

30 Years of Sisterhood

—Women in the 1970's Women's Liberation Movement in Japan



Documentary/Japan/57min/2004
Directed by YAMAGAMI Chieko/ SEYAMA Noriko

Music by MASA/Ahn Hye Kyoung
Produced by Herstory Project

U.S. Tour 2006 Program

Feb 10-28, 2006

Feb 10 (Fri)	University of Chicago
Feb 11 (Sat)	University of Iowa
Feb 12 (Sun)	Grinnell College
Feb 15 (Wed)	Yale University
Feb 16 (Thu)	The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center (NYC)
Feb 17 (Fri)	Boston College
Feb 19 (Sun)	Bluestockings Books (NYC)
Feb 21 (Tue)	University of Michigan
Feb 23 (Thu)	University of Minnesota
Feb 27 (Mon)	University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign
Feb 28 (Tue)	Washington University in St. Louis

Participants

YAMAGAMI, Chieko (filmmaker)

SEYAMA, Noriko (filmmaker)

AKIYAMA, Yoko (professor of Chinese Literature and Women's Studies, Surugadai University, Japan)

DOI, Yumi (writer in San Francisco, CA)

MIKI, Soko (professor of English/Women's Studies, Kyoto Seika University, Japan)

WOOLALA, Satoko (filmmaker)

Coordinators

MASA (jazz saxophonist)

MATSUGU, Miho (assistant professor of Japanese Studies, Grinnell College)

YAMAGUCHI, Tomomi (post-doctoral scholar, Center for East Asian Studies, University of Chicago)

Thank you for coming to the screening and discussion of *30 Years of Sisterhood*! I hope we will all get opportunities to look back on ourselves, talk about the situations of women of the past, present and future in Japan and the US, and experience global “sisterhood.”

Planning this tour was a challenging task, and the participants spent a great deal of time meeting and/or exchanging an enormous number of emails. For me, it required traveling back and forth between the US and Japan several times recently. Throughout this planning process, I was able to connect with many people; I got to know the “lib” women in much deeper ways, and met many new people all over the United States, primarily through emails, who are interested in feminism in Japan. I am excited to finally meet all the people who were involved in the planning of this tour! “*Deai*” - or “making connections” - has been a key word in the women’s liberation movement, and I have been able to experience this very process of “*deai*” by coordinating this tour.

I am very grateful that the US tour has been able to travel to eleven locations, with precious help from the participating directors and feminists from Japan and San Francisco, my fellow coordinators and friends, and students, faculty and staff members of various universities and organizations where the screenings are to be held. This tour was made possible through the devoted work of many, many people in Japan and the United States.

Now, please enjoy the film, the discussion with the directors and panelists, and the endless exchange of thoughts and feelings that this film can bring to all of us, and gain power from that experience!

YAMAGUCHI Tomomi (coordinator of the US tour)

Synopsis of *30 Years of Sisterhood*

This film is a documentary based on the stories of 12 women who lived the Women's Liberation movement in Japan in the 1970s. Its creation was motivated by a desire to tell what the "women's liberation movement" was, to show the trails they blazed and where they went.

In the 1970s, women were considered to be second-class citizens in society in general, within social movements (including the radical student movement), and in the family. However, there was no social consensus that women were being discriminated against *for being* women, and women who complained were subjected to ridicule.

The fact that women were considered to be lesser beings in society meant that women's rights were not regarded as necessary. At the same time, it also meant that women were used as the objects of men's sexual desires, and women could not claim their own sexuality as truly theirs. This was the context in which the Women's Liberation Movement voiced the slogan "Sexual Liberation." Moreover, aside from sexual liberation, they also problematized the sexual division of labor within the household, which had previously been considered to be a private realm, and closely intertwined it with the sexual division of labor within society. This division placed women in "feminine roles" and prohibited them from living freely outside the narrow confines of the existing norms and roles for women. Women realized that women's liberation would not happen through a "socialist revolution" or through patiently waiting for "women's advancement in society," and decided that the direct liberation *of* women *by* women was necessary.

During this period, people with similar thoughts and feelings started to raise their voices in many different areas of Japan, and a "Lib Camp" was held. The women in attendance at the camp raised their own voices in order to create a movement by talking about their own problems in their own words. Some women also obtained information about the women's liberation movement in the United States. In translating such information, Japanese women realized that these issues were not just their own problems, but were problems shared by women all over the world.

However, this radical movement was attacked and repressed by society. But this social reaction actually gave fuel to the movement. Societal opposition created an extremely harsh environment in which women had to continue fighting 24 hours a day in order to carve out their own place in society. In Tokyo, the reactions in the mass media forced the activists and the lib organization into an extremely difficult situation. However, at the same time, the women involved lived by their own feelings and sought their own ideas about society that could not be fully expressed in words, and their lives were not always serious but were also sometimes filled with humor.

On the surface, the Women's Liberation Movement is said to have lasted no more than several years. One of the reasons could be that the Movement did not have enough time to find new ways to create and operate their organization. However, the Movement did not truly die out after their few most flourishing years. Women's Liberation, spread throughout Japan by the Lib Camp and the network created there, still endures today, in local areas and within individuals. Women's Liberation influenced individuals' lives, and those who encountered Women's Liberation realized the importance of living their own lives honestly with their own feelings and thoughts, rather than being bound by traditional values and norms. In their later lives, they still continued searching for how to live their own lives without compromise.

This film is based on interviews with women who continue to live as liberated women. This film was made in order to recount the diverse courses of women's lives in the women's liberation movement.

From the last scene of the movie



Miki Soko: The result of our friendship is this! Look, I am still putting Post-it notes in my editing book!



Saeki Yoko: It took 10 years to finish them.

Miki: No, 15 years!



Doi Yumi: The left wing laughed at us. The mass media called us a bunch of ugly women. My parents worried about me till they were sick. Despite all these odds, I believed that woman's bright future would be there and worked hard in the movement. I definitely identify myself as a Woman's Libber. I value it very much.



Akiyama Yoko: I used to live only with my brain. I was living, feeling as if I would have been much better off without my own body. In that aspect, we truly dealt with our bodies, and I understood that I was not just composed of my brain, and with my own body, I became myself. In that sense, that time was so important to me.



Tanaka Mitsu: I was thinking to say no to the idea of an appropriate age for marriage, and to start our actions. But the same me, who was the person in charge, also liked to be seen as as youthful as possible. I thought to myself, "Who are you? What are you thinking?"



Kitamura Mitsuko: Now I have been working as a caregiver for elderly people at a nursing home for 12 or 13 years. There, while I was doing physical labor, there were things I came to be able to see. I compared women, and realized something. There are women with many kinds of occupations. But whatever jobs they may have, women are women, and we all share something with other women.

Watanabe Fumie: I was encouraged a great deal by the views of lib that women should have self-confidence and that it's ok to live our lives by doing things you want to do because they are important.



Kuno Ayako: The Lib Camp was introduced in the *Sunday Mainichi Magazine* or something. Then I was told that I was fired. They said I went to such a suspicious group. There was a photo showing that we hung our underpants to dry in the camp. (Laugh)



Wakabayashi Naeko: I had a natural food store from 1982 to 1996. It was an independent, self-employed business of my own. Then I engaged in lesbian activism, such as Regumi, and Asia Lesbian Network.



Mori Setsuko, Fujimoto Yoshiko,
Asakawa Mariko: Let's do it again!



Co-operation:

The participants of 5th Lib Hot Springs Retreat

The archive of Libu-Shinjuku Center, Yonezu Tomoko, Asakawa Mariko,
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Ano Yoko

▼Review by Livia Monnet (Professor of Comparative Literature, Film and Media Studies, University of Montreal)

30 Years of Sisterhood—Women in the 1970s Women's Liberation Movement in Japan (*Sanjunen no Sisterhood: Senkyuhyaku nanaju nendai woman ribu no onna tachi*, 2004) is a powerful documentary focusing on little known aspects of the history, unfolding, and multiple legacies of Japan's Women's Liberation Movement, or Woman's Lib (*Uman ribu/Ribu*).

Adopting a different approach from Nanako Kurihara's *Ripples of Change* (1993) the only film engaging with the Japanese Women's Liberation Movement that has so far been shown, and received coverage internationally? *Thirty Years of Sisterhood* records the testimonies and reminiscences of 12 participants at an annual gathering for former Woman's Lib activists at a hot spring resort in Shizuoka prefecture.

The Libbers' conversations are interspersed with rare archival footage of actions launched by the Movement -- mass demonstrations, consciousness-raising musicals and plays, the publication and distribution of fliers, manifestoes, and magazines -- to bring about significant changes in Japanese women's self-perception, thinking, and behavior, as well as in 1960s-1970s Japan's patriarchal, conservative society as a whole.

What emerges from the film's vivid montage of objective retrospective assessment, subjective memories, and highlighting of radical political actions is a fascinating, layered portrayal of a group of committed feminists and women activists who, three decades after the momentum of Woman's Lib subsided, have lost neither their utopian belief in the power of women's community, creativity, and imagination, nor their will to continue the fight initiated in the 1970s.

Another notable achievement of the film is its highlighting of the cultural specificity of Japan's Women's Liberation Movement; as well as its depiction of the latter as a heterogeneous network of groups, organizations, and individuals motivated by common goals, but whose political orientation, ideological commitments, statements, and actions could be conflicting, puzzling, or paradoxical.

The viewer is offered an inspiring, intimate perspective on Women's Liberation Movement's major role in changing women's status, as well as in paving the way for women's prominent contributions to the culture, arts, and society of contemporary Japan.

The Characteristics of the Women's Liberation Movement in Japan

1) We demanded "Sexual Liberation".

This meant liberating women from the various forms of oppression of our sex: no sex education; pregnancy and childbirth not accepted outside of marriage; access to abortion greatly limited by law, women's sex for sale (via prostitution and pornography), forced femininity, rape, sexual harassment, etc. We wanted to liberate ourselves—our bodies and lives—from the control of men.

2) We tried to be just us, as natural as we could be.

We women have been labeled and defined as daughters, mothers, wives, daughters- or mothers-in-law, married or unmarried, virgins, prostitutes, bitches, etc. and we were forced to live the life they named for us. Those labels limited our lives and divided women and turned us against each other. By just being a woman, natural and untitled, we tried to regain our freedom to live. By being just ourselves, we wanted to meet other women as they were.

3) The movement had underlying socialist ideas and ideals.

The Japanese Women's Liberation Movement criticized the ways of left wing movements, but not socialist ideas per se. We criticized and questioned the policies and authority of the Student Movement, the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China, but we still supported socialist ideals. In other words, we were against capitalism with its money, power, and violence.

4) We were anti-authority, anti-power, and anti-establishment. We believed in anarchism.

Being the lowest in the power structure, it was natural for women to be anti-power and anti-establishment. We were class-conscious and we called ourselves "Woman-class". We did not follow authoritarianism (which continues today), which was (is) oppressive. That means we did not want to oppress other people in such a way.

5) We objected to capitalistic efficiency and productivity as a primary principle,

because it turns away from the workplace "the weak", such as women who need leave for pregnancy and childbirth, old people, and the handicapped, because they are not seen as efficient enough.

We sought for an alternative way of working instead of profit-centered working.

6) We tried our best to create "Women's Culture".

In order to create "Women's Culture," we made women's coffee shops, women's bookstores, concerts and festivals, etc. We knew it was necessary to make our own culture that would liberate us from the male-dominated one.

7) We were against the marriage system.

That was because the legal system of marriage itself was (and is) an oppressive system against women. One could see the reality of marriage in and of itself as oppressive. One clear example of that was the fact that 97% of women change their family name to their husband's. At that time it was difficult for a woman to be single and independent but we chose a difficult way of living: freedom.

8) We wanted Revolution, not Reform.

Although from the late 70's to the early 80's there were women who tried hard to change society within the framework of the existing system, like being a member of the Diet or trying to pass an equal job opportunity law. We had little hope of changing society since Japan was/is a country that despises women deeply. We wanted a revolution to live the life we believed in.

9) The Women's Liberation Movement was an alliance of small groups.

This alliance was formed in order to eliminate power and authority from our Movement. A smaller group structure enabled women to talk directly to each other in a democratic way.

(Written by Miki Soko)

Messages from the Directors

YAMAGAMI Chieko

Although I have made only a small number of films, I think I have always been making documentaries for myself. For me, making documentary films can be a means of asking what I am looking for.

I have always gained strength from the women in the women's liberation movement. However, the libbers are considered in our society to be scary women. Of course, that is only the image of them created by the mass media. I did not want women's herstory to be recorded with such a mistaken image. I wanted to record the women's liberation movement as I know it, as they really are. That was the starting point of the film *30 Years of Sisterhood*, a film about 12 libbers. As the terminology changed from "women's liberation" to "feminism" and feminism spread widely, current society may have come to look on the surface as if it is free and equal. However, in the present day, oppression and discrimination against women, as well as against the weak, is becoming more convoluted. Under such circumstances, I sometime can't figure out exactly what I really want and what I am looking for. By looking back on the herstories of 12 women's libbers, I wanted to reconsider the roots of living in a way that was true to myself. In this confusing era, I wanted to gain the strength to survive as myself in my own unique way.

By seeing this film, I would like you to gain strength from these 12 women who have tried for the past 30 years to live in a way true to themselves and their own senses. I am pleased if this movie becomes a catalyst for discussing together what we, as women, really want.

1982 Began to make videos from women's point of view. "We are lively women! -Abortion rights" "Abortion -To live myself" **1990** Established non-profit video group WORK-INN, making women's issues video series supported by the Yokohama Women's Center. Worked for television broadcasting as a director. **2001** First independent documentary "Dear Tari," was given People's Choice Award at 3rd Women's Film Festival in Seoul. **2004** Produced & directed "*30 years of Sisterhood*" with Seyama Noriko.

SEYAMA Noriko

Wanting to leave a record of Women's Liberation for the future

Over the last 30 years, the women's movement of Japan has gone through a transition in its terminology and the standard bearers who carried on the role of describing it, as it changed in name from "Women's Liberation" to "Feminism" to "Gender Studies." It has been pointed out repeatedly: the terminology has become highly abstract. As a result, thoughts and discussions have become somewhat monopolized by academics, thus excluding the constituent women. I have been thinking, "Is this what the movement is meant to be?" I would like to consider this problem and to explore possible effective solutions. I want to be able to avoid complications with the use of terminology by recording the women's movement through images. This was the starting point of my exploration.

Through images, I wanted to convey that there was a group of women who actively seized the challenges and ran with them, in the same way we think about our problems today. I wanted to do this in an open way where I could expect viewers to see the common ideas that they share.

Compared with the 70's, women have achieved advancements in society. But also today women (and the women's movement) are being challenged and criticized, it's a so-called backlash. Given this circumstance, the history of the women's movement might end up being buried, if we don't record the past ourselves. While there is still time, it is important for us to think what we want to tell, to whom, and in what voice, and how we can best accomplish that.

I want to continue to record herstories by various methods and to connect the reality of the living women of the past to the lived reality of now.

Born in 1974. Member of Women's Visual Creation Group, *Video-Juku*. Work: *"I would like to live like this: A documentary on the daily life of a physically challenged woman,"* 21 min. 2000. (Award for Video Activity at The 23rd Tokyo Video Festival)

Messages from the participants

AKIYAMA Yoko

I started to study Chinese Literature in the 1960s and the Lib Movement let me to Chinese women. I would like to discuss with you the similarities and differences in women's situations among the USA, Japan and China, and what has and has not changed in these 30 years.

DOI Yumi

One of my greatest pains of being a woman was seeing and experiencing unnecessary and unconscious competitiveness and divisiveness among women based on patriarchal values. Women feud among themselves in order to get attention from men, and it has been treated as if it is in our nature, although it is simply a part of patriarchal conditioning. I innocently believed that the Women's Liberation Movement could change the way women relate to each other as well as how we relate to men. In fact, the movement addressed a wide variety of social and personal issues. The women in the movement had high hopes, excitement and ideas in the 70s. I felt an enormous amount of energy flowing through me

from the movement, which was also an expression of the dynamic power of that time, and the huge potential for change. Then as the 80s set in I got burnt out considerably and came to the US in 1981. I have lived here since then.

Now women in Japan have more choices in their lives, expanded social rights, financial freedom and increased awareness about sexism. This situation is probably even more pronounced in the US. However, despite all of these external social gains, or possibly in exchange for these gains, I feel that women have lost their real internal power on a personal level, and are even more isolated from each other than we were before. Unfortunately, many women are depressed. I wonder why? I think women as a whole are facing different kinds of challenges in the new millennium. I hope that our gathering will bring some light into the dark stagnant age of women's liberation and to the future of humanity.

MIKI Soko

Thank you for inviting us all. I am very glad to have a chance to talk with you about our experiences. I hope these gatherings will help us to understand each other more and to make our sisterhood and solidarity stronger. I am now doing research on "Women's Music in the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970's".

I am very happy to be visiting Chicago and New Haven because they are the homes of Chicago/New Haven Women's Liberation Rock Band. I also know that the University at Illinois, Urbana-Champaign is the place where the National Women's Music Festival was first held. If anyone, anyplace knows about the bands, music festivals, women's music or women of the 1970s, I would like to meet her and ask about these things. (Please feel free to email me with any information: miki@kyoto-seika.ac.jp)
I am looking forward to seeing you!

WOOLALA Satoko

What? A message? Or massage...

I am so bad at writing. I have thought about how to write this message for three days and nights in a row, but could not organize my thoughts.

My brain got totally frozen and malfunctioned, so I decided to give it up. So, my message will be communicated to you by telepathy....

Messages from coordinators and those who helped

MASA

The things that I have learned from the women's liberation movement.

The people in the women's liberation movement didn't act based on thoughts long contemplated. They acted immediately against the pressures of a society in which men dominated women. Then they formulated philosophies and knowledge learned from their own actions. This was a very practical approach. They found that the true reality was not inside their heads but was gained through their

actions. They felt it bodily. Each woman has different thoughts because she has different experiences from others. But these differences gave power to the movement because they were all based on deeply held feelings that became the foundations of women's liberation.

They preferred variety to a homogeneous front. Their feelings that these differences were good and gave them value, became a source of power. The style of the movement has always been nonviolent direct action. They admitted and respected each other's differences. They could believe in the power of differences. And they were making a movement that denied the power of men's society and authority. Actually they were more essentially anarchist than avowed anarchists. They set fire to the movement as it spread from woman to woman and to me also.

The reason why I would like to have a screening of *30 Years of Sisterhood*.

I am a Japanese female saxophonist. I started playing the saxophone about 33 years ago in junior high school. When I graduating from junior high school, I thought that I wanted to keep playing the saxophone for a long time. However, I had never seen a professional woman saxophonist. Then, I was very influenced by the Women lib movement when I was 20 years old. The influence made me start to think about being a jazz saxophonist. I got a lot of support from many women's lib activists when I had a fund raising concert to pay for a trip to New York to study jazz about 18 years ago. I used to feel a lot of warm sisterhood with a high sense of humanity from these women and I will never forget that.

Now is the time for me to give back to them. The motto of women's lib is "From Women to Women." As for this documentary film, the director interviewed several women who greatly influenced me. In this film, the director also used music performed by me. I began to think that I wanted various people to see this work after I saw it for the first time at the Women's Film Festival which I also worked at as staff in Osaka two years ago. When I think about that, I was very fortunate to get the news from my friend Tomomi that she was producing the US tour of the movie and panel discussion, and the transportation budget was almost all distributed. So I started to create a project in New York. I call this plan "The Sisterhood Project 'From Women to Women' 2006 in New York"

MATSUGU Miho

When Tomomi first told me about her plans last summer, I couldn't have imagined how much this event would grow in scale and the multiple perspectives that it would take on. I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to all members of the organizations and communities involved for making this challenging project possible. I am sure that this tour will provide an important chance to reexamine the history of feminist political activism in 1970s Japan and its validity in our contemporary world.

Bethany GRENALD

I have been delighted to participate in this project with Tomomi and all of these inspiring, intrepid women who have forged new paths for women, and stand as wonderful examples for us all. I am so glad their stories will be preserved on film and in their own words.

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Tour Blog: <http://sisterhoodjapan.blogspot.com/> (in English)
<http://sisterhood.exblog.jp/> (in Japanese)

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