

[Homei on Takeuchi-Demirci, 'Contraceptive Diplomacy: Reproductive Politics and Imperial Ambitions in the United States and Japan'](#)

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The following book review from H-Diplo may be of interest to some H-Women list members.

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Aiko Takeuchi-Demirci. *Contraceptive Diplomacy: Reproductive Politics and Imperial Ambitions in the United States and Japan.* Asian America Series. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018. 336 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-5036-0440-7; \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-5036-0225-0.

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It has been long since historians have detailed how a matter as personal as birth control paradoxically became a subject of international—and even transnational—diplomacy during the twentieth century. Many of their works have depicted how negotiations for and against the promotion of birth control in international politics were spurred by a number of intricately interwoven factors, such as the internationalization of birth control advocacy, growth in the transnational activism in eugenics, increase in global communication in reproductive medicine and population sciences, and the establishment of modernization theory and demographic transition theory as guiding principles of transnational family planning initiatives presented as overseas development aids. Some have highlighted the role of such political events as the Cold War in shaping reproductive politics on the transnational level, while others have pointed out how imperial ambitions among the great powers, coupled with racist and sexist assumptions about non-white women's fecundity, justified the transnational circulation of the idea and practice of birth control.[1] By now, scholars know clearly from these works that changes in international politics over the century, along with the shifting meanings of reproduction for international feminism, socioeconomic development, and sovereignty, made people's reproductive lives extremely susceptible to public scrutiny on the international level.

Contraceptive Diplomacy by Aiko Takeuchi-Demirci directly follows up on these works. However, instead of adopting a bird's-eye view to examine a world history of reproductive politics or focusing on one country that many of us have done in the past, Takeuchi-Demirci tightly locks her perspective

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on the US-Japan exchanges over contraceptive knowledge and technology. In so doing, the author follows the interactions between the prominent American birth control activist Margaret Sanger and her Japanese confidant Shizue Ishimoto (Shizue Katō after she remarried in 1945), which took place between 1920 when they first met and 1966 when Sanger died. Moreover, since both Sanger and Ishimoto were calling for women's emancipation and since their cause could have had a direct impact on women's lives, the transpacific history that Takeuchi-Demirci describes goes beyond an official history of US-Japan relations in which female agency is often overlooked. As the author explicitly states, *Contraceptive Diplomacy* "situates the history of reproductive politics at the intersection of transnational feminist activism and US-Japan relations" (p. 5).

With this perspective, Takeuchi-Demirci shows how such diverse groups as birth control activists, feminists, elite bureaucrats, economic and political leaders, obstetrician-gynecologists, health practitioners, population experts, the media, and governmental and nongovernmental organizations both in the United States and in Japan participated in, or reacted to, the transnational negotiations over birth control that centered on Sanger and Ishimoto. Chapter 1 depicts social and political contexts in Japan and the United States from the late nineteenth century that led to the encounter between Sanger and Ishimoto in New York in January 1920 and Sanger's first visit to Japan in April 1922. The chapter also describes how Sanger's 1922 visit triggered the US-Japan birth control exchanges as well as birth control activism in Japan. Chapter 1 ends by arguing that the grassroots birth control movement in Japan, originally inspired by the transnational exchange revolved around Sanger, had declined by the 1930s as feminists, socialists, and other activists were compelled to prioritize other political goals than women's liberation that Sanger called for.

Chapter 2 examines Sanger's and Ishimoto's birth control activism in the interwar period by situating them in the international women's activism movement. The chapter highlights limitations of their activism. International elite women's networks, represented by such women's organizations as the Pan-Pacific Women's Association and Women's Christian Temperance Union, largely ignored Sanger's and Ishimoto's calls for the popularization of birth control for women's liberation. In addition, Sanger's orientalist assumption glossed over her birth control work vis-à-vis Japan, while preventing Ishimoto from effectively communicating her cause to her American audience on the US tour. Finally, birth control "failed to serve as ... a pacifist topic for international understanding" as Japan was actualizing its imperialist ambitions from the early 1930s onward in the form of territorial expansion and warfare (p. 81).

In chapter 3, the book's focus shifts onto male American eugenicists and a burgeoning group of population experts who, amid imperial struggles in the Pacific, brought reproductive control in Japan to global attention. In the 1920s, many American intellectuals thought differential fertility between races—especially the declining fertility of the white race and the expansion of non-white races—would destabilize global security, and this argument legitimated birth control for non-white races. As Japan portrayed itself as a champion of non-white races after its victory in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5), American intellectuals pondered over the possibility of birth control as a way to curtail Japan's imperial ambitions. The chapter also describes how population studies emerged in the 1930s in this context. It points out that, while population experts stressed their field's objectivity, they also naturalized the notion of white supremacy that was also the basis of eugenicists' argument. The chapter details the "pioneering role" that the Rockefeller Foundation played in "extending the eugenics studies of race to Asia" (p. 99). Finally, the chapter depicts how Sanger's activism

capitalized on the changing intellectual and political climate that legitimized birth control, but evaluates that Sanger “unknowingly yielded to the authority of male professionals at the expense of women’s individual sexual freedom” (p. 114).

Chapter 4 is about American involvement in population control in Japan under the US-led Allied Occupation (1945-52), which ironically led to US officials’ repeated denial of Sanger’s requests for a visa to enter Japan. The chapter describes how the Cold War discourse on overpopulation in Asia, a serious threat to the Western defense against Communism, spurred the American personnel and advisors in the occupation government, known as SCAP (Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers), to stress the need to popularize birth control in Japan. However, in the early postwar period, birth control was still a controversial topic because of its association with eugenics, imperialism, and feminism. Thus, SCAP adopted the policy they called “benevolent neutrality” (p. 119)—officially taking a hands-off approach to birth control work while actively supporting it behind the scenes. The chapter details how SCAP actualized the policy. While blocking Sanger from coming to Japan, it dispatched Yoshio Koya, prominent medical researcher and director of the Institute of Public Health in Tokyo, to the US South to “import” into Japan the US-devised population control programs originally targeted to the region’s black populations (p. 132). In parallel, the chapter shows how SCAP collaborated with the Rockefeller Foundation, which supported academic infrastructure for population studies in Japan and guided SCAP to “take active steps” in Japanese reproductive policies (p. 126). The chapter also skillfully describes how Japanese collaborators, such as Koya, were not just pawns of the US occupiers, but were themselves motivated by their own agenda. Finally, the chapter suggests that the experience some influential American demographers (for example, Frank W. Notestein, Irene Taeuber, and Pascal K. Whelpton) had in Japan, coupled with the rapid decline in Japanese birth rates from the late 1940s on, paved the way for the transnational movement for population control in Asia in later years.

Chapter 5 details reproductive politics in early postwar Japan, with a focus on efforts to manage population quantity and population quality. By introducing voices of various groups—politicians, doctors, population experts, midwives, birth control activists, and middle-class women—the chapter ably demonstrates how rapid fertility reduction in Japan in the early postwar period was informed by diverse motivations. On the one hand, elites and technocrats “used ... top-down approaches to spread birth control to rural women across Japan” while on the other, activists “made efforts to return the power of control over reproduction to women themselves” (p. 179). Yet the chapter also indicates that these varying motivations were commonly buttressed by eugenically inspired rhetoric and the rhetoric of modernity, which exhorted the Japanese to reproduce “national bodies”—bodies that served postwar national reconstruction and prosperity.

Finally, chapter 6 examines how elite American and Japanese birth control advocates participated in the transnational population control movement based on their experience in Japan. The chapter details US-Japan collaboration in the formation of the Family Planning Federation of Japan in 1954, the Pill Project (a trial in Japan requested by Sanger of the oral contraceptive pill that had newly been developed by Gregory Goodwin Pincus), and the Fifth International Conference on Planned Parenthood that took place in Tokyo in 1955. The chapter vividly illustrates how local-level negotiations between Americans—most prominently Sanger—and the Japanese were strongly embedded in the global population control movement, which insisted on the techno-scientific approach to socioeconomic problems. The chapter concludes by arguing that Sanger’s feminist cause

to popularize birth control finally gained legitimacy in the 1960s, but it was brought ironically by international politics that “further transformed birth control into a tool for patriarchal control and world domination” (p. 210). However, the author also stresses that this chapter in birth control history also paved the way for the women’s reproductive rights movement in later years.

Based on thorough research on English- and Japanese-language sources, the book gives a rich account on the transpacific US-Japan alliance for birth control promotion. It gives equal weight to Sanger and Ishimoto/Katō (though in later chapters Ishimoto/Katō becomes less prominent than Sanger) as well as other American and Japanese actors and institutions, and this method permits the author to successfully illustrate a complex history that connects birth control advocacy to eugenics, feminism, population science and policy, and the transnational population control movement. A description of female subjectivity beyond that of the elite women, such as Ishimoto/Katō and Sanger, could be more substantial, especially given the monograph’s feminist stance. However, I acknowledge that it is an onerous task to excavate the voices of everyday women when the historical sources themselves are informed by sexism and patriarchal ideology. *Contraceptive Diplomacy* will be a welcome addition to the rapidly growing historical scholarship that locates birth control advocacy in international and transnational politics.

Note

[1]. The works on this topic abound. See, for example, Chikako Takeshita, *The Global Biopolitics of the IUD: How Science Constructs Contraceptive Users and Women’s Bodies* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011); Matthew James Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008); Matthew Connelly, “Population Control in India: Prologue to the Emergency Period,” *Population and Development Review* 32, no. 4 (December 1, 2006): 629–667, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2006.00145.x>; Johanna Schoen, *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); John Sharpless, “World Population Growth, Family Planning, and American Foreign Policy,” *Journal of Policy History* 7, no. 1 (January 1995): 72–102, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898030600004152>; and Betsy Hartmann, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control*, rev. ed. (Boston: South End Press, 1995).

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