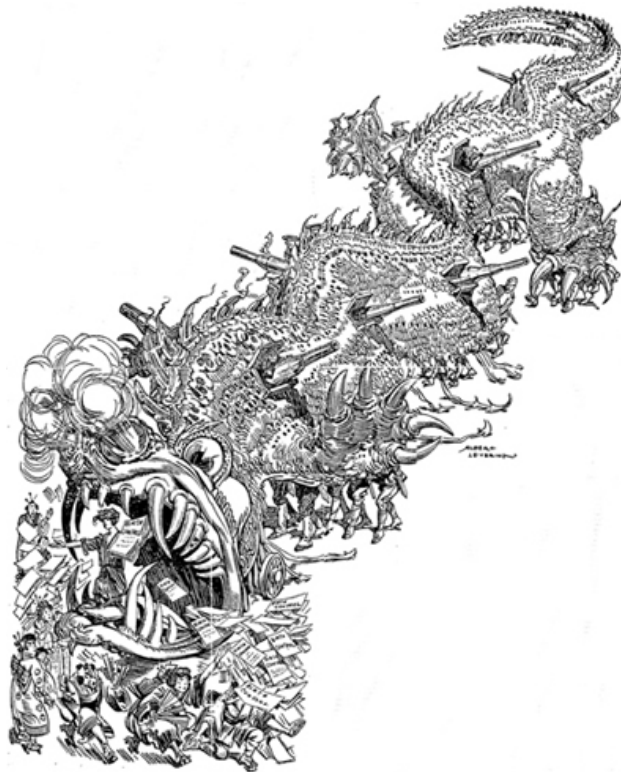


Sentiments Towards Birth Control in Interwar Japan: A Neo-Malthusian Mechanism or a Societal Disgrace

Birth control is a good expedient for to become the playthings of men. Mrs. Sanger's propaganda encourages the domination of the animal instinct, which should on the contrary be restrained, thereby lowering the value of mankind. Furthermore, it leads to racial suicide.¹



Cartoon by Albert Levering

Clare Ousley, "Mrs. Sanger As Japan Sees Her," *New York Tribune*, 14 May 1922, p. D3.²

¹ Waka Yamada, "Against Birth Control," *Japan Advertiser*, March 10, 1922, 2–3. Originally published in *Tokyo Nichi Nichi* (abridged and translated). In *How Did Margaret Sanger's 1922 Tour of Japan Help Spread the Idea of Birth Control and Inspire the Formation of a Japanese Birth Control Movement?* Documents selected and interpreted by Esther Katz, Peter C. Engelman, Cathy Moran Hajo, and Rui Kohiyama. Translations by Kazuhiro Oharazeki. Alexander Street Press, 2011.

² Clare Ousley, "Mrs. Sanger As Japan Sees Her," *New York Tribune*, May 14, 1922, D3. In *How Did Margaret Sanger's 1922 Tour of Japan Help Spread the Idea of Birth Control and Inspire the Formation of a Japanese Birth Control Movement?* Documents selected and interpreted by Esther Katz, Peter C. Engelman, Cathy Moran Hajo, and Rui Kohiyama. Translations by Kazuhiro Oharazeki. Alexander Street Press, 2011.

Albert Levering's cartoon portrays American birth control advocate Margaret Sanger as a destructive dragon devouring Japanese tradition—a dramatic image underscoring the tensions in a society straddling reform and tradition. This portrayal reflects a Japan in flux, reacting to the sudden arrival of Western ideas, most notably with Sanger's visit on March 10, 1922. Her presence introduced debates on birth control that many viewed as foreign to Japan's social and cultural landscape. Some scholars argued that these Western problems were not relevant to Japan, sparking public debate and mixed reactions. The use of a dragon in the cartoon is particularly significant; in Japanese culture, dragons are often revered as wise and benevolent protectors. Depicting Sanger as a dragon, then, subverts that symbolism—transforming her into a foreign, chaotic force that consumes rather than protects. The ambiguity over which political, economic, and social concerns mattered most led to fragmented public opinion, framing Sanger as a symbol of invasive change.

From March 10 to April 4, 1922, renowned American birth control advocate Margaret Sanger toured Japan, delivering public lectures and meeting with a range of audiences—including women's groups, medical professionals, industrial leaders, and members of the House of Peers—in one of the most widely publicized visits by a Westerner at the time. Her presence sparked intense public debate about birth control and population issues, especially as Japanese authorities attempted to monitor and restrict her speech.³ This discourse helped spur a developing birth control movement within Japan. Sanger arrived during a transformative period in Japanese history, marked by rapid industrialization, urbanization, and population growth. The Japanese

³ Introduction. In *How Did Margaret Sanger's 1922 Tour of Japan Help Spread the Idea of Birth Control and Inspire the Formation of a Japanese Birth Control Movement?* Documents selected and interpreted by Esther Katz, Peter C. Engelman, Cathy Moran Hajo, and Rui Kohiyama. Translations by Kazuhiro Oharazeki. Alexander Street Press, 2011.

population grew from forty million people in the 1890s to nearly fifty-seven million people in 1922. Following World War I and the rise of the Taishō emperor in 1912, Japan saw a shift from oligarchic rule to a more liberal political atmosphere with diminished military dominance. These changes fostered a dynamic urban middle class and gave rise to new social groups and proletarian movements seeking individual autonomy and social reform. Among these developments, a growing women's movement emerged, advocating for suffrage and reproductive rights as means to improve family health and women's autonomy. At the same time, conservative and nationalist forces resisted these liberal trends, reflecting the cultural tensions of the interwar era.

In her first lecture, Margaret Sanger addressed an audience on the subject of “War and Population.” Sanger attributed colonization and militarism to an overflowing population, as typified in Germany before the outbreak of World War I and urged Japanese audiences to address similar issues facing Japan.⁴ Sanger appealed to the fears of the neo-Malthusians who believed that overpopulation would strain national resources and ultimately lead to disaster, and by some extremes, anarchy. By adopting overpopulation as a central theme in her lectures, she aligned and presented her message with neo-Malthusian concerns to the Japanese government and utilized this framework to introduce birth control as a viable and accepted method of population control for the state. Masanao Hanihara, Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, concluded that Sanger was not a threat to the Japanese government in a letter to Foreign Minister Kosai Uchida and Consul General Shichitaro Yada, “I wish to inform you that her plan is only to

⁴ “Overpopulation is Cause of War Says Mrs. Sanger,” *Japan Times & Mail* (Tokyo), March 15, 1922, 1, 8. In *How Did Margaret Sanger's 1922 Tour of Japan Help Spread the Idea of Birth Control and Inspire the Formation of a Japanese Birth Control Movement?* Documents selected and interpreted by Esther Katz, Peter C. Engelman, Cathy Moran Hajo, and Rui Kohiyama. Translations by Kazuhiro Oharazeki. Alexander Street Press, 2011.

introduce an idea based on scientific and practical grounds in a very sensible manner, in order to relieve society from the difficulties and advance the welfare of mankind.”⁵ Sanger believed Japan’s rising population would lead to domestic problems as well as international conflicts. Therefore, the debate over birth control pioneered by Sanger’s visit to Japan extended far beyond medical debates over the use of contraceptives: the introduction of birth control into interwar discussions about population growth provided a chance for Japanese intellectuals, activists, and bureaucrats to tackle a variety of pressing social issues, including poverty, employment, migration, and maternal and child health.

Though Japanese birth control advocates reconfigured sexual reproduction and motherhood as central politico-economic problems, Sanger additionally promoted eugenics as a tactic to promote birth control. In the Western world, eugenics and neo-Malthusianism began to converge in the 1920s. Eugenicists who had previously opposed neo-Malthusianism became involved in its promotion. One main reason was that they realized positive eugenics was ineffective in encouraging the ‘fitter’ class to have more children, who used more birth control, and birth control was considered necessary to discourage the ‘unfit’ class from having more children.⁶ The idea of linking eugenics and neo-Malthusianism together had a strong influence on some Japanese intellectuals, for instance, Shidzue Ishimoto, who urged people to improve the ‘quality’ of newborns through birth control, stressing that doing so was closely related to national interests.

⁵ Hanihara, Masanao. *Telegram (No. 16) from Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Masanao Hanihara to Foreign Minister Kosai Uchida and Consul General Shichitaro Yada*, 24 February 1922. Japanese Foreign Ministry Archival Documents. Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Tokyo. Translated by Kazuhiro Oharazeki. In *How Did Margaret Sanger’s 1922 Tour of Japan Help Spread the Idea of Birth Control and Inspire the Formation of a Japanese Birth Control Movement?* Documents selected and interpreted by Esther Katz, Peter C. Engelman, Cathy Moran Hajo, and Rui Kohiyama. Alexander Street Press, 2011.

⁶ Takeuchi-Demirci, Aiko. 2017. *Contraceptive Diplomacy: Reproductive Politics and Imperial Ambitions in the United States and Japan*. Stanford University Press.
<https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=0e48959e-ee54-308e-a85b-b43542464df9>.

The apprehension surrounding Sanger's visit must be understood within the broader context of interwar Japan, a society in flux. While the Meiji and Taishō eras brought significant modernization and Western influence, there remained strong undercurrents of resistance to external intervention in areas perceived as deeply tied to national identity—such as family life, reproduction, and gender roles. Japan in the early 1920s was navigating its dual ambitions of modernity and imperial expansion, both of which influenced how birth control was debated and understood. One of the most pressing domestic concerns was overpopulation, which had grown more acute following World War I. Industrialization, urban crowding, and economic volatility made the question of population control both a political and social imperative. Socialist, Shirō Kawata frames contraception as a tool for addressing structural inequality, arguing that it can improve the lives of the working class, “Poverty may be bearable if people are all equally poor. But, if wealth is distributed unequally, only the poor will suffer while the rich will not be affected much.”⁷ He follows up with, “As a means to control [population and births], moral restraint may be the more preferable, but if it is not effective, a scientific method, like the one proposed by Mrs. Sanger's movement, will be necessary.”⁸ Furthermore, Sujin Lee argues, interwar Japan was a dynamic site where the politics of population—shaped by discourses of neo-Malthusianism, eugenics, and proletarian birth control—merged with broader imperial and economic goals.⁹ For many policymakers, regulating reproduction was not simply a social issue, but a question of national stability and strength.

⁷ Kawata, Shirō. “On Birth Control, Part II.” Published as “*Ikuji seigen ni tsuite (ge)*,” *Tokyo Asahi Shinbun*, March 12, 1922, 6. Translated by Kazuhiro Oharazeki. Included in *How Did Margaret Sanger's 1922 Tour of Japan Help Spread the Idea of Birth Control and Inspire the Formation of a Japanese Birth Control Movement?* Documents selected and interpreted by Esther Katz, Peter C. Engelman, Cathy Moran Hajo, and Rui Kohiyama. Alexander Street Press, 2011.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Lee, Sujin. “Problematizing Population: Politics of Birth Control and Eugenics in Interwar Japan.” PhD diss., Cornell

Within this dynamic, reactions to Sanger's birth control advocacy reflected a wide ideological spectrum. Feminist physician Yoshioka Yayoi, for instance, opposed birth control not solely out of traditionalist conservatism, but from a principled stance rooted in women's moral health and social cohesion. Yoshioka worried that Western-style contraceptive discourse encouraged individualism at the expense of collective social and familial responsibilities. Her opposition was also tied to broader concerns about how foreign feminist ideologies might disrupt Japanese women's roles as nurturers and moral guardians of the household.¹⁰ These hesitations highlight how anxieties about modernity and Westernization were projected onto the birth control debate. At the same time, other Japanese feminists interpreted Sanger's message more favorably, though they adapted it to fit local contexts. Sujin Lee describes Yamakawa Kikue, a socialist and feminist, who reimagined Sanger's notion of "voluntary motherhood" as a political tool—calling for a "birth strike" to protest women's oppression within patriarchal capitalism.¹¹ For Yamakawa, birth control was not just a personal right but a form of class resistance. In contrast, Shidzue Ishimoto, another key feminist figure, embraced Sanger's advocacy from a "eugenic feminist" standpoint. Her support for birth control stemmed from a belief in improving the health of the nation through maternal responsibility and rational family planning. Ishimoto fused her feminism with a sense of national duty, promoting birth control to create stronger families and a more efficient, modern Japan.

Sabine Fröhstück's book *Colonizing Sex: Sexology and Social Control in Modern Japan* analyzes the shifting perceptions and institutionalization of sex and sexuality in modern Japan. Through detailed engagement with exchanges among governmental bodies, scholars,

¹⁰ Lee. "Problematizing Population," 2017.

¹¹ Lee, Sujin. "Differing Conceptions of 'Voluntary Motherhood': Yamakawa Kikue's Birth Strike and Ishimoto Shizue's Eugenic Feminism." *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*, no. 52 (2017): 3–22. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26401835>.

intellectuals, reformers, the media, and the public, Frühstück reconstructs the processes of normalization, medicalization, and pedagogization of sexual behavior. Chapter 4, “Claiming the Fetus,” is particularly relevant, as it explores the socio-political and economic factors that shaped public opinion across social classes during the interwar period—the same moment in which birth control emerged as a contested topic. This chapter provides a critical foundation for understanding the ideological landscape in which Sanger’s tour took place.¹² This paper additionally draws from Frühstück’s insights to contextualize the promotion of birth control during this period and to map the patterns of reaction it provoked, thereby linking her findings to the broader impact of Sanger’s visit.

Scholars have approached the subject of birth control in interwar Japan from a range of disciplinary and thematic angles. Sujin Lee, for example, emphasizes the convergence of neo-Malthusianism, eugenics,¹³ and proletarian feminism¹⁴ within a broader framework of imperial and economic statecraft, framing birth control as a tool of both social liberation and national policy. In a different manner, Frühstück takes a more cultural and institutional approach, tracing how ideas about sexuality, reproduction, and medical authority were produced and circulated among various elite and public actors.¹⁵ Finally, the primary and secondary accounts selected and interpreted by Ester Katz, Peter C. Engelman, Cathy Moran Hajo, and Rui Kohiyama provide the various opinions of Japanese individuals as well as crucial historical events of Sanger’s tour.¹⁶ Therefore, this paper synthesizes these perspectives to explore how Margaret Sanger’s 1922 tour

¹² Frühstück, Sabine. *Colonizing Sex: Sexology and Social Control in Modern Japan*. Vol. 4. Univ of California Press, 2003.

¹³ Lee. “Problematizing Population,” 2017.

¹⁴ Lee. “Differing Conceptions,” 2017.

¹⁵ Frühstück, Sabine. *Colonizing Sex: Sexology and Social Control in Modern Japan*. Vol. 4. Univ of California Press, 2003.

¹⁶ Katz, Esther, Peter C. Engelman, Cathy Moran Hajo, and Rui Kohiyama, eds. *How Did Margaret Sanger's 1922 Tour of Japan Help Spread the Idea of Birth Control and Inspire the Formation of a Japanese Birth Control Movement?* Translations by Kazuhiro Oharazeki. Alexander Street Press, 2011.

served as a crystallizing event that drew these ideological, political, and cultural threads into conversation. Ultimately, the differing sentiments toward Sanger and the broader birth control movement offer a valuable lens through which to understand the complexities of Japanese interwar society, the contested nature of women's roles within it, and the broader implications of a Western influence on Japan. By examining the multiplicity of reactions, from enthusiastic adoption to principled resistance, this paper contributes a more nuanced account of how transnational feminist encounters were refracted through Japan's unique socio-political context.

The Role of the Japanese Government

The invitation sent to Sanger was issued by the *Kaizo-sha*, the liberal publishing firm that put out *Kaizo (Reconstruction)*, a socialist journal that had previously invited Bertrand Russell and Albert Einstein to Japan as part of a five-year lecture series featuring important world figures.¹⁷ Margaret Sanger's difficult entry into Japan in 1922 revealed the Japanese government's ambivalence toward Western ideologies. Although her visa was initially denied under the pretense of maintaining moral and political order, Sanger's eventual admission—albeit with restrictions—highlights Japan's cautious but calculated openness to external ideas when they aligned with national interests. While official policy promoted population growth under *umeyo fuyaseyo* (“have children and increase the population”), there was growing concern among Japanese elites about overpopulation, food scarcity, and resource limitations after the conclusion of World War I.¹⁸ Within this context, Sanger's argument that birth control could alleviate social strain gained traction. Though she was forced to moderate her feminist rhetoric, Sanger navigated these constraints skillfully, framing population control as a pragmatic *solution*

¹⁷ Katz et al. Introduction, “How did Margaret Sanger,” 2011.

¹⁸ Ibid.

rather than a radical challenge to national values. The Japanese government, wary of social upheaval but intrigued by the potential for targeted family planning, selectively embraced her presence as politically useful—so long as it did not threaten the patriarchal or imperial structure.¹⁹

This strategic ambivalence, resisting overt Western influence while quietly adopting parts of it, echoed the broader Japanese approach to modernization during the interwar years. Still, for imperialist and militarist ideologues, the population increase was proof of a prosperous empire, potent and willing to fight future wars not only thanks to healthy and well-trained male subjects, but also to a supply of offspring provided by unlimitedly fertile women.²⁰ Though the government was willing to listen to a way to mitigate their overpopulation problem, the hesitation toward Sanger's advocacy also stemmed from concerns about state control over women's reproduction. Sanger's collaboration with Japanese allies like Shidzue Ishimoto and her decision to emphasize population over sexuality reflected a conscious effort to reframe birth control as a matter of national strength first while preaching some individual liberation second. By avoiding overt challenges to social hierarchy or morality, Sanger was able to contribute to a discourse that presented reproductive control as a tool for economic stability and political progress. Japan's conditional acceptance of her visit underscores a recurring theme in its response to Western ideologies: transformation without total assimilation. In allowing Sanger to speak, under surveillance and within limits, the Japanese government demonstrated a willingness

¹⁹ Katz et al. Introduction, "How did Margaret Sanger," 2011.

²⁰ Frühstück, Sabine. *Colonizing Sex: Sexology and Social Control in Modern Japan*. Vol. 4. Univ. of California Press, 2003, 118-119.

to adopt birth control discourse when it could be recast as a domestic imperative rather than a foreign imposition.

Feminist Reactions to Margaret Sanger's 'Voluntary Motherhood'

Photographs showcase Shidzue Ishimoto and Margaret Sanger side by side, appearing as a united team of two in the campaign for women's liberation in Japan. Yet, while Ishimoto supported Sanger's mission, her advocacy maintained distinct local concerns and ideologies. For certain women's groups, the population problem provided a setting for the redefinition of



Fig. 1. A photograph of Margaret Sanger with Shidzue Ishimoto and likely Keikichi Ishimoto, ca. March-April 1922. From the Margaret Sanger Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

women's roles, status, and rights in society.²¹ Ishimoto skillfully leveraged Japan's contentious politico-economic climate to frame her arguments for birth control in a way that would resonate with domestic audiences. Her long-standing support for birth control was deeply rooted in neo-Malthusian and eugenic ideologies, which enabled her to link reproductive control with national

²¹ Fröhstück, 119.

improvement and women's political empowerment. Sujin Lee characterizes this approach as “eugenic feminism” in her dissertation on Japanese feminists’ reinterpretations of Sanger’s idea of “voluntary motherhood.”²² For Ishimoto, birth control was a pragmatic tool— “a matter of expediency”—that addressed pressing social problems such as overpopulation, racial degeneration, and poverty. “The parents must have assurance of the ability of providing the child with a sound education, with sufficient and proper food, and they must be able to dress it well and nicely,”²³ she argued, emphasizing how reproductive regulation could strengthen families and the nation alike.

At the same time, Ishimoto viewed birth control as a way to liberate women from the physical, emotional, and economic toll of unregulated motherhood, “Their beauty and noble spirit – although they usually do not blossom because of the heavy burdens described above – will fade away. They are just breeding machines and will be nothing forever unless their families support the idea of limiting the number of children.”²⁴ Ishimoto acknowledges the political capital of women’s wombs, the expansive part of their bodies that would, if fully functional, improve their status as imperial subjects. She fully embraced Sanger’s 1922 tour as a catalyst for advancing these goals in Japan, yet her support was grounded in her own critique of patriarchal structures. She emphasized that women should have the freedom to choose whether to bear children and to control the size of their families—particularly in a society where the burdens of reproduction fell disproportionately on working-class women. Despite her status as a well-off

²² Lee, Sujin. “Differing Conceptions of ‘Voluntary Motherhood’: Yamakawa Kikue’s Birth Strike and Ishimoto Shizue’s Eugenic Feminism.” *U.S.-Japan Women’s Journal*, no. 52 (2017): 3–22. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26401835>.

²³ Ishimoto, Shizue. “Women’s Liberation and Birth Control.” *Shō Kazoku* 1, no. 13 (May 1922): 6. Originally published as “Fujin kaihō to ikuji chōsetsu.” Translated by Kazuhiro Oharazeki. In *How Did Margaret Sanger’s 1922 Tour of Japan Help Spread the Idea of Birth Control and Inspire the Formation of a Japanese Birth Control Movement?*, edited by Esther Katz, Peter C. Engelman, Cathy Moran Hajo, and Rui Kohiyama. Alexander Street Press, 2011.

²⁴ Ibid.

baroness, Ishimoto was not immune to the burdens of motherhood that affected women across class lines. Although she belonged to the upper class, she recognized the pervasive injustice in the notion of women as mere “breeding machines”—a dehumanizing ideal she was determined to challenge and undo.²⁵ While aligned with Sanger’s advocacy, Ishimoto’s vision for birth control was further personally shaped by Japan’s class hierarchies, nationalist anxieties, and gender norms.

Ishimoto’s localized adaptation of Sanger’s ideas reflects the broader argument of this paper: that Sanger’s tour became leverage for contested interpretations of modernity, gender, and



Fig. 2. A photograph of Shidzue Ishimoto, Margaret Sanger, and Grant Sanger during the Japan trip, 1922. From the Special Collections Library, The Pennsylvania State University Libraries.
Reproduced with Permission of the Special Collections Library, The Pennsylvania State University Libraries.

national identity in interwar Japan. While some, like Ishimoto, embraced Sanger’s message and reinterpreted it to advance feminist goals, others—including journalists, physicians, and government officials—responded with skepticism or outright opposition. These varied reactions

²⁵ Lee, “Differing Conceptions,” 15.

underscore how Japan's fragile and evolving social and political climate was shaped by transnational currents but remained firmly rooted in local struggles. Through figures like Ishimoto, the complexities and contradictions within Japan's birth control debate come into focus, offering a powerful lens through which to understand the tensions of the era.

Margaret Sanger embraced eugenics to promote the biological and social benefits of reproductive autonomy, "Let us then friends, depart from the old methods of quantity and turn our attention to producing quality in our peoples,"²⁶ framing birth control as a pathway to a more cohesive and better-functioning society. Yet, Japanese socialist feminist Yamakawa Kikue approached the idea of "voluntary motherhood" from a radically different perspective. For Yamakawa, birth control was not simply a matter of individual choice or racial betterment, but a political tool to challenge enforced sexual morality, the exploitation of women under capitalism, and the enduring constraints of feudal patriarchy.²⁷ Her advocacy reflected a broader socialist vision that demanded fundamental structural change through labor and economic reform. Within this framework, birth control was an element of social revolution, but not its central goal.

Yamakawa's interpretation of reproductive autonomy was rooted in a critique of both capitalist and patriarchal systems. While Sanger portrayed overpopulation as a problem generated by working-class families and saw birth control as a solution to mitigate their suffering—thereby implicitly blaming them for their own oppression—Yamakawa exposed how the overpopulation discourse functioned as an ideological tactic. In her view, neo-Malthusianism simply displaced the true source of exploitation: the capitalist system itself. She rejected the idea that women's sexuality or reproduction should be reduced to tools of national progress or

²⁶ "Overpopulation is Cause of War Says Mrs. Sanger," March 15, 1922.

²⁷ Lee, "Differing Conceptions," 7.

expressions of essential womanhood.²⁸ Instead, she reframed reproductive autonomy as a form of political subjectivity—an act of resistance that reclaimed the body from both state and economic control.

Yamakawa's perspective offers a striking counterpoint not only to Sanger's message but also to the broader birth control movement's alignment with state and scientific authority. Her critique underscores this paper's central argument: that Sanger's 1922 tour ignited a wide spectrum of responses in Japan, revealing deep fractures in how different actors—feminists, socialists, physicians, and government officials—conceptualized modernity, gender, and national identity. Yamakawa's interpretation of voluntary motherhood as a revolutionary act illustrates how the birth control debate became a site of ideological contestation, *not* consensus. By highlighting such divergences, the discourse reveals how birth control in interwar Japan was not only transnational, but deeply entangled in local struggles over power, class, and the meaning of women's liberation.

Rejections to Margaret Sanger's Political Agenda

While figures like Shidzue Ishimoto and Yamakawa Kikue engaged with Margaret Sanger's birth control movement—either in support or through adaptation—other Japanese intellectuals and activists responded with outright rejection. Critics such as physician, women's rights advocate, and nationalist Yoshioka Yayoi, along with journalist Yamada Waka and several commentators in the press, viewed Sanger's mission as a misguided and culturally insensitive imposition of Western values on Japanese society.

Yoshioka Yayoi not only opposed Sanger personally but also took a broader anti-birth control stance. A vocal critic of neo-Malthusianism, Yoshioka argued that Japan's high infant

²⁸ Lee, "Differing Conceptions," 7.

mortality rate made the adoption of birth control counterproductive to national development. In her view, a growing population was vital for strengthening the country, especially amid the geopolitical pressures of the time. Rather than limiting population growth, Yoshioka advocated for alternative solutions to issues like food scarcity and social welfare: improved land use, delayed marriage and childbirth, and public policy reforms.²⁹ Her rejection of neo-Malthusianism was thus rooted in both nationalistic concerns and a belief in Japan's unique social and demographic circumstances.

In addition to these practical objections, Yoshioka also voiced deep moral concerns. She feared that artificial interventions in reproduction, whether contraception or abortion, would not only harm women's physical health but also undermine their moral and spiritual development. Reflecting broader conservative values, Yoshioka emphasized virtues like chastity, self-restraint, and fidelity, arguing that birth control threatened these traditional foundations.³⁰ To her and other like-minded critics, Sanger's emphasis on women's sexual freedom was incompatible with Japanese cultural ideals, which linked moral discipline to personal growth and national strength.

Yamada Waka echoed these sentiments, criticizing Sanger's advocacy as superficial and dangerous. She argued that promoting birth control without addressing deeper issues like moral responsibility and sexual continence ignored the true path to social improvement. Yamada states, "Attempting to limit the number of births without reforming the sense of responsibility is shallow," reflecting a belief that personal virtue should precede or accompany any social reform.³¹ The rationale for asserting this claim may allude to Yamada's feminist point of view

²⁹ Hou, Haiying. 2022. "A Re-Examination of Birth Control in the First Half of Twentieth Century Japan: Yoshioka Yayoi's Anti-Birth Control Position." *The History of the Family* 27 (2): 391–409. doi:10.1080/1081602X.2022.2041065, 394.

³⁰ Hou, 397.

³¹ Yamada, 1922.

and escaping from a life of prostitution. Yamada argues that birth control reshapes relations by removing one of the few conditions under which women could refuse their husbands – namely, the risk of pregnancy.³² Therefore, Yamada believes birth control undermines the need for *everyone*, both men and women, to strengthen themselves morally through self-control and personal responsibility. Further, in describing her disdain for women that chose to engage in abortion practices, Yamada emphasizes, “Those women who come under the latter group are the ones whose hankering after liberty is so strong that they have come to choose the criminal act of abortion.”³³ Yamada views abortion as an extreme measure that women resort to, and sees the decision to carry out such an act as a failure of character, particularly when it’s pursued in the selfish nature of personal liberation.

Other voices in the Japanese press went further, framing Sanger’s tour as an extension of Western imperialism and cultural superiority. One editorial criticized her assumptions about Asia and population control, pointing out the hypocrisy of Western powers preaching restraint while denying equal opportunity to non-white nations. Rather than embracing birth control to curb Japanese population growth, the editorial called for global equity and the elimination of colonial structures that limited non-Western nations’ access to resources and development.³⁴ These critiques reveal a deep skepticism toward the racialized and imperial undercurrents of the global birth control movement, exposing the tension between Sanger’s universalist rhetoric and Japan’s nationalist anxieties.

³² Yamada, 1922.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ “Birth Control,” *Japan Times & Mail* (Tokyo), April 3, 1922, 4. In *How Did Margaret Sanger’s 1922 Tour of Japan Help Spread the Idea of Birth Control and Inspire the Formation of a Japanese Birth Control Movement?* Documents selected and interpreted by Esther Katz, Peter C. Engelman, Cathy Moran Hajo, and Rui Kohiyama. Translations by Kazuhiro Oharazeki. Alexander Street Press, 2011.

Beyond moral and practical concerns, the rejections of Margaret Sanger's message reflected a deeper resistance to what many Japanese critics perceived as the cultural imperialism embedded within Western feminist discourse. Sanger's framing of overpopulation as a threat to global stability—and her implication that Asian populations needed to be controlled—struck many Japanese intellectuals as both racist and hypocritical. In an article titled "Birth Control" in the *Japan Times & Mail* an anonymous individual expresses disapproval of Sanger's missionary approach to educating the Japanese about population issues and birth control, "If the white race will only practice what it preaches to others, and if our sons and daughters should enjoy the equal opportunity in other parts of the world as the white race insists upon China, there is yet sufficient room on the earth to which to go and in which to settle comfortably."³⁵ Sanger's colonialist warnings about an impending war due to unchecked population growth not only perpetuated anxieties about the "Yellow Peril," but also reinforced Western hegemonic narratives that portrayed non-Western nations as threats to world peace and progress. These framings failed to acknowledge the legacies of imperial expansion, economic exploitation, and political subjugation that had destabilized regions like East Asia in the first place. For many Japanese critics, Sanger's brand of internationalism was inseparable from the broader project of Western dominance.

The editorial that challenged Sanger's assumption that Japan's traditional family system was "primitive" underscores this tension.³⁶ By emphasizing that Japan had already modernized in many ways while maintaining its own unique social structures, the editorial resisted the idea that Western-style liberalism—and specifically Western feminism—was the only legitimate path

³⁵ "Birth Control." *Japan Times & Mail* (Tokyo), April 3, 1922, 4. Included in *How Did Margaret Sanger's 1922 Tour of Japan Help Spread the Idea of Birth Control and Inspire the Formation of a Japanese Birth Control Movement?* Documents selected and interpreted by Esther Katz, Peter C. Engelman, Cathy Moran Hajo, and Rui Kohiyama. Translations by Kazuhiro Oharazeki. Alexander Street Press, 2011.

³⁶ Ibid.

to modernity. In this light, the rejection of Sanger's birth control advocacy was not merely a matter of cultural misunderstanding or conservative backlash, but a strategic assertion of national identity in the face of foreign intervention. Critics like Yoshioka Yayoi and Yamada Waka did not reject birth control solely on religious or moral grounds; they rejected what it symbolized—a foreign model of liberation that overlooked the specificity of Japanese society and undermined existing forms of national and cultural coherence.

Moreover, these rejections complicate the historiographical tendency to treat the interwar birth control movement as a straightforward project of global feminist solidarity or progressive reform.³⁷ Instead, they reveal how deeply embedded birth control was in ideological contests over sovereignty, morality, and modernity. The very idea of “voluntary motherhood,” while empowering in some contexts, was viewed as offering personal freedom at the cost of collective moral discipline or national strength. This tension reveals the limits of transnational feminist discourse when it fails to fully account for the local conditions, historical traumas, and cultural frameworks of the societies it seeks to influence.

In this way, the rejection of Sanger's ideas by Japanese intellectuals and public figures speaks to the broader argument of this paper: that birth control in interwar Japan became a highly politicized terrain where global ideas were not simply adopted or opposed, but contested, reinterpreted, and strategically reframed. The responses to Sanger's tour—ranging from enthusiastic adaptation to ideological resistance—demonstrate how the Japanese public, especially its intellectual and feminist communities, navigated the pressures of modernity not by passively absorbing Western norms, but by actively debating and reshaping them within their own political, social, and cultural realities. Rather than marking a moment of feminist

³⁷ Lee. “Differing Conceptions,” 2017.

convergence, Sanger's 1922 visit exposed the fault lines of an evolving nation grappling with its place in a rapidly globalizing world.

The reception of Margaret Sanger's 1922 tour of Japan was far from monolithic. Her presence catalyzed a diverse array of reactions—from enthusiastic support to ideological adaptation and outright rejection—that collectively illuminated the tensions embedded in interwar Japanese society. Figures like Shidzue Ishimoto strategically aligned with Sanger's goals, adapting them to Japan's politico-economic realities through frameworks like neo-Malthusianism and eugenic feminism. Meanwhile, socialist feminists like Yamakawa Kikue reimagined reproductive autonomy as a revolutionary tool against capitalism and patriarchal control. On the other hand, opponents like Yoshioka Yayoi and Yamada Waka rejected Sanger's message altogether, citing both nationalistic concerns and deeply rooted moral and spiritual traditions. These varied responses were not merely reactions to a foreign figure, but reflections of broader and nuanced debates in Japan over gender, class, modernity, and the limits of Western influence synthesized and articulated in the many sentiments of Sanger's tour. Ultimately, the discourse around Sanger and the birth control movement served as a revealing site of contestation—one that helps to understand how Japanese society in the interwar period negotiated global ideas while asserting its own complex, and often conflicting, visions and versions of progress and identity, as demonstrated through responses to Sanger's tour.

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