

Western Women's Influence in Japanese Education, 1868–1912

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Abstract

Between 1868 and 1912, Japan underwent a radical transformation as it emerged from over two centuries of relative seclusion and launched an ambitious programme of modernization. Central to this national project was the reform of education, marked notably by the 1872 Gakusei (Education Order), which aimed to reshape Japan's schooling system along Western lines. This study reframes the narrative of Meiji educational reform by highlighting how Western women, many of them missionaries, reformers, or independently hired educators, helped redefine female education and expand the horizons of Japanese womanhood in ways that both aligned with and subtly challenged the Meiji government's domestic ideal of *ryōsai kenbo* ("good wife, wise mother"). Their influence, though often omitted from mainstream accounts, was crucial to Japan's transformation and offers vital insights into the gendered dynamics of cultural exchange during a pivotal era of global change.

The study draws on memoirs, letters, and institutional records to explore how these women interpreted and navigated Japanese society. Rather than passive transmitters of Western ideals, they engaged in complex negotiations of identity and cultural difference. Many challenged Victorian gender expectations even as they embodied them, asserting intellectual agency in a space historically defined by domesticity. Their experiences reveal how gender conditioned their access to Japanese households and their ability to shape cross-cultural interactions through the informal realm of "soft diplomacy," influencing social attitudes and fostering intercultural understanding from within the private sphere.

This project contributes to a more gender-sensitive historiography of the Meiji era, engaging with scholarship that has typically privileged race and nationality while sidelining gender as a lens of analysis. It also addresses contemporary relevance: Japan's current ranking of 118th in the 2024 Global Gender Gap Index underscores the need to historicize gender inequality and recognize the long-standing struggles and contributions of women - both foreign and Japanese - in shaping educational discourse. By focusing on themes such as cross-cultural adaptation, and the role of women in knowledge transmission, the research positions Western women not as peripheral figures but as active participants in Japan's modernizing project.

Keywords: Education, Japan, Western women, Meiji era, Gender, missionaries.

Introduction

Between 1868 and 1912—a transformative period in Japanese history marked by rapid modernization and the Meiji government's ambitious nation-building efforts - Western women played a pivotal yet often overlooked role in shaping Japan's educational landscape. The era was inaugurated by the *Gakusei* (Education Order) of 1872, a landmark reform that sought to modernize the national education system through the adoption of Western pedagogical models. Within this framework, Western women - many of them missionaries, reformers, or

independently contracted educators - became key agents in introducing modern curricula, teaching methods, and new ideals of women's education.³¹

This biographical project investigates how Western women interpreted, navigated, and influenced Japanese society during the Meiji era (Meiji jidai, 1868–1912), with a particular focus on how gender shaped their experiences, contributions, and cross-cultural adaptations. Their stories illuminate not only the educational transformation of Japan but also the complex negotiations of identity and cultural difference in a period of intense social change.

The ongoing relevance of gender in historical inquiry is underscored by contemporary data such as the Global Gender Gap Report 2024, which ranked Japan 118th out of 146 countries - well behind its G7 counterparts (The Global Gender Gap Index 2024 rankings). This reinforces the importance of integrating gender perspectives into historical and cultural scholarship, in alignment with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

Drawing on memoirs, letters, and other personal writings, this research explores themes of gender and education. While previous scholarship has focused largely on race and nationality in Western engagements with Japan (Brecher, 2018), gender remains an underexplored lens. The project brings renewed attention to figures such as French nun Mère Mathilde Raclot (1814-1911), Annie L. Howe (1852–1943); Margaret Clark Griffis (1838-1913) and Methodist missionary Dora E. Schoonmaker; Jean “Jennie” Margaret Gheer (1846–1910) and Elizabeth Russell (1836–1928).

Through the examination of themes such as mixed marriage, exogamy, and cultural adaptation, the study reveals how these women negotiated dual identities, redefined traditional roles, and offered alternative perspectives on gender and modernity (Sterry, 2009). By critically engaging with the historical marginalization of women's voices (Atwood, 2017; Beard, 1991), this project contributes to a more inclusive and nuanced historiography, enriching our understanding of the gendered dimensions of cultural exchange in Meiji Japan.

These women worked in schools across Japan, from Tokyo to more rural regions, where they taught not only English but also science, hygiene, literature, and Western cultural values. Their roles were particularly influential in the development of girls' education, which the Meiji state recognized as essential to shaping future wives and mothers who could contribute to the moral and intellectual strength of the family and the nation. Western women often established or supported mission schools for girls, such as Doshisha Girls' School in Kyoto and Ferris Seminary in Yokohama, where their influence extended beyond language instruction to the development of values associated with Christian ethics, self-cultivation, and civic responsibility.

Education Reforms in Japan

Following more than two centuries of self-imposed seclusion under the *sakoku* (鎖国, “closed country”) policy from 1639 to 1853, Japan underwent a series of radical transformations. J.D. Davies wrote: ‘The fleet of “barbarian” ships which cast anchor in the Bay of Yedo on that Sabbath morning, July 7, 1853, under the command of Commodore Perry, finally caused the

³¹ This article is based on research generously supported by the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation Travel Grant awarded in 2023. During the three weeks course of this project, I conducted archival research at the following institutions: Ferris University Library Archives (FULA) in Yokohama; Doshisha Women's College of Liberal Arts Library in Kyoto; the library of the International Christian University (ICU) in Mitaka, Tokyo; and I accessed primary sources housed at the Hannah Riddell and Wright Memorial Hall in Kumamoto. All remaining research was undertaken at my home institution, the University of Buckingham, in Buckingham and London, UK.

nation which had been closed for two hundred and fifty years to open its gates to the world.' (Davies, 1894). Although traditionally portrayed as completely isolated, the *sakoku* system has been re-evaluated by modern historians who note that while contact with Western powers was indeed highly restricted, Japan maintained regulated relations with neighbouring Asian states and permitted controlled trade through limited channels—most notably with the Dutch and Chinese at Dejima, Nagasaki (Toby, 1984; Hesselink, 2001; Chaiklin, 2003). Despite this limited openness, European access was strictly confined. Foreign women were explicitly banned, reinforcing gendered boundaries in diplomatic and trade encounters.

A notable exception occurred in August 1817, when Jan Cock Blomhoff, the Dutch *opperhoofd* (director) of the trading post at Dejima, arrived with his wife Titia Bergsma (1786–1821), their infant son, and wet nurse Petronella Muns. Titia, often regarded as the first Western woman to set foot in Tokugawa Japan, was not allowed to remain in the country. Despite her brief stay, her presence caused a sensation; hundreds of images of her were created by Japanese artists, fascinated by a figure they had never encountered before (Bersma, 2020). Her forced departure symbolized the rigid exclusionary policies of the period, particularly towards Western women.

The eventual *opening of Japan* - sparked by Commodore Perry's expeditions and culminating in the collapse of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1868 - ushered in the Meiji period (1868–1912), during which Japan rapidly transitioned from a feudal society to a centralized, industrialized nation-state. This transformation was not only technological and institutional but also deeply educational. Modernizing the education system became one of the Meiji government's top priorities in its mission to build a strong and competitive nation. Education was seen as a cornerstone of *bunmei kaika* (civilization and enlightenment), reflecting the broader goal of *fukoku kyōhei* ("Enrich the country, strengthen the army"), and young people were encouraged to study Western ideology and Western languages (Fukuchi, 1993). In March 1868, the Five Oaths issued in the name of the Emperor put forward the basic principles of Japanese educational modernization reform, namely "breaking the old bad customs" and "seeking knowledge from the world" (Ogata, 1972)

Key figures such as journalist and historian Tokutomi Sohō (1863–1957) advocated for the emulation of Western models as the best path forward. To accelerate modernization, the government hired foreign advisors known as *oyatoi gaikokujin* across sectors such as engineering, medicine, and education. Among these were numerous Western missionary women who became central to Japan's evolving pedagogical landscape. However, the enthusiasm for foreign expertise was not indefinite. As Japan developed a robust domestic knowledge base, the influence of foreign professionals began to wane. American physician and missionary John C. Berry (1847–1936), for example, remarked in 1912 that "service of foreign physicians became unnecessary" by the late 1880s (Berry, 1912), signalling growing national confidence and self-sufficiency.

One of the most ambitious state-sponsored efforts to absorb Western knowledge was the Iwakura Mission (1871–1873), a diplomatic and educational expedition led by Iwakura Tomomi. This extensive delegation of over 100 officials and students toured the United States and Europe, aiming to renegotiate unequal treaties and study Western institutions, including legal systems, industry, and education. While overtly political, the mission also carried a subtle but far-reaching cultural agenda: the reformation of Japanese society through the modernization of its education system—especially for women.

A revolutionary element of the Iwakura Mission was the inclusion of five young girls—Tsuda Umeko, Yamakawa Sutematsu, Nagai Shigeko, Ueda Tei, and Yoshimasu Ryōko—who were left behind in the United States to receive a Western education. Aged between six and fourteen, these girls symbolized a radical reimagining of women's roles in the future of Japan. At a time when female literacy was limited and educational opportunities scarce, sending these girls abroad was both an ideological and strategic investment. The most well-known among them, Tsuda Umeko (1864–1929), would later found Joshi Eigaku Juku (the Women's Institute for English Studies, now Tsuda University) in 1900 and advocate tirelessly for women's higher education. Her efforts went beyond the traditional ideal of *ryōsai kenbo* ("good wife, wise mother"), a slogan that would come to dominate state rhetoric, promoting instead the vision of educated women as civic-minded, globally engaged individuals (Koyama & Sylvain, 1994; Koyama, 2012).

The presence of these girls in the West reflected the Meiji state's recognition that women had a vital role to play in shaping the nation's moral and intellectual fabric. Their education abroad served not only their personal advancement but also national goals of modernization. This move implicitly challenged entrenched gender norms, positioning women as cultural mediators and agents of transformation within a rapidly changing society.

Western missionary women and educators later built on the precedent set by the Iwakura girls. In schools and seminaries across Japan, they introduced curricula that emphasized hygiene, moral instruction, critical thinking, and language acquisition, while promoting a broader conception of women's roles beyond the domestic sphere. Their efforts found fertile ground in a reformist climate, particularly after the enactment of the 1899 Girls' Higher School Law, which mandated that each prefecture establish at least one public middle school for girls. This law institutionalized female education as part of the national agenda and reflected the long-term impact of earlier reform efforts initiated by both Japanese and foreign women educators.

The Gakusei of 1872 laid the groundwork for a national education system in Japan. The government recognized that women, as future mothers of the nation, needed to be educated. Yet, the infrastructure and philosophy for educating girls were underdeveloped. This created an opportunity for foreign actors—particularly Western women—whose involvement filled a gap in both resources and pedagogical expertise.

In sum, Japan's education reforms in the Meiji era were not simply the result of top-down modernization policies. They were shaped by a diverse array of actors—including Western women—whose influence extended beyond traditional male spheres of politics and industry. Through their teaching, advocacy, and lived example, these women helped redefine the possibilities of female education in Japan, challenging domestic roles, reshaping gender expectations, and contributing to a more inclusive vision of national progress.

Pioneers

While much has been written about the men who spread Christianity in Japan, such as Jesuit Francis Xavier (1506-52) and Fr Bernard Thaddée Petitjean (1829-84), the women who venture to the archipelago have often remained unacknowledged by history. When their stories are included, they are frequently relegated to footnotes within male-centred narratives. However, female accounts offer a richer and more subtle view. As American educator Alice Mabel Bacon (1858–1918) observed: "Only life in the home itself can show what a Japanese home may be; and only by intimate association – such as no foreign man can ever hope to gain." (Bacon, 1891). Bacon draws a striking distinction between the experiences of foreign

women and foreign men. Her statement suggests that foreign men were inherently excluded from the domestic sphere in Japan, implicitly reinforcing contemporary gender norms by situating men in the public realm and women within the private domain. This delineation echoes Victorian ideals of masculinity, which prized professional success, public reputation, and chivalrous behaviour, while defining the domestic sphere as the woman's domain (Pearson, 2010). Men were expected to earn their living and maintain their status in the public world, not to engage in household duties such as child-rearing or cooking. However, Bacon's reflection also hints at the tensions women experienced during this era. In April 1900, she was invited to Japan to help establish the Joshi Eigaku Juku (Women's English Preparatory School).

Many women were beginning to challenge the constraints of traditional domesticity, signalling a broader movement towards redefining women's roles beyond that of wife and mother. Rather than being confined to domesticity, many of these women redefined it as a platform for cultural engagement and soft diplomacy, using their positions to foster cross-cultural understanding and advance new models of womanhood. Women began rejecting the limitations of being merely wives and mothers, seeking instead to assert intellectual and social agency in a rapidly changing world. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) reflects how these constraints were beginning to be pushed. When the character Jane offers to accompany St. John Rivers to India as a sisterly companion, he rejects the idea, insisting that only a "missionary wife" would suffice. In the early 19th century, the term *missionary* typically referred to a man. His wife, if present, was a "helpmate," expected to support his calling. As literary scholar Valentine Cunningham points out, Jane's wish to be a "fellow missionary" was "an impossibility," as missionary work was seen as an exclusively male role. Yet by the late 19th century, shifting social norms and opportunities in Japan allowed women to begin carving out spaces for themselves—not only as companions, but as independent agents of cultural, educational, and spiritual exchange.

While gender and educational norms were evolving in the West, Japan during the Meiji period was actively seeking knowledge from foreign educators. The value placed on English language acquisition was especially high, as it was seen as a gateway to modernity and upward mobility. In her 1910 book *Behind the Shoji*, British writer Evelyn Adam (possibly a pseudonymous), offers a vivid snapshot of this linguistic enthusiasm. She notes that the desire to learn English was not only widespread but often expressed with urgency and practicality: 'Teach us to write English—and teach as cheaply,' young Japanese asked, she recalled, explaining that many hoped to 'unlock the doors of Tokyo officialdom with this magic key of language' (Adam, 1910). Adam observed that while the zeal for English was commendable, the outcomes were occasionally less than successful. She warned against economizing on language instruction, emphasizing that poor mastery of English could lead to confusion or unintended humour, especially when students passed along flawed advice to local merchants eager to advertise their services in the foreign tongue. The results, she noted, were both charming and comical:

A certain barber's sign is as good as some of our epitaphs in country churchyards. 'Hairs shaved here. Porpoises (paupers presumably) need not apply.' The typical general storekeeper proudly puts up 'Dealer in Sack Doods' over his door, the egg-seller, 'Extract of Fowl,' a butcher, 'Beef and Hen Met,' and a milkman paints upon his little handcart the puzzling inscription, 'Whole Milk,' which leaves the prospective customer to guess whether the milk is all milk and not half water, or whether it is wholesome. (Adam, 1910).

These anecdotes, while humorous, underscore a broader reality: the English language in Meiji Japan was a symbol of both aspiration and anxiety. For many Japanese, especially those navigating the new bureaucratic and commercial landscape of a rapidly modernizing society, English represented access to international standards and cultural capital. Western women like Adam, who taught and observed closely, played a unique role in shaping this linguistic transformation while also documenting the occasional missteps along the way.

This period in Japan, coincided with an outburst of conscientious Christianity in the West and the Meiji government's decision to lift the ban on Christianity in 1873. Many foreign women filled with religious zeal and with the aim of propagating the Christian religion, entered Japan as nuns and missionaries (Harrington, 2001). Although it must be pointed out that the term missionary only began to be applied to religious women by the 1880's, and the canon itself did not change until 1983. Their role in Japan would vary, Elizabeth K. Eder calls them 'foreign nation-builders,' especially in regard to their role as educators (Eder, 2003).

The majority of young women missionaries recruited in the late nineteenth century had little or no prior experience earning their own living. For these women, missionary service abroad - particularly in Japan - offered not only a religious calling but also a rare path to financial independence within a socially sanctioned framework. Working under the institutional protection of missionary organizations provided them with both economic security and a degree of autonomy that would have been difficult to attain at home, especially within the constraints of Victorian ideals of femininity.

As Elizabeth Eder notes in her study of American missionaries such as Margaret Clark Griffis and Dora E. Schoonmaker, teaching in Japan served as "a way to escape the confines of locality, domesticity, poverty, and dependence" (Eder, 2003). For many of these women, including Griffis, religious service offered an escape from limited life prospects in their home countries (Usui, 1990). Griffis's diaries from 1858 to 1861 reveal her acute awareness of her family's financial instability, voicing fears of becoming an economic burden. Such personal reflections highlight the deeply intertwined motivations that shaped missionary careers. Economic necessity was not separate from spiritual conviction but often reinforced it.

This dual drive - spiritual devotion and the desire for economic self-sufficiency - was characteristic of many Western women missionaries during this period. In choosing to teach, evangelise, and serve abroad, they were not only spreading their faith but also asserting a new, more independent identity as professional women in a global context. Their participation in missionary work thus reflected both a commitment to religious ideals and a practical strategy for navigating the socioeconomic limitations of their time. Ultimately, the missionary field became one of the few avenues where women could simultaneously pursue purposeful work, personal development and financial independence, albeit within the moral and organizational boundaries set by the church.

Catholic nuns dedicated their efforts towards the promotion of female education and charitable organizations. The first Catholic sisters ever to set foot in Japan arrived on 28 June 1872, led by French nun Mère Mathilde Raclot, at the age of 59, and four other French and Irish nuns from the *Soeurs de l'Enfant-Jesus*, also known as the *Dames de Saint-Maur* (Fauconnet, 2022). They founded the first Catholic school in Japan, now known as Saint Maur International School). It remains the oldest international school in Asia and third-oldest in the world. The first class of students included girls from many countries, with Japanese girls joining them in 1899. In her extraordinary career in Japan, Mère Mathilde founded orphanages and institutions including the prominent Futaba Gakuen schools, which includes the Empress and the Crown

Princess amongst their past students. Other female religious orders would follow, such as the *Sœurs de l'Enfant-Jésus* (1877), and the *Sœurs de l'Enfant-Jésus de Chauffaille* (1878).

A defining feature of the Protestant evangelical revival in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain was the establishment of foreign missionary societies dedicated to spreading the Gospel among what were termed the "heathen." This movement, rooted in both spiritual zeal and a sense of civilizational mission, soon extended across the Atlantic, with American counterparts forming similar organizations. One such group, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), sent Reverend J.D. Davis to Japan in 1871. Davis quickly became involved in promoting Christian education, particularly for girls, in Kobe.

Deeply moved by the transformation he observed among Japanese women who had embraced Christian teachings, Davis became a strong advocate for expanding educational opportunities for girls. When he learned that Japanese Christian reformer Niiijima Jō (1843–1890) was planning to establish a Christian school for boys in Kyoto (what would become Doshisha University in 1920), Davis urged that a girls' school be founded alongside it to offer women equal access to moral and intellectual development. In response, American educator and missionary Alice J. Starkweather (1850–1926) was invited to Japan. She arrived in 1876 to become the leading teacher at the newly established School for Girls, which would later evolve into Doshisha Women's College of Liberal Arts. Starkweather's arrival occurred during a growing wave of missionary engagement; by that year, sixty-two Western women were already working in Japan as missionaries, many of them educators.

The late nineteenth century saw a marked increase in the number of Western women missionaries in Japan, particularly from the United States. While some accompanied their missionary husbands, others, like Starkweather, came independently through women's missionary societies. By 1881, the majority of foreign female missionaries in Japan were married, and American women had come to outnumber their British counterparts—reflecting not only changing recruitment patterns but also the burgeoning enthusiasm for overseas missions in the postbellum United States.

These women played vital roles not only in supporting the work of their male colleagues but also in leading their own educational and healthcare initiatives, many of which were specifically designed to uplift and empower Japanese women and children. Their work resonated with the Meiji state's own ambitions for modernization, particularly in education and social reform. While their presence also carried the cultural weight of Western assumptions and religious superiority, their contributions to the development of Japan's early women's education system were significant and enduring.

American missionary and educator Annie L. Howe was a pioneer who played a pivotal role in advancing girls' education during Japan's Meiji period. Arriving in the 1870s under the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, she came at a time when Japan was embracing Western models to modernize its society, including the education sector.

Howe's most enduring contribution was her leadership at the Doshisha Girls' School in Kyoto, an institution founded by Niiijima Jō (Maxey, 2020). As principal and lead educator, she introduced a broad liberal arts curriculum far beyond traditional teachings for women. Her educational model included subjects such as English, mathematics, science, history, music, and religious instruction—reflecting a holistic and progressive vision for female learning (Nishida, 2022).

Howe also emphasized moral and character development, grounded in Christian principles, nurturing integrity and social responsibility. Beyond classroom teaching, she trained Japanese women as educators, ensuring that her influence extended to future generations. Despite her Western Christian background, Howe demonstrated cultural sensitivity by adapting teaching methods to local contexts and working collaboratively with Japanese colleagues. Howe introduced Friedrich Froebel's (1782-1852), principles of teaching children in Japan (Nishida, 2022).

Her impact reached beyond Doshisha, as she helped establish a network of Christian girls' schools and offered a template for women's education that aligned with Japan's modernization efforts. Although her mission was rooted in religious and Western ideals, her work significantly contributed to legitimizing education for women as a means of national development. Howe promoted Christian values and higher education for women, and focused on moral development alongside academic instruction.

Howe's legacy is evident in Japan's continued investment in women's education and institutions like Doshisha Women's College. She remains a key figure in the history of cross-cultural exchange—both empowering and complex—between Western missionaries and Meiji Japan.

American missionary and educator Mary Eddy Kidder (1834–1910) was the first woman educator sent to Japan by the Reformed Church in America (RCA). In 1875, Kidder founded Ferris Women's Seminary (now Ferris University), the first Christian women's college in Japan, dedicated to educating Japanese women. She advocated for girls' education and was a pioneer in introducing Western-style liberal arts to young Japanese women. Her students were among the earliest cohorts of women who moved into public life or became teachers themselves.

Western women educators played an essential role in this transformative period. Notably, their presence helped facilitate a cultural negotiation between Japanese reformers and foreign educational models. For some, such as Clara Hepburn (1818-1906), their involvement extended beyond supporting their missionary husbands. Clara, the wife of James Curtis Hepburn (1815–1911) - famed for introducing the Hepburn system of Japanese romanization - opened the Hepburn Juku, a school that would later evolve into Meiji Gakuin University.

American Presbyterian missionary and pioneering educator Julia D. Carrothers (1830–1894), arrived in Japan, with her husband Christopher, in 1869. She returned to San Diego in 1877. In 1879 she published her experiences of missionary-life in a book titled: 'The sunrise kingdom: Or, Life and Scenes in Japan, and Woman's Work for Woman There.' Julia Carrothers played a foundational role in advancing women's education in Meiji Japan. Her vision combined Western liberal arts education with Christian moral instruction, reflecting the broader missionary goal of cultivating both intellectual and spiritual growth.

Carrothers was deeply committed to her work, but her writings also reveal the challenges she encountered in adapting her educational mission to the cultural and social realities of Meiji-era Japan. In her book, she candidly expresses her frustration at the difficulties of maintaining student engagement and navigating cultural expectations:

The [Japanese] women listened very attentively, but at times there comes such a feeling of helplessness in the effort to teach them! So many come only once or twice, and we see them no more. What should we say to such? (Carrothers, 1879, p. 289).

The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, the first U.S. missionary agency that was founded in Boston, sent Eliza Talcott (1836–1911) and Julia Elizabeth Dudley (1840–1906) to Japan. They came to Japan at the beginning of the Meiji Era as pioneering missionary single women. In 1873, as American missionaries and educators, they opened a private day-school in Hanakuma-mura (Hanakuma village), Kobe, and in 1875, they founded “Girls’ School,” a boarding school for girls, on Yamamoto Dori (Yamamoto Street), Kobe. Talcott was the first principal and Dudley, the matron. Eventually it developed into Kobe College. They promoted English-language instruction and Western literature and encouraged the intellectual and spiritual development of women.

American Methodist missionary Dora E. Schoonmaker, at the age of 23, was sent to Japan on October 28, 1874, by the Women's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States. She was the society's first single missionary in Tokyo. In 1874, Schoonmaker opened *Joshi Shogakko*, the oldest origin of Aoyama Gakuin and a pioneering school for girls' education. Until 1879, when she returned to Illinois, she taught and administered the school. Schoolmaker promoted Christian education in a Japanese context and advocated women's empowerment through bilingual instruction and intercultural exchange.

Canadian Martha J. Cartmell (1845–1945), was the first Methodist missionary sent by the Woman's Missionary Society of the Methodist Church of Canada (currently the United Church of Canada), for Japan in 1882. In 1884, she established the *Toyō Eiwa Jogakkō* (now Toyo Eiwa University) a Christian school for girls in Roppongi, Tokyo. Cartmell is one of the most influential figures in Christian education in Tokyo. Her efforts assisted in the revolutionising of education for women in Japan, and she is revered to this day. She aimed to provide Christian-based education to Japanese girls, integrating English, music, and Western etiquette.

The American Methodist Episcopal Church began to establish a missionary presence in Japan prior to the Meiji government's decision in 1873 to lift the ban on Christianity. One of its early emissaries, John Carrol Davidson, had been dispatched to Nagasaki, where he founded a Methodist church in Dejima in 1876. Recognizing the pressing need for women's education, Davidson appealed to the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society (WFMS) to send female missionaries who could support this vital work.

In response, the WFMS appointed missionary and educators Jean Margaret Gheer and Elizabeth Russell. Russell would later reflect on her decision to embark on this journey to a land she “knew nothing of... save that it was a little spot on the map near Asia” (Seat, 2008). Just one week after their arrival at Nagasaki Port, Gheer and Russell established Kwassui Jo Gakko (*Kwassui Girls’ School*) on December 1, 1879, in the foreign settlement of Higashi Yamate, Nagasaki. The school quickly became a pioneering institution in Christian-based education for girls and women in Japan.

In addition to her educational work, Russell founded the Kwassui Girls’ Home in response to the needs of orphaned children, and also established a seamen's home, part of a broader moral reform movement aimed at guiding sailors arriving in Nagasaki away from the temptations of “worldly pleasures” during their time ashore (Seat, 2008). Over her forty years in Japan, Russell made substantial contributions to women's education, social welfare, and missionary activity. In recognition of her service, she was honoured by the Japanese emperor's blue-ribbon medal in 1919.

In 1884, Christians in Fukuoka City requested the establishment of a similar educational institution. Gheer responded by founding Ei Wa Jo Gakko (later renamed Fukuoka Jo Gakko) in 1885. Decades later, under the leadership of Elizabeth Lee, then principal of Fukuoka Jo Gakko, the school introduced a Maypole Dance with a May Queen in 1916 as part of its anniversary celebrations, held annually on May 18.

In 1921, Elizabeth Lee introduced another transformative innovation: the sailor-style school uniform (*sērā fuku*), now widely used in Japanese schools. The adoption of this uniform reflected a fusion of Western naval attire and emerging ideals of modernity, practicality, hygiene, and mobility in girls' education. Lee's legacy remains visible in the ongoing cultural and educational practices shaped by her vision.

Christian missions - primarily from the United States and Britain- established some of the earliest formal institutions for girls' education in Japan. These schools, often founded and led by Western women, combined academic instruction with moral and spiritual education rooted in Christian values. This broader conception of education challenged traditional norms that had confined girls' learning to household skills or basic literacy.

However, not all Western missionary women focused on education or were explicitly evangelical. One notable example is Hannah Riddell (1855–1932), an Englishwoman selected by the Church Missionary Society (CMS). She arrived in Japan in 1891 and settled in Kumamoto, on the island of Kyushu. While visiting Honmyōji Temple, she encountered leprosy patients begging for help—an experience that moved her profoundly and led her to dedicate her life to their care. In 1895, Riddell opened the Kaishun Hospital (Kumamoto Hospital of the Resurrection of Hope) to treat people suffering from leprosy. Later, in 1918, she established Japan's first scientific research laboratory dedicated to the study of leprosy (Boyd, 1996). Riddell is known as the "Mother of Lepers" in Kumamoto.

Western women educators introduced progressive teaching methods such as interactive learning, the use of textbooks, and moral education that emphasized individual conscience and self-discipline. Many of them also worked on teacher training, equipping Japanese women to become educators themselves—thus multiplying their influence across generations.

Moreover, Western women offered alternative role models to the confined gender norms of the period. Their very presence—as professional women leading institutions and publishing educational materials—posed subtle challenges to the domestic ideal of the *ryōsai kenbo*. However, many of these women also operated within the limitations of their own cultural assumptions, often seeing themselves as civilising agents within an Orientalist framework.

By 1912, Japan had made significant strides in developing a national system of girls' education, increasingly under state control. Nonetheless, the foundational work of Western women persisted in several ways. The inclusion of liberal arts, music, and ethics in girls' education reflected the values these women helped promote. These women influence enabled a generation of Japanese women to access new social roles—as teachers, writers, and public figures and social mobility in general.

Conclusion

Western women were key contributors to the emergence and development of girls' education during the Meiji Era, operating at the intersection of education, gender reform, and cultural exchange. Their work unfolded within a complex historical context marked by both progressive

ideals and colonial hierarchies. While their motivations were often shaped by missionary zeal or reformist convictions, their actions left an enduring legacy in Japan's educational landscape.

Figures such as Elizabeth Russell and Jean Margaret Gheer founders of *Kwassui Jo Gakko* in Nagasaki and *Fukuoka Jo Gakko* in Fukuoka, played pioneering roles in establishing formal schooling for girls that combined academic learning with Christian moral instruction. Elizabeth Lee, principal of *Fukuoka Jo Gakko*, not only introduced the Maypole Dance and the now-iconic *sērā fuku* (sailor-style school uniform) but also fostered a vision of modern femininity rooted in both Japanese and Western ideals. Martha J. Cartmell and Dora E. Schoonmaker contributed significantly to early girls' schools such as *Toyo Eiwa Jogakuin* and *Joshi Shogakko* in Tokyo; while Eliza Talcott and Julia Elizabeth Dudley were instrumental in founding a Girls' School in Kobe. Others, like Julia D. Carrothers, Clara Hepburn, Mary Eddy Kidder, and Annie L. Howe, extended this legacy across multiple cities, laying the groundwork for Japan's modern female education system.

Beyond education, some women, such as Hannah Riddell, engaged in social welfare work that addressed the neglected and marginalized. Riddell's lifelong commitment to caring for leprosy patients in Kumamoto and her founding of the *Kaishun Hospital* and Japan's first leprosy research laboratory illustrate the breadth of missionary women's impact beyond the classroom.

The Meiji Era was a turning point in Japan's history—a time of rapid modernization, centralization, and negotiation with Western knowledge systems. Education was both a tool and a battleground for this transformation. Western women educators and reformers played a crucial, though complicated, role in this process. Their work introduced new pedagogical models, expanded opportunities for female education, and helped redefine womanhood in a changing Japan. Their roles were also shaped and sometimes limited by colonial assumptions and gendered hierarchies. Many saw themselves as bearers of progress and enlightenment, but their efforts were often entangled with paternalism and Orientalist perceptions. Despite these contradictions, their contributions—particularly in founding institutions, training teachers, and designing curricula—had profound and lasting effects.

Ultimately, the legacy of these women reflects the interplay of cultural imperialism, gendered agency, and cross-cultural dialogue. Studying their influence not only brings to light their often-overlooked contributions but also enriches our understanding of how Japan selectively absorbed and adapted foreign ideas in its journey towards modernity. Their stories remain essential to any comprehensive history of education in Japan.

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