



Keynote Speech

## Beauvoir in Japan

Tracing the Impact of *The Second Sex* on Japanese Women

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**Abstract:** Simone de Beauvoir's monumental work of feminist philosophy, *The Second Sex*, was translated into Japanese in 1953, just four short years after its first appearance in French. The timing of this translation, *Daini no sei*, was fortuitous—Japan had just emerged from the shadow of the Allied Occupation and was struggling with the legacy of its postwar reforms. These reforms offered Japanese women an unprecedented array of rights and opportunities, but those who sought to exercise such rights still had to confront conservative norms that expected them to channel their ambitions into “careers” as wives and mothers. To many who sought an unconventional life-course, Beauvoir's vision of “freedom” through financial independence and professional projects offered an enticing alternative to the prewar “good wife, wise mother” model of femininity—even if, or perhaps because, this vision was difficult to attain in actuality. In this presentation, I explore the way Japanese women in the 1950s and 1960s understood the value of Beauvoir's theories for their own life and work, responses that ranged from homage and appropriation to parody and critique.

### Introduction

I'll be talking to you today about Japanese translation and reception of the work of a French feminist philosopher named Simone de Beauvoir. I imagine some of you may have heard of her, but if not, I'll give a brief introduction to her thought in a moment.

I'd like to start my story by taking you back to the evening of September 18, 1966. Over sixty photojournalists are gathered on the tarmac at Haneda Airport in the midst of a typhoon to capture the historic arrival of two French “celebrities”—the philosophers Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. They are confronted with crowds normally reserved for rock stars like the Beatles.

Beauvoir is mobbed by throngs of young women calling her name, reaching out to shake her hand, touch her arm, or at the very least get a glimpse of their philosopher heroine and her

famous companion.<sup>1</sup> So often cast as the significant Other of Sartre, Beauvoir likely did not realize the extent of her own popularity in Japan, or that she had arrived on the eve of an explosion of “second-wave” feminist discourse that came to be known as *ūman ribu* (“women’s lib”).

Beauvoir *was* internationally famous at this time, but her popularity in Japan requires a bit of explanation. The 1960s was a relatively conservative time, socially speaking. Women were exhorted by their parents and teachers—and of course the Japanese government—to grow up to become a version of “good wives and wise mothers.” This was an early twentieth century model of Japanese femininity that stressed dependence on husbands and fathers and service to the family and state in the domestic sphere. Beauvoir, and her philosophy, were completely antithetical to these values. She refused marriage and motherhood, and advocated for women’s financial independence from men. In retrospect, it’s a wonder they even let her in the country.

But despite this apparent disconnect, Beauvoir *was* phenomenally popular among Japanese women at this time. We’ll discuss the reasons why in a moment, but first I’ll start by telling you a little bit about Beauvoir herself. Then give you a bit of historical context about the Japan that welcomed her in 1966. Next, I’ll talk about what Japanese women did and did not find useful about Beauvoir’s ideas. We’ll discuss how her texts were translated into Japanese. I’ll conclude with some thoughts about the enduring legacy of her philosophy for Japanese women and the feminist movement in Japan.

### Who was Simone de Beauvoir?

Beauvoir was born in 1908 in Paris, into a middle-class French Catholic family. Her father worked for a law office. Her mother, like most middle-class French Catholic ladies at the time, was a housewife. Her mother was also very religious, and the family hoped that Simone and her sister Helene would grow up to be much like her mother—a middle-class housewife who stayed home to bear and raise children while their father worked outside the home to support them. However, the family’s fortunes declined in World War I, and her parents bitterly resigned themselves to the fact that their daughters would have to work to support themselves, as their parents could not afford the dowry that was expected of young brides at the time. So—if you can believe this—we owe the education of one of the greatest feminist philosophers of all time to the patriarchal institution of the dowry.

Simone was initially educated at a convent school, but went on to higher education at the Sorbonne, a prestigious French university. There she studied philosophy and trained to be a schoolteacher. She was among the first generation of young French women to receive a university education alongside men. Prior to this, girls like her were self-taught or received private tutoring at home.

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<sup>1</sup> Asabuki Tomiko, *Sarutoru, Bovowaru to no 28-nichikan—Nihon* (Tokyo: Dōhōsha Shuppan, 1995), pp.27-31.

As scholar of French feminist theory, Toril Moi notes:

Beauvoir belongs to the generation of intellectual women who came of age in the 1920s and 1930s....At least in relation to their education and intellectual careers, these women believed that they were being treated as equals in an egalitarian system. On the whole, they tended not to be conscious of the social significance of their own femaleness....By the time they reached middle age, however, the weight of their experience spurred many of them to wonder about the significance of being female in a male-dominated society. It was only in 1946, if we are to believe her memoirs, that Beauvoir realized that to be an educated woman is not, after all, quite the same thing as to be an educated man. With a rare sense of moral and political integrity she faced the consequences of that insight: the very moment she realized that she was an intellectual *woman*, she started to write *The Second Sex*.<sup>2</sup>

Beauvoir is probably best known for this lengthy philosophical treatise, *The Second Sex*. It draws on a wealth of evidence from history, literature, mythology, biology, philosophy, anthropology, and many other fields to demonstrate that human societies from antiquity have treated woman as man's Other. This means that historically they have been defined according to masculine standards, and found lacking when they do not meet these standards. Because of this they are stereotyped as inferior to men, and are therefore oppressed by societal institutions such as marriage that seek to use women for their reproductive potential while depriving them of their natural right to self-determination.

It was in this text that Beauvoir famously argued that "One is not born, but becomes, a woman." By this, she meant that from birth women are taught to conform to feminine stereotypes and are punished with disapproval when they do not conform. Thus, "femininity" is not an innate quality, but one that is acquired through a process of training over one's lifetime. To gain their freedom, women must liberate themselves by understanding these stereotypes as false and constructed rather than natural. In other words, Beauvoir's arguments created the foundation for the contemporary distinction between biological sex and socially constructed gender norms.

Beauvoir also argued that to be truly free, women should be able to support themselves financially, rather than depending on men for their livelihoods through institutions such as marriage. Beauvoir herself never married. She was famous for her affairs with both men and women—though this latter detail wasn't publicly known in the 1960s. More importantly, she was known for her productive career as a writer and teacher, and eventually as what today we would consider to be a feminist activist and theorist.

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<sup>2</sup> Toril Moi, Simone de Beauvoir, *The Making of an Intellectual Woman*, 2nd ed. (Oxford UP, 2008), pp.23-24.

## What did Japanese women see in her?

What did Japanese women see in her? To answer this question, we need to step back a bit, historically speaking. Let's go back to 1945.

World War II is over, and Japan is occupied by Allied forces. Led by the United States, this Occupation regime literally rewrites the legal framework of Japanese society. It produced a new Constitution in 1946, and a Civil Code based on it, that granted Japanese women an unprecedented array of new legal rights, including the right to vote and hold office, to choose their own spouse, and to equal opportunity in education.

And yet women found that attempting to exercise these rights brought them into conflict with persistently conservative societal and cultural norms regarding their proper "place" in society. In other words, postwar Japanese women were still struggling against the vestigial logic of the prewar household (*ie*) system that demanded feminine subordination to the family patriarch. This system was no longer legally enforceable in the postwar period due to Occupation-era constitutional revision, but it continued to exert itself in modified form on the level of cultural custom and attitudes regarding gender roles.<sup>3</sup>

These attitudes were increasingly reinforced by the economic realities of the postwar period. As Japan recovered from World War II and entered a period of economic expansion that accelerated throughout the 1960s, prosperity was increasingly based on a gendered division of labor. This meant that society sought to confine women to the domestic sphere, so as to enable men to devote themselves entirely to powering the engine of economic growth. Japanese women in the 1950s and 1960s thus struggled to reconcile the promise of postwar reform with the reality of postwar society—a struggle that would culminate in the women's liberation movement of the 1970s.<sup>4</sup>

This struggle was particularly acute for the first generation of young women who were educated in the new postwar system of coeducation. Prior to 1945, the Japanese educational system was sex-segregated, meaning that girls and boys were educated separately beyond the first year or two of elementary school. Boys were eligible for training leading up through university to professional careers, and girls attended girls' schools designed to train them for "careers" as "good wives and wise mothers." Thanks to the postwar reforms, girls who attended school from the late 1940s on were allowed to compete for entrance to prestigious universities on par with men. As you may recall, Beauvoir was in something of the same situation when she was a young woman. So Japanese girls who were struggling to capitalize on postwar promises of equality could relate—not only to Beauvoir's arguments about

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<sup>3</sup> For a concise description of the various postwar legal changes in women's status, and the persistent gap between *de jure* and *de facto* "equality" for women, see Kiyoko Kinjo, "Legal Challenges to the Status Quo," in Kumiko Fujimura-Fanselow and Atsuko Kameda, *Japanese Women: New Feminist Perspectives on the Past, Present, and Future* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1995), pp.353-363.

<sup>4</sup> For a thorough account of the historical, social, and cultural trends that shaped postwar models of femininity in the age of high economic growth, see Chapter 1 of Julia C. Bullock, *The Other Women's Lib: Gender and Body in Japanese Women's Fiction, 1960-1973* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010).

women's need for liberty and financial independence, but also to her lived experience as a pioneer in equal education for women.

*The Second Sex* was published in French in 1949. Just four years later, it was translated into Japanese as *Daini no sei*, a literal rendering of the original French title. The timing ensured it an enthusiastic reception among Japanese readers, and particularly women. 1953 was just one year after the end of the Occupation. Japan had just regained its sovereignty. Two years after that, in 1955, the conservative parties merged to form the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Soon its conservative politicians began trying to roll back the Occupation-era reforms. This included promoting so-called traditional roles such as the “good wife, wise mother” norm of femininity. Women pushed back against this conservative trend, finding inspiration in Beauvoir's arguments for women's liberation.

By 1961, the first volume of Beauvoir's memoirs was published in Japanese as *Musume jidai* (“Girlhood”). This part covers her life from birth to her early twenties. It details events such as her struggles to cope with societal demands that she act like a girl when (as her father used to say) she had the mind of a man. It covers her early friendships and romantic attachments, including her fateful meeting with Jean-Paul Sartre, who would be a lifelong companion if not always her lover. She also describes her philosophical education; her loss of faith in God and decision that she was an atheist; and her search for her life's purpose as a writer and scholar. With the possible exception of the religious struggle, the rest of this story was highly relatable to young Japanese women who were coming of age in a society that was increasingly inhospitable to their aspirations—particularly those goals that did not involve becoming old-school “good wives and wise mothers.” I would argue that Beauvoir's memoirs, and especially this first volume, were probably more influential on this generation of young Japanese women than her famous essay *The Second Sex*, because the text spoke to them about problems they could understand as critical to their own journeys to adulthood.

One aspect of Beauvoir's public persona that contributed immeasurably to her popularity as a feminist icon was her relationship with Sartre. This was depicted in the Japanese media and elsewhere as an ideal union based on total equality, freedom, and mutual respect. Uemura Kuniko neatly summarizes what she calls the “myth of Sartre and Beauvoir” that was cherished particularly by young women of the time as follows:

The relationship between Sartre and Beauvoir was an object of longing to us in the 1960s. According to the rumors, those two famous lovers lived in separate rooms in the same hotel, worked in cafes, ate in restaurants, and critiqued each others' unpublished manuscripts. We heard that Beauvoir was totally liberated from housework, and

balanced work with love. To every Japanese woman who spent her youth during the early 1960s, it seemed like the ideal relationship.<sup>5</sup>

Sartre and Beauvoir evidently collaborated in cultivating such perceptions. During a 1966 interview with the Japanese newspaper *Asahi*, the two present themselves in a rather romantic light as an indivisible “we,” constantly in agreement on everything, working side-by-side at adjoining desks, sharing responsibility for all housework and other chores.<sup>6</sup> This somewhat fanciful account of their “union,” which the two explicitly liken to a marriage, contrasts markedly with most other accounts of their relationship, which hold that the two never actually lived together, that she did all the cooking when he came over, and that by this time they had long since stopped having sex—at least with each other, since they had numerous affairs with other people.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the open nature of Beauvoir’s relationship with Sartre was well known because of her frank portrayal of her own heterosexual affairs (and his) in her memoirs, and this seems to have been part of the appeal for Japanese women. Encouraged by parents, teachers, and the mass media of the 1960s to desire romantic love, but to channel those impulses into marriage and motherhood, the notion of openly pursuing love and sex outside of restrictive marriage conventions seems to have appealed to Japanese women as liberating.<sup>8</sup>

As an example of Beauvoir’s influence on women’s cultural production at this time, consider the case of novelist Kurahashi Yumiko. Kurahashi was particularly inspired by Beauvoir’s rejection of marriage and motherhood and her arguments for women’s financial independence. We can see the imprint of these ideas on a number of Kurahashi’s novels, essays and short stories.

An early essay, titled “My Third Sex,” explicitly draws on Beauvoir’s arguments about women’s “otherness” and need for independence. Kurahashi uses these arguments to craft her own formula for liberation based on women’s artistic production. Her controversial first novel *Kurai Tabi (Blue Journey)* can also be read as an homage to (or parody of) the open relationship between Sartre and Beauvoir. In this story, the protagonist and her lover pursue sexual liaisons with any number of other partners with impunity, on the condition that they tell each other all about it, as Sartre and Beauvoir evidently did in their letters to one another.

Furthermore, many of Kurahashi’s short stories lampoon the institution of marriage, portraying it as a rather ridiculous construct that bears no relationship to sex or love.

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<sup>5</sup> Uemura Kuniko, “Bovowaru no ren’ ai jinsei: ‘Gyōgi no warui musume’ kara ‘risō no tsuma’ e,” *Joseigaku kenkyū* 14 (March 2007): p.27.

<sup>6</sup> Reprinted in Asabuki, pp.88-92.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Hazel Rowley, *Tête-à-tête: Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre* (NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> For more on the connection between romantic love ideology and “purity education” (i.e. exhortations to remain abstinent until marriage), see Sonia Ryang, *Love in Modern Japan: Its Estrangement from Self, Sex, and Society* (London/NY: Routledge, 2006).

Kurahashi heroines typically meet their husbands' sexual advances with the challenge "What would be the point?", or else with a firm reminder that sexual service was not part of the contract they signed. In fact, marriage in such early Kurahashi stories is more often than not governed by the existence of an actual contract that provides for the wife to be "kept" by her husband while absolving her of most of the typical "duties" of a housewife. One such heroine claims that the terms of her contract with her husband in no way obligate her to cook, clean house, eat or sleep with her husband, or have his children; she is merely required to "support" him. Although what this support entails remains unspecified in the text, we are assured that it involves "a lot of work."<sup>9</sup>

While such texts contain moments of playful parody, they most often end on a dark note of cynicism. For example, at the conclusion of Kurahashi's story "Kekkon" (Marriage, 1965), the contract that should have protected the protagonist, "L," from the drudgery of conventional matrimony has now apparently been rewritten in conformity with the gendered division of labor commonly associated with middle-class households of the 1960s. L is now pregnant and confined to the home, and devotes herself to the daily production of elaborate meals that her working husband will never be home long enough to eat. While the story begins with a subversion of the structure of marriage from within, it concludes with a return to "normalcy" that is explicitly coded within the text as a most unhappy ending. The emptiness and futility of her new arrangement seem to have driven L mad, and she even begs K, the masculine half of herself that she has had to abandon in order to fulfill her domestic destiny, to kill her. The tendency of such stories to end with L's failure to subvert the structure of conventional marriage underscores two primary themes that link the author's early works—a subtle message of protest at the deadly mediocrity of so many Japanese women's lives, and a lament that the pressures of bourgeois marriage ideology are so difficult to resist.

Another writer whose personal and professional life changed dramatically as a result of her encounter with Beauvoir was Asabuki Tomiko.

Asabuki was born in Tokyo in 1917,<sup>10</sup> as the youngest of five children and only daughter of a wealthy family connected to the Mitsui industrial empire. Her father Tsunekichi, a stylish and socially adept man of the world, had studied in England as a youth and continued to observe European-style social graces at home. He even hired an English governess for the children to ensure they would be fluent in this language from an early age. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that Asabuki (along with her brothers) would spend a significant portion of her adult life studying and traveling abroad. After withdrawing from the Gakushūin at the age of fifteen due to ill health, she was briefly married to a young man of similar background. She

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<sup>9</sup> Kurahashi Yumiko, "Symbiosis" (Kyōsei), in *Kurahashi Yumiko zensakuhin v.6* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1976), p.93.

<sup>10</sup> Biographical information in this section is taken from the volume of her memoirs entitled *Watashi no Tokyo monogatari: Yomigaeru hibi—waga ie no arubamu kara* (Tokyo: Bunka Shuppankyoku, 1998).

divorced her husband at eighteen and enrolled in an all-girls' prep academy outside of Paris. After mastering the French language, she enrolled at the Sorbonne, where she remained until she and her brothers were recalled to Japan in 1939 in anticipation of the outbreak of war on the continent.

After suffering through years of wartime devastation and postwar privation in the Tokyo area, which sapped her family's considerable wealth, Asabuki returned to France in 1950 and enrolled in a dressmaking academy. She supported herself through various odd jobs as a fashion correspondent, translator, interpreter, consultant and all-around "fixer" for Japanese business and government interests in Paris. For example, here in this photo we see her promoting Japanese films at the Cannes film festival, on behalf of the Japanese government. In the course of this work as liaison between Japan and France, she developed an impressive array of personal contacts that ultimately gained her entrance to the worlds of Parisian high fashion, arts and literature. This personal journey brought her into direct contact with the "family" of intellectuals that surrounded Beauvoir and Sartre, and she soon became close to the philosopher-couple, eventually acting as their interpreter and tour guide when they visited Japan in 1966.

Asabuki was also the translator of Beauvoir's memoirs, including the first volume that had such a profound impact on young Japanese women when published in 1961. Like Beauvoir, Asabuki was born into an upper-class society known for protecting its daughters from the corrupting influences of the world outside the confines of the family. Like Beauvoir, she also went on to flout the conventions of her class by establishing an independent identity for herself as a writer and public figure who espoused liberation for women, among other progressive causes. Born less than a decade apart, both women survived years of social and political upheaval surrounding World War II, and both were forced to make their own way in the world after their family fortunes were ruined.<sup>11</sup> This financial and intellectual independence led them to question the "common sense" of their own societies and find common cause not just with other women, but with members of different classes, nationalities, and races. Thus, it is hardly surprising that Asabuki found Beauvoir's memoirs compelling enough to want to translate them into her native language. It is also not surprising that, once these two women met, they became fast friends. Asabuki even credits Beauvoir (and Sartre) for inspiring her to embark upon her own first attempt at life-writing, the autobiographical novel *Ai no mukōgawa* [The Other Side of Love] (1983). She would follow this novel with a sequel, and with multiple, less fictionalized volumes of her own memoirs, in addition to travel writing and cultural criticism that established her as an authority on French culture and a taste-maker in her native country.

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<sup>11</sup> Beauvoir experienced the decline of her family's wealth due to generations of financial mismanagement by male relatives; Asabuki's family fortune was intact until the Occupation period, when increasingly stringent estate taxes and the freezing of personal savings forced the family to gradually sell off their possessions to pay their bills.



## Criticism of Beauvoir

While writers like Uemura, Kurahashi and Asabuki certainly appreciated Beauvoir's arguments for liberation from the traditional family structure, many others found it difficult to entirely renounce conventional feminine norms. As confining as the institution of marriage felt to many women, motherhood was still central to their sense of feminine identity. And the notion of bearing children outside the structure of marriage was still not socially acceptable. Also troubling to many women was what they felt to be Beauvoir's "male-identified" system of value. In other words, they understood her to denigrate femininity in favor of adopting "masculine" attitudes and ways of life. Beginning in the late 1960s, the Japanese "women's lib" movement increasingly based itself on a call to create a society in which women want to bear children. Correspondingly, many had become increasingly skeptical of Beauvoir's value for Japanese feminism.

A 1969 essay by Takai Kuniko<sup>12</sup> provides a quintessential example of this turn away from Beauvoir. In the section of her essay devoted to *The Second Sex*, Takai characterizes Beauvoir's thought as follows:

[For Beauvoir] corporeal conditions are not [a matter of] immovable fate, but simply one [kind of] situation [*jōkyō*], and humans exist by continually creating themselves through choosing freely. According to existentialist philosophy, it is impossible for anything to surpass human beings. Even nature is beneath them.<sup>13</sup>

According to this understanding of Beauvoir, then, failure to transcend one's biological limitations through denial of motherhood or other feminine experiences meant one's choices were in "bad faith." Takai also claims that Beauvoir "not only does not value the maintenance of human life (childbirth) but says that this is a humiliation [*kutsujoku*] and reduces people to animals." This seems to form the basis for her conclusion that Beauvoir "denies" motherhood and argues that women resign themselves to immanence and Otherness when they become mothers.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, this perception of Beauvoir as "male-identified" persisted into the mid-1990s,<sup>15</sup> even after much scholarly work by Japanese feminists had been devoted to debunking this interpretation of Beauvoir.

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<sup>12</sup> Takai Kuniko, "Beauvoir ni okeru tashasei no mondai" *Meiji Gakuin Ronsō* no. 146 (Feb 1969): 127-156. The author is listed as an "assistant" at this school, presumably a graduate student assisting one of the professors at the university.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>15</sup> See for example a three-part series of articles by fiction writer Saegusa Kazuko published in the journal *Yuriika* ("Ika ni shite josei no tetsugaku wa kanō ka," parts 4-6, published in the August through October 1995 issues), as well as Shimada Akiko's textbook on feminism for characterizations of Beauvoir as "denying" pregnancy, childbirth, childrearing and marriage as hallmarks of femininity that render woman as man's Other: *Nihon no feminizumu: Genryū to shite no Akiko, Raichō, Kikue, Kanoko* [Japanese Feminism: Its Orifgines in Akiko, Raichō, Kikue, Kanoko] (Tokyo: Hokuju shuppan, 1996).

## Lost (and Found) in Translation

Beauvoir's death in 1986 prompted a re-examination of her legacy for feminism worldwide. In Japan, this also resulted in the discovery of serious problems with the first Japanese translation of *The Second Sex*. The text was initially translated by a Japanese male expert in French literature named Ikushima Ryōichi in 1953. By the 1980s, scholars found that Ikushima had rearranged large portions of the essay, thus obscuring the logical relationships between her ideas. They also noted problematic translations of key terms that gave the erroneous impression that Beauvoir was anti-female—for example, by using language for female anatomy and biological processes that had decidedly negative connotations.

Sometimes these mistranslations actually reinforced stereotypes of femininity that Beauvoir was trying to critique. For example, here Beauvoir describes housework as a task that is “implied in women's femininity”—meaning that society assumes women should do it because of cultural presumptions that housework is “women's work.” But Ikushima translates this as “responsibilities that come from the fact that she is a woman” (*josei de aru koto*), suggesting that this type of work is connected to the biological fact of being a woman, not the cultural norms associated with femininity (*onnarashisa*).

By 1997, a committee of scholars<sup>16</sup> had collectively produced a second, “definitive” Japanese translation. This version preserved the sequencing of material in the source text, and adopted more neutral terminology for female biological processes. It also employed clearer and more consistent translations for philosophical terms, thus clarifying Beauvoir's claims about femininity and motherhood.<sup>17</sup> This retranslation of Beauvoir was motivated by shifts in Japanese feminist theoretical discourse such as the rise of women's studies as an academic discipline in the 1980s and the introduction of queer theory in the 1990s. With the publication of this second translation, a new generation of Japanese feminists (re-)discovered Beauvoir's thought, finding renewed relevance in her insights even for twenty-first-century readers.

These efforts to reclaim *The Second Sex* for Japanese readers seem to have borne fruit, given that more recent scholarship on Beauvoir reflects the influence of both the “definitive” translation and the success of its translators' efforts to promote the text. Kanai Yoshiko, who wrote disparagingly of Beauvoir's “male-identified” strand of philosophy in her 1989 book

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<sup>16</sup> This group formed exclusively for the purpose of re-reading Beauvoir in the original French, as suggested by their adoption of the name *Daini no Sei Genbun de Yominaosu Kai* [Committee to Re-read *The Second Sex* in the Original]. Ten members of this committee collaborated to translate volume one of the original text; eleven of its members produced volume two. This resulted in publication of *Daini no sei: Ketteiban* (The Second Sex: Definitive Edition), referenced above.

<sup>17</sup> Inoue Takako and Kimura Nobuko, “Yakusha atogaki,” *Ketteiban: Daini no sei v. 1: Jijitsu to shinwa* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1997), 374; Katō Yasuko and Nakajima Kimiko, “Yakusha atogaki,” *Ketteiban: Daini no sei v. 2: Taiken* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1997), p.647.

*Postmodern Feminism*,<sup>18</sup> later retracted these claims in a 2002 article that profiled *The Second Sex* as one of fifty “feminist classics.”<sup>19</sup>

Likewise, in a 2005 essay<sup>20</sup> on Beauvoir’s stance toward motherhood published in the proceedings of a women’s university journal, Satō Hiroko notes Beauvoir’s understanding of the difficulties of balancing motherhood with projects outside the home:

Beauvoir did not become a mother. However, she understood the situation [*jōkyō*] in which mothers are placed and the difficulties [they experience], and thought about ways they could extract themselves [from these difficulties]....From that point, becoming a mother was no longer women’s destiny, and it became possible for the first time for them to choose a number of lifestyles at various stages of their lives.<sup>21</sup>

Significantly, Satō’s Works Cited section lists many articles penned by members of the retranslation committee in order to reclaim Beauvoir’s significance for contemporary feminism. This indicates the impact of the translators’ efforts in shaping Japanese readers’ impression of her work.

On the other hand, the translators’ activist zeal in “reclaiming” Beauvoir’s thought for Japanese feminism raises important questions for me about how this goal may have shaped their own interpretation of *The Second Sex* in ways that Beauvoir might not have envisioned or intended.

For example, in their Afterword to the 1997 translation, Inoue Takako and Kimura Nobuko note that the Ikushima translation frequently creates the false impression that Beauvoir is criticizing women in a categorical sense. This is because he fails to distinguish between Beauvoir’s use of the term “femininity” to describe actual women and her use of this term to reference the stereotype of the “eternal feminine.” They argue that her intention is to criticize such stereotypes, not actual women. Thus, they chose to differentiate between these two cases in their translation of *The Second Sex*, referring to the feminine stereotype with the term *onnarashisa* (being *like* a woman) and to actual feminine experience as *onna de aru koto* (the state of being a woman).

However, as the translators themselves note, Beauvoir’s text itself fails to distinguish between these two concepts.<sup>22</sup> While linguistic distinctions between biological sex and cultural constructions of gender had become commonplace by the turn of the millennium, they were not widely understood or denoted linguistically at the time Beauvoir wrote her

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<sup>18</sup> Kanai Yoshiko, *Posutomodan Feminizumu* (Tokyo: Keisō shobō, 1989).

<sup>19</sup> Kanai Yoshiko, “Simone de Beauvoir: *Daini no sei*,” pp.60-69 in *Feminizumu no meicho* 50, eds. Ehara Yumiko, Kanai Yoshiko (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Satō Hiroko, “Bōvowārū Daini no sei to <bosei>,” *Kawamura Gakuen Joshi Daigaku joseigaku nenpō*, 3 (2005):43-50.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>22</sup> Inoue and Kimura, “Yakusha atogaki,” *Ketteiban: Dai ni no sei v. I: Jijitsu to shinwa*, p.372.

foundational feminist treatise. Furthermore, in some cases—such as the first few pages of her Introduction to Volume I of *The Second Sex*—Beauvoir seems to want to highlight the societal conflation between the stereotype and the reality of “femininity.” In fact, she begins her lengthy dissertation on femininity by asking seriously “What is a woman?” so as to underscore the very instability of the category itself. So while perhaps well-intended, the translators’ attempts to make distinctions between these two meanings of “femininity” in some cases may actually cut against the intention of Beauvoir’s inquiry.

Furthermore, the way they denote these distinctions in their translation may further obfuscate, rather than clarify, the degree to which Beauvoir articulated conceptual distinctions between sex and gender in her own writing. It is certainly true that *The Second Sex* helped to lay the theoretical groundwork for later linguistic distinctions between these two notions. The translators highlight this legacy as follows: “[Beauvoir’s notion of] sex [*sei*] as societally and culturally constructed is to be distinguished from biological sex [*sekkusu*], and today is expressed with the term ‘gender’ [*jendaa*].”<sup>23</sup> This remark seems to explain the translators’ tendency to gloss the character 性 (*sei*)—which in Japanese may connote either “sex” as a biological fact or “gender” as a cultural construction—with the term *sekkusu* (セックス, or “sex”) when they understand it as signifying biological sex.

But as noted above, this “clarification” may actually have created artificial distinctions where Beauvoir might have intended to preserve a kind of productive ambiguity—between “sex” as a biological fact and a cultural construct.<sup>24</sup> This also highlights inherent aspects of the Japanese language that pose challenges for the translator in rendering terms related to sex and gender. The term *sekkusu*, which the translators have chosen as a gloss meaning biological sex, exists in Japanese only as a counterpart to *jendaa* [ジェンダー, or “gender”]. Both of these terms are very recent loanwords derived from English, rather than the French language in which Beauvoir wrote her original text. Not only is this distinction anachronistic, but it also has the unfortunate and no doubt unintended consequence of reasserting the linguistic supremacy of English over French (among other languages). This is a historical legacy of the post-World War II Allied Occupation that has more to do with the politics of language in Japan than it does with feminism generally speaking, or with Beauvoir’s specific contributions to feminist theory.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.371.

<sup>24</sup> In the original French, when Beauvoir uses words like *sexe* and *féminité*, there is often some ambiguity in the usage that makes it difficult to say clearly that in one case she means biological sex and in another culturally constructed gender. Beauvoir scholars argue quite a bit about this point. Ironically, I think if the translators had just kept it vague in the Japanese by exploiting the multiple meanings of 性 the translation would have been closer to the intention of the original text. However, I think they are translating in keeping with the current convention in feminist scholarship to make such distinctions, which was not the case at the time Beauvoir was writing.

## Conclusion

The first Japanese translation of *The Second Sex* by Ikushima Ryōichi somehow managed to inspire many young women in the 1950s and early 1960s with its suggestion of femininity as a social construct rather than a biological given. This was in spite of significant problems with the translation that rendered some of her arguments opaque. However, these mistranslations also gave many readers the erroneous impression that Beauvoir denigrated femininity and motherhood. By the late 1960s, this notion of her work as “male-identified” struck activists in the incipient “women’s lib” movement as increasingly behind the times, and many began to turn away from her philosophy. It was only after Beauvoir’s death in 1986 that the worldwide reconsideration of her legacy for feminist theory prompted Japanese scholars to re-assess her work. Thanks in part to their 1997 retranslation of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir is understood today in Japan as a pioneer whose thought laid the groundwork for many of the cornerstone concepts of contemporary feminist theory. But while the 1997 retranslation improved on the Ikushima version in many respects, the translators’ activist impulse to “clarify” Beauvoir’s thought may also have had unintended consequences—for example, by creating artificial distinctions where Beauvoir may have preferred to remain ambiguous and thus flattening out some of the philosophical complexity of the original text. Nevertheless, her inclusion in major reference works and histories of feminism in Japanese indicates that her position as a founding mother of feminist philosophy remains secure.