lifestyle of women of that time (Yabuta, p. 3). Women had opportunities to travel on many occasions. Women from private schools would travel together to visit well-known places they had learned of through poetry. They also went to temples and theaters or visited their relatives. Suzuki Toyo, a peasant woman from Echigo, never forgot her pilgrimage to the Ise shrine in 1752 when she was fourteen. All of her daughters also made the pilgrimage to Ise, at the not-insignificant cost of five to ten ryō apiece, paid for by their family (Walthall, p. 48). Wealthy peasant families could afford costly pilgrimages so that their daughters would gain the opportunity to step out of their home communities and observe society. During their travels, girls

were encouraged to learn to interact with strangers and deal with challenges and emergencies on their own. The vivid experience often left the girls with a deep impression and enhanced their knowledge of the world.

Finally, wealthy peasant families devoted a great amount of time and energy to the upbringing of their children regardless of their sex, allowing their daughters to engage in public affairs and broaden their scope. In Echigo, Suzuki Bokushi served as his granddaughter Suwa's private tutor, teaching her everything he had taught his son. From a young age, Suwa could perform certain roles to represent her family in public. At sixteen, she represented her family at the funeral of her great-grandfather (Walthall, p. 47).

Reasons for discrepancy

Greater Learning for Women affected samurai women and peasant women in Edo Japan differently. While samurai women strictly followed the moral standards in the book, peasant women developed more freedoms that did not align with the norms of the book. There are several possible reasons for this discrepancy.

One of the most important factors was money issues. Since middle-level peasant families were wealthy enough to back up their daughters, the girls were secured in their marriages and could receive a higher education. However, samurai families, despite their reputation and seemingly high social status, only received fixed stipends that could barely support the family. The houses that many samurai families lived in were actually quite shabby, and their clothing and food were also limited. With severe financial distress, samurai families did not have the ability to support their daughters as wealthy peasant families did. Moreover, samurai families were trapped in their social status. Believing samurai class standing to be noble, they paid more attention to educating their daughters to conform to the moral standards of *Greater Learning for Women*. They also tried to keep up the family's appearance by keeping many retainers, further exacerbating the family's financial distress. Actually, their living standards were much worse than wealthy peasant families. On the other hand, peasant families were less restricted by these traditional moral standards. Many peasant women had to interact with other people since they earned a living by doing business, and the support of their wealthy families allowed many to lead a fulfilling life. As a result, wealthy peasant families desired first and foremost to secure the happiness of their daughters, regardless of moral standards. In this way, a discrepancy emerged between the lives of peasant women and samurai women even under the impact of *Greater Learning for Women*.

Another important factor to consider is the gap between ideology on one hand and actual practice on the other. Originally named *Treasure Box of Greater Learning for*

Women, Greater Learning for Women not only includes ethical education, but also includes literature, art, and practical knowledge. The appendices added before and after the main section and above the text on each page include elements such as treatises on childbirth and childrearing (Yabuta, p. 6). Many peasant families probably used the book to teach their daughters correct handwriting and paid more attention to the utilitarian life skills it taught, including matters of childbirth and first-aid treatment, instead of emphasizing the moral dimensions of the book—which made the book indeed worthy of the name “Treasure Box”.

Conclusion

While the significance of *Greater Learning for Women* in Edo Japan is undeniable, the book influenced samurai women and peasant women in different ways. While samurai women generally obeyed the moral standards in the book, peasant women managed to break some of its rules and many of them lived fulfilling lives with a greater measure of freedom.

Even so, peasant women's lives were not completely contradictory to *Greater Learning for Women*. During the Edo period, peasant women did not completely break free from the shackles of the moral principles expressed in the book. Instead, their breakthroughs can be perceived as a kind of freedom developed within the boundaries of *Greater Learning for Women*. Although their lives were not as boring and oppressive as they might otherwise have been, we cannot ignore the constraining and stultifying effects of the text entirely. The degree to which women of the Edo period laid the foundation for later women's independence movements in Japan is therefore a question worth exploring. Although the proponents of women's education in Meiji Japan viewed *Greater Learning for Women* as a symbol of Japanese women's past oppression, the actual experiences of women in Edo Japan suggest that a less rigid interpretation may be truer to historical reality.

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