

Abstract

In my 2022 article “40 Years of Ecofeminism in Japan: From the First to the Fourth Wave,” I reviewed the 40-year history of ecofeminism in Japan and divided it into the following four waves:

[First Wave] (1983-1986): Illich, Feminist Anthropology, and the Ueno-Aoki Debate

[Second Wave] (1987-1994): From the “Lost Decade” to the European Women’s Study Tour for Women’s Environmental Issues

[Third Wave] (1995-2011.3.10): Practical Research and Study, Participation of Male Researchers, and Ecofeminist Literary Criticism & Religious Studies

[Fourth Wave] (2011.3.11-present): Ueno’s Reflections, Reconsideration/Revival of Ecofeminism, and Disaster and Women’s Studies

Subsequently, I was given the opportunity to conduct a research project as a visiting researcher, entitled “A Genealogy of Japanese Ecofeminists,” funded by the Kitakyushu Forum on Asian Women (KFAW) during FY2022-2023. It was an opportunity to rethink the four waves, as well as to define the zeroth wave (-1982) preceding the first wave. This report focuses on the first wave, which was extensively reconsidered as part of the research.

The first wave of ecofeminism in Japan is represented by the Aoki-Ueno debate, in which the late ecofeminist Aoki Yayoi and Ueno Chizuko, who at the time held an anti-ecofeminist stance, clashed intensively in academic journals and a symposium, especially in 1985, an academic debate which resulted in Ueno’s victory. Even in the 2020s, ecofeminism continues to be misunderstood and represented to others in a misleading way, understood only one-sidedly or inaccurately.

Sakurai Yuko’s 1990 analysis of the debate is excellent but was written only five years after the culmination of the debate. More recently, Tooyama Hideya’s 2023 article summarizes the Aoki-Ueno debate in four points; unlike this report, however, it focuses on presenting a history and facts of the debate, rather than the points of contention. This report aims to reexamine the Aoki-Ueno debate from the current academic horizon—40 years after the debate—discursively, historically, and genealogically by distilling it into five points of contention and, by extension, reconsidering the significance of ecofeminism in the current environmental crisis of the “Anthropocene.”

The structure of this report is as follows: Chapter 1 provides an introduction. Chapter 2 defines the genealogy of ecofeminism as a guiding thread in reviewing the Aoki-Ueno debate; in particular, it aims to present a brief history of ecofeminism and its various schools. Chapter 3, “A History of the Aoki-Ueno Debate,” chronologically traces a history of the debate—before, during, and after, culminating in a symposium in May 1985 in Kyoto, Japan. Chapter 4, “The Five Points of Contention Raised by the Aoki-Ueno Debate,” before Chapter 5’s conclusion forms the core of this report, identifying the following five points presented by the debate:

- (1) Gender Maximization vs. Gender Minimization—Difference or Equality?
- (2) Maternalism vs. Anti-Maternalism: A “Historical Debate” Over “Motherhood”
- (3) Essentialism vs. Constructionism: “Feminist Flights From Nature”? Or Confusion Between “Nature” and “Naturalness”
- (4) Structuralism vs. Post-Structuralism: Losing Sight of the Structuralist Insight
- (5) Anti-Modernism vs. Modernism—An Invented Opposition?

Regarding Point 1, Aoki was regarded as a maximizer of gender differences, while Ueno was regarded as a minimizer. Point 1 explores the fact that Aoki was positioned as recognizing gender differences between men and women, while Ueno as advocating for equality. Point 2 looks at how Aoki was positioned as a maternalist and Ueno as an anti-maternalist. Aoki’s partner, Kitazawa Masakuni, considers the Aoki-Ueno debate as a historical debate over “motherhood” comparable to, or even surpassing, the “motherhood protection debate” between Hiratsuka Raicho and Yosano Akiko during the Taisho era (1912-1926). In Point 3 I address how Aoki was regarded as an essentialist and Ueno as a constructionist. In academia, essentialism (also known as “naturism”) has long been considered inferior or denied, and constructionism has continued to prevail. From another angle, however, Ueno’s constructionism can be seen as “feminist flights from nature.” It is also possible that the two meanings of “nature”—“nature” versus “naturalness”—were confused in the debate.

Point 4 positions Aoki as a structuralist and Ueno as a post-structuralist. Although post-structuralism continues to prevail in academia, as Charis Thompson notes, post-structuralist feminism lost sight of the structuralist insight brought by ecofeminism in linking the social trends of environmental destruction and women’s

oppression. Point 5 positions Aoki as an anti-modernist and Ueno as a modernist. That being said, as Ehara Yumiko posits, the “anti-modernism vs. modernism” dichotomy may *per se* have been an “invented opposition” constructed by modern society. As described above, the Aoki-Ueno debate in fact produced many more twists and turns than have been previously discussed or considered.

It is unfortunate that the Aoki-Ueno debate has muted the potential for the development of ecofeminism in Japan. Coincidentally, the year 2024 marks nearly 40 years since the Aoki-Ueno debate, as well as the 50th anniversary of Françoise d’Eaubonne’s coining of the term *ecofeminism*. Now is the time to reconsider the Aoki-Ueno debate and the significance of ecofeminism in the age of the Anthropocene and SDGs, the latter of which includes both environmental and gender goals. Through this process, Japan will have a happy reunion with ecofeminism. I am convinced that the time has come for Japan to move past the Aoki-Ueno debate, and seek for both the environmental and gender justice simultaneously in society.