From Sacred to Secret: Tracing Changes in Views of Menstruation in Japan

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines understandings and experiences of menstruation in Japan, by tracing shifts in views of menstruation throughout Japanese history and analyzing ethnographic interviews conducted with college-aged Japanese women in 2018. Once considered a mystical phenomenon, menstruation came to be seen as a source of pollution, surrounded by various taboos and proscriptions. Then, around the turn of the twentieth century, views of menstruation shifted again; menstruation was no longer a cause of spiritual defilement. Instead, ideologies of moral and physical hygiene that dominated education and public health discourse in twentieth-century Japan positioned menstruation as an issue of hygiene that should be managed through proper bodily comportment and careful use of commercial menstrual products. While hypothetically ‘free’ of connotations of impurity and pollution, women still were not – and are not – free from stigma surrounding menstruation. Today, public discourse on menstruation is virtually nonexistent outside of menstrual product commercials, and menstruating women carry out vigilant routines of concealing their menstrual status, creating an illusion of absence. Young women’s reported experiences of compulsory swim class in grade school, as well as recent news articles discussing the topic, are used in this paper to highlight both the social and health issues currently surrounding young menstruators in Japan

KEYWORDS: menstruation, Japanese history, taboo, anthropology, Japanese women

Introduction
For many women, everyday adult life is marked by the menstrual cycle – a monthly pattern of rising and falling hormone levels, ovulation, and the build-up and release of endometrial tissue and blood. Over the course of Japanese history, however, another cycle has emerged: cultural views and treatment of menstruation. Similar to how Frühstück posits that there have been repeated cycles of “liberation” and “repression” of sexual behaviors and discourses on sexuality throughout Japanese history (Frühstück 2003: 5), I argue that there have been cycles of “openness” and “concealment” of menstruation in Japan. Views and experiences of menstruation are quite complex and multifaceted, and they can tell us much about transformations
of concepts such as gender and sexuality. This paper will trace changes in views of menstruation in Japan from early historical periods to the modern day.

Before discussing these historical shifts, I will provide an overview of existing literature on menstruation in anthropology. Over the past few decades, anthropological research on menstruation has expanded greatly, with investigations into the diverse and subjective experiences of menstruating women, as well as into how cultural beliefs about menstruation impact different spheres of society, from institutional religion to family life. Next, I will cover early beliefs and traditions relating to menstruation, which were largely influenced by religious doctrines, mainly that of Shinto and Buddhism, and their ideas of divinity, purity, and pollution. Following that, I will discuss changes in the Meiji Period and the twentieth century, which saw menstruation reframed as an issue of hygiene that should be concealed. Additionally, it was at the turn of the twentieth century that commercial menstrual management products, as alternatives to homemade products, entered the market and appeared in magazine advertisements, an influential form of media in women’s lives. These products evolved in effectiveness and comfort over the proceeding decades. Now, the menstrual product industry is huge, with several hundred million products being manufactured each and every year. However, as I will explain in a discussion of my recent ethnographic research in Japan, secrecy and taboo still linger around the phenomenon of menstruation. Public discourse on menstruation is virtually nonexistent outside of menstrual product commercials, which emphasize how their products help the user conceal any and all signs of menstruation. Interviews with female university students in Tokyo show the prevalence of this view of menstruation – something that should be hidden at all costs. The paper concludes with a discussion of the practice of (semi)compulsory swim class, where girls are often forced into the uncomfortable situation of revealing their menstrual status. This investigation of historical views of menstruation will help towards a better understanding of the treatment of menstruation in modern-day Japan.

**Why Study Menstruation: Sexed Bodies and Taboo**

Cultural beliefs and practices surrounding menstruation are not just informative about this one – important – aspect of women’s lives; they have an impact across societal institutions, affecting gender relations and even socioeconomic status (Gottlieb 2002). Many studies have been done on this topic; however, they tend to focus on non-industrial communities
and what may be considered ‘traditional’ practices. Therefore, research on the current cultural attitudes about menstruation and women’s bodies in industrial nations such as Japan is lacking. Moreover, while Japanese scholars have examined practices revolving around birth and menstruation from the viewpoint of Shinto and Buddhist beliefs, everyday women’s experiences in the past, rather than theoretical analysis of doctrines, are somewhat difficult to find.

In many societies around the world, menstrual blood is seen as one of the most powerful and dangerous bodily fluids. Numerous scholarly works mention, if not solely focus on, the polluting qualities of menstrual blood, and, by extension, the female body. For example, Dan (1986) and Hardacre (1999) both discuss the ritual pollution of menstrual blood in Shinto practices, and Yoshida (1990) discusses it in the context of Okinawan religious traditions. These researchers, and many others outside of Japan as well, draw upon the work of Mary Douglas as the foundation for their argument of menstrual blood as polluting. In *Purity and Danger*, Douglas (1984) analyzes the classificatory system for edible and non-edible animals in the Old Testament. Categories are most vulnerable at their margins, the boundary between one discrete thing and another. Ambiguous things that do not belong explicitly to one category or another exist at these margins, and their ability to permeate and flow through boundaries poses a danger to the classificatory – and the social – system. Douglas extends her analysis to the body as a bounded system, with the skin and orifices as the boundaries of the system: “We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolize its specially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, feces or tears simply by issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body” (Douglas 1984: 121). “Marginal stuff” is that which has passed through the boundaries of the body, and this transgression of bodily boundaries by ambiguous substances existing at the margins is an act of defilement and pollution. Through this act of transgression, the “marginal stuff” becomes dirt, “that which upsets or befuddles order” (Grosz 1994: 192). No object (or person) is inherently ‘dirt’ or ‘dirty’; it is only through its relation to defined boundaries and categories that an object becomes ‘dirty’, a source of impurity and pollution (Grosz 1994: 192; Warin 2009: 109-110). For Douglas, the marginal body fluids that are the most dangerous and the most defiling are those related to digestion and reproduction – including menstrual blood (Douglas 1984: 125).

However, although the contributions Douglas brought to the field have been significant and long-lasting, the analytical focus on menstruation
through the lens of pollution and impurity has recently been criticized as simplistic and lacking consideration of the agency and subjective experiences of menstruating women themselves (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Gottlieb 2002). Gottlieb argues that the menstruation-as-pollution argument is a “patriarchal ideology” and that “[w]omen’s own views…can offer alternative readings of that ideology, sometimes affording women a form of personal resistance to a degrading cultural script, or allowing them to reinterpret it entirely” (Gottlieb 2002: 383-384). More recent work highlights the empowering capabilities of menstruation ignored or missed by previous researchers. Pedersen (2002) and Hoskins (2002) discuss the powers of menstrual blood in women’s performance of magic in Bali and Sumba, Indonesia, respectively; and Morrow (2002) describes the social power grasped by women through menstruation among the Yupik of Alaska. Many works have also challenged the notion that usage of menstrual huts is a misogynistic and isolating practice (e.g. Maggi 2001). Martin (1992), Freidenfelds (2009), and Stoltzman (1986) are among those researchers who have also interviewed American women for their individual perspectives on menstruation; these works serve as examples of the necessity to talk with Japanese women themselves about their experiences with and ideas of menstruation in order to better understand its place in their lives and in Japanese society today. While I have been able to do so, to a limited extent, through my ethnographic research with university students in Tokyo, it is much more challenging to piece together what Japanese women’s experiences with menstruation were like in the past. However, while this paper will explore notions of menstruation as polluting, I aim to provide a more nuanced picture that shows the complexity and variability of menstrual experiences throughout Japanese history.

Beliefs about Menstruation in Early Japanese History
In ancient times, menstruation was understood to be connected to nature and to gods kami (神). This is evident even in the Japanese word for menstruation gekkei (月経), which can be glossed as ‘going around the moon.’ Other former terms for menstruation also follow this theme of menstruation being connected to the moon: getsuji (月事) and tsuki no mono (月の物, both meaning ‘the moon thing’), gassui (月水 ‘moon water’), and tsuki no sawari (月の障り ‘moon sickness’) are a few examples. This section outlines the beliefs and social treatment of menstruation from (roughly) the Heian Period (794-1185 CE) through the
Edo Period (1600-1868), with an emphasis on the emergence of the belief of menstrual impurity.

Ono (2009) and Tanaka (2013) discuss two different accounts of menstruation in the *Kojiki*, which purportedly represent not only the views of menstruation held by those in the ancient past about whom the stories are written, but also the views of the stories’ writers/compilers. In the first account in which menstruation is mentioned, in the first half of the second century, the twelfth emperor’s son, Yamato Takeru, and his fiancée, Princess Miyazu, composed and exchanged poems in which allusions were made to menstruation. Yamato Takeru’s song is on the left, and Princess Miyazu’s reply is on the right:

**Yamato Takeru’s song**

*Across the heavenly Kagu Mountain, Flies like a sharp sickle The long-necked swan*

*Your arm slender and delicate Like the bird’s neck – Although I wish to clasp It in my embrace; Although I desire To sleep with you, On the hem Of the cloak you are wearing The moon has risen.*

**Princess Miyazu’s reply**

*O high-shining Sun-Prince, O my great lord Ruling in peace! As the years one by one Pass by, The moons also one by one Elapse. It is no wonder that While waiting in vain for you On the cloak I am wearing The moon should rise* (Philippi 1968: 244-245).

The sight of menstrual blood on the hem of Princess Miyazu’s clothing inspires Yamato Takeru to sing this song. Here in these poems, we see again a linguistic and symbolic connection between menstruation and the moon: the rising of the moon is a euphemism for the appearance of menstruation. Yamato Takeru had been absent for a lengthy amount of time, and so as Princess Miyazu says, “It is no wonder that…[t]he moon should rise.” At this time, menstruation was viewed as something sacred and which had the “mark of the *kami*”. Menstruation had a mystical quality to it, since it involved bleeding without dying, which was only a feat the *kami* were capable of, and so this granted menstruation a kind of divinity (Ono 2009: 152) and “religious consecration” (Philippi 1968: 245). Since the prince did have intercourse with the princess, regardless of her menstrual
status, this shows that menstruation was not considered polluting at the time (Tanaka 2013: 68).¹

The other account of menstruation in the *Kojiki*, however, shows a slightly different view. The story goes that the twenty-first emperor (during the fifth century), Emperor Yūryaku, held a banquet. During the banquet, the emperor was served by a maid-in-waiting a wine glass that had a fallen leaf *tsuki* (槻) floating in it, which greatly angered him. The servant, facing execution at the emperor’s hands, begged his forgiveness for her offense through the performance of a song which praised the emperor and his palace and reframed the *tsuki* leaf incident as a good omen rather than an offense (Philippi 1968, 362-366). The significance in this story is that the *tsuki* leaf is a symbol for menstruation.² Therefore, the actual events portrayed in the story can be interpreted as the woman polluting or defiling the ceremonial banquet, but the act of pollution was subsequently absolved by the emperor. Ono argues that this story reflects the views held by Heian nobility that menstruation was polluting (*kegare* 瑕れ) (Ono 2009: 152). However, Tanaka points out that interpretations of this story are divided, and that the *tsuki* leaf may not necessarily be a symbol of menstruation after all (Tanaka 2013: 68).

The idea that certain women’s bodily actions (birth, menstruation) were sources of pollution arose among the court society of the Heian period (Faure 2003: 68-71; Tanaka 2013: 61). Birth especially had strong connections to *kami*, spirits, and pollution. At the time, the nobility would call upon female shamans, priests, and mountain ascetics to offer magical prayers to ensure a safe and smooth birth. During parts of pregnancy as well as childbirth, as it was a special, vulnerable time, women were isolated in birth huts in order to keep away evil spirits. This practice is considered to be the beginning of the view of childbirth as polluting, and as an extension, the birth hut as a “polluted space.” Beliefs about pollution, as well as purity and impurity, were also influenced by the religious teachings of esoteric Buddhism (mainly of the Shingon sect), which were promulgated during the Heian Period. These teachings included the

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¹ The practices of the Yayoi Period state of Yamatai-koku also display connections between menstruation and the divine. Women were the rulers because they were more closely connected to the divine and could practice shamanism/spirit possession. It was widely believed that menstruation could cause mental/emotional turmoil or abnormalities; this was seen as divine will (*shin’i*) and a marker of those women’s strong connection to the divine (Tanaka 2013: 64).

² In the past, women secluded themselves during menstruation in a special hut constructed near a *tsuki* [zelkova tree], and these huts were thus called *tsukiya* (’zelkova tree hut’) (Ono 2009: 152). Therefore, the *tsuki* leaf was closely associated with menstruation. More discussion on seclusion huts is below.
practice of “isolating and removing” impurity in order to protect and maintain purity, as well as the concepts of pollution arising from death, birth, and blood (Ono 2009: 152). In Buddhist teachings, women were considered morally inferior to men and incapable of rebirth as a buddha (Faure 2003: 62-23). In his discussion of the view found in Buddhist beliefs and teachings of menstrual blood as polluting, Faure writes, “Menstrual blood is especially impure inasmuch as it bears the mark of exclusively female powers. The biological phenomenon of menstruation led to the view that the female body is essentially porous, and that its ‘outflowing’ is practically beyond control” (Faure 2003: 68-69). Pollution and power are often closely tied together, along with taboos or other practices meant to contain such power; something that is polluted (or someone who is polluted) has power in that the pollution can spread to other objects, spaces, or people (Douglas 1984, Buckley and Gottlieb 1988). In the case of medieval Japan, menstrual or birth pollution can interfere with the actions of kami as well as humans’ relations with kami. We can see this with the beliefs about the birth hut; due to its polluting quality, kami would not or could not approach it, since they only appear “under conditions of extreme purity, the exact opposite of pollution” (Namihira 1987: S65). Menstrual pollution was equally offensive to Buddhist deities and disruptive to the rites of Buddhist priests; this manifested itself in restrictions on entering temples or other sacred spaces during times of pollution (Faure 2003: 62-63).

Still, the historical origin of the notion of menstrual blood as polluting is difficult to pinpoint, and many researchers have different opinions and theories on the topic. As discussed in Tanaka (2013), Mieda purports that the phenomenon of menstruation, in which women bled profusely but did not die, was difficult to explain logically, so it was considered part of a “mysterious/mystical domain”. Since only women experienced birth and menstruation, these also served as clear displays of the difference between the sexes. Men were in awe or afraid of menstruation, and thus they had a special view of it, which then evolved to taboos. Kunugi theorizes that menstruation may have been disliked or feared because it is different from other forms of blood: it is a mix of solids and liquids, and it may be brown or blackish instead of red. It also comes out near the anus, and it may happen suddenly and cannot be controlled. Moreover, it is likely that due to malnutrition and high birth rates (because of high infant mortality and lack of contraceptives), women in the past did not get their period very often, which may have added to women’s fear of it. Another theory is that people

3 This idea that menstruation was scary to women is refuted by Toda (Tanaka 2013: 58-62).
learned from experience that contact with sick and dying individuals’ blood was dangerous and could lead to their own sickness and death; this then contributed to the idea that menstrual blood could be dangerous and polluting (Tanaka 2013: 58-62).

Regardless of how beliefs of pollution and impurity came to be, notions of pollution were in fact codified into law during the Heian Period, with the enactment of the Engi Code in 967. Included in its regulations were specific prohibitions against certain activities for a person who was polluted or in close contact with a polluted person. For example, a person affected by birth pollution could not visit a shrine or temple for seven days. Additionally, a person affected by death pollution could not make such a visitation for thirty days, while someone touched by or closely connected to the former sort of person (i.e. a person affected by death pollution) was prohibited from shrine/temple visitation for twenty days (Ono 2009: 152).

Originally circulated among the nobility of the Heian Period, these notions of pollution spread throughout the populace during the Muromachi Period (1336-1573). At the same time, teaching of the Blood Bowl Sutra, originating from China around the 10th century, also spread throughout the land. Those who committed sins of blood would fall into the Blood Pool Hell after death; however, they could be saved if they read the Blood Bowl Sutra, carried a copy with them, and followed certain rites. While in China, both men and women could potentially suffer the fate of the Blood Pool Hell, in Japan, the emphasis was on women and their polluting blood at birth and during menstruation, which would defile the land and water and offend the gods. There were variations on these teachings throughout the country, including explanations that menstrual blood was a physical manifestation of women’s jealousy, lust, or other sins (Tanaka 2013: 70-71).

Birth huts, at first used for the purpose of isolating the pollution derived from childbirth and parturition blood, came to be used by menstruating women as well. This is reflected in the various alternative names for these huts that developed, one of which was ‘moon hut’ (tsuki-goya 月小屋) (Ono 2009, 152). These would also be called taya (他屋, ‘other house’), hima-ya (暇屋, ‘rest house’) (Namihira 1987: S68), fujō-goya (不浄小屋, ‘filth hut’), or yogore-ya (汚れ屋, ‘filth house’) (Tanaka 2013: 74).

Sometimes, villages or communities would not have constructed seclusion huts\(^4\); however, there were still taboos that women followed to separate themselves from others in their activities. This included preparing their

\(^4\) In this paper, ‘seclusion hut’ is a term used to encompass all huts used by women to seclude themselves from the rest of the community, for various reasons including childbirth and menstruation.
own food using a separate cooking fire and eating separately from their family (Ono 2009: 153; Namihira 1987: S68). Additionally, menstruating women were not supposed to touch the *kamidana* (神棚, ‘household altar/shrine’) or pass through *torī* gates (鳥居), as these objects were associated with *kami* (Ono 2009: 153). They also should not have approached boats, or fishing or hunting tools, lest their pollution ruin the efforts of the food-gathering tasks associated with those objects (Tanaka 2013: 76).

However, just because such restrictions existed and menstruation was viewed as polluting, this does not mean that menstruation was such a terrible or negative thing in people’s lives. In fact, it is thought that the women who isolated themselves in huts during menstruation did not necessarily see menstruation as a source of impurity, and their sojourn in the huts was potentially an enjoyable and important part of their lives. Since all women of a community would share the same seclusion hut, bonding and sharing of experiences could easily occur. Additionally, women could use their time in the seclusion huts to rest their bodies and minds from the usual daily physical labor and work. This was especially beneficial to the health of women who had recently given birth, it is believed (Tanaka 2013: 77). Moreover, menarche was treated as a celebratory occasion because it represented the transition of a girl into a woman who now had the ability to create new members of the community, vital for the community’s prosperity and survival. People’s participation in celebrations of menarche, as well as their ability to ascertain who in a community was menstruating by observing who was secluding themselves or following menstruation taboos, shows that menstruation was actually an integral aspect of a community’s social life (Ono 2009: 153). Although it was viewed as something polluting, it was still recognized and accepted by people as a part of day-to-day life. Whether life while using seclusion huts and operating under these taboos was pleasant or unpleasant is really up for debate though; experiences vary from region to region, time period to time period, and woman to woman (Tanaka 2013: 77).

**Views of Menstruation from the Meiji Period through the Late Twentieth Century**

In Japan’s past, although menstruation was viewed as having polluting aspects and menstruating women often removed themselves to a separate – physical and/or symbolic – space, it was still integrated into people’s daily lives. However, the Meiji government made explicit steps to erase the notion of menstruation as polluting; at the same time, efforts were also
made to make menstruation “invisible” (Ono 2009: 153). This section explores the details of these societal changes during the Meiji Period (1868-1912), the Taishō Period (1912-1926), and up to the early postwar period of the mid-twentieth century.

One of the main driving forces behind the Meiji government’s attempted eradication of ‘folk’ beliefs surrounding menstruation was influence and pressure from Western nations. Taking a stance alongside these ‘advanced’ Westerners, the Meiji government declared that the idea of menstruation and childbirth as polluting and the practices stemming from this idea were “uncivilized” (Tanaka 2013: 73). In 1872, the government issued an edict whose purpose was to completely abolish these ‘backwards’ ideas through the removal of any and all official codes that had once institutionalized the concept of pollution, such as the aforementioned Engi Code (Ono 2009: 153). In addition, the practice of using seclusion huts for birth or menstruation was banned, and in some cases, these huts were even forcibly dismantled or burned down by government officials (Namihira 1987: S68). However, enforcement of this was uneven, and some areas of the country still used seclusion huts up until the 1960s and had women who practiced other taboos, like eating separately, even after that (Tanaka 2013: 74-83).

One of the most influential ideas of this time period adopted from the West was the modern concept of ‘hygiene’, knowledge of which, along with that of modern Western medicine, was spread by the Japanese government for the sake of ‘enlightening’ Japanese doctors, bureaucrats, and even women (Ono 2009: 153). Through public lectures, magazine articles, and school curricula, (mostly male) scientists and instructors ‘standardized’ the experience of menstruation for women. That is, they set forth parameters of what would be considered the medically ‘normal’ age at menarche, length of menstrual cycle and menstrual bleeding, and amount of menstrual discharge. By following the “principles of hygiene” (Nakayama 2017), women and girls purportedly could ensure they would meet the standards of normality, which were required to fulfill their reproductive duty to the nation. As evidenced below, menstruation was reframed as an issue of personal hygiene that should be dealt with using proper products and behavior; and, due to its connection to (reproductive) sex, it should only be discussed when necessary with medical professionals or teachers.

The Ideology of Hygiene and Women’s Bodies
As part of Japan’s nation-state-making processes that took root in the early years of the Meiji Period, concepts of the “national body” of Japan were developed, whereby the goal of the government was to create optimally
healthy citizens in order to have the strongest military – and nation – possible. Of this, Frühstück writes, “Calling upon an increasingly complex configuration of bureaucrats, military officials, police, physicians, pedagogues, and other men and women in public office, these concepts [of the ‘national body’] focused on a populace to be regulated, protected, nurtured, and improved in order to establish…a modern ‘health regime’” (Frühstück 2003: 17). The concept of hygiene was part and parcel of these ideologies of imperialist Japan. However, for government officials, doctors, teachers, and others, hygiene soon became something that represented not just the health of the body, but that of the mind as well. Cleanliness and morality became closely linked, and “[p]roper care and maintenance was declared the basis of a ‘moral person’; in fact, the care and maintenance of the whole self was to be recognized as both ‘a virtue and a duty’” (Frühstück 2003: 25).

This concept of hygiene and its accompanying moral prescripts, as well as Japanese imperialist ideology as a whole, had a profound influence on Japanese women’s and girls’ lives as their bodies came under the control of the state. As Japan’s government was striving to build up a national population and a military that was as large and as strong as possible, women were told that the best way for them to serve the state was to be mothers. “Good wife, wise mother” (ryōsai kenbo 良妻賢母) was the slogan promulgated by the Ministry of Education (Ono 2009: 153). Women were supposed to serve their husbands and families by taking care of the household. They were also supposed to serve “as educators who instilled proper Japanese values in their children…[placing] themselves in loyal service to the state” (Kondo 1990: 267). This also meant that, at least for women, any non-reproductive sexual activities were – from the official standpoint of government officials and doctors – frowned upon as pointless and even “abnormal”, as compared to reproductive sex that resulted in childbirth, which was “natural” (Narita 1999: 358).

Although women’s main roles and occupations were supposed to be in the home (and for many upper-class women, this was the case), women workers played a crucial role in the industrialization process of Japan. Between 1894 and 1912, about sixty percent of the nation’s industrial workforce was comprised of women, many of whom worked in the textile industries (Kondo 1990: 269). Working conditions for these young factory women, though, were notoriously bad, with long hours, dangerous machinery, inadequate food, and a lack of sanitary facilities (Kondo 1990: 269-270; Dan 1986: 7-8). This spurred demand for menstruation leave (seiri kyūka 生理休暇) from both women and doctors. They argued that
menstruation was “a ‘barometer’ for reproductive ability” and so women “ought to take leave to protect their future motherhood” (Dan 1986: 8). The reproductive health of these young women was considered extremely important, and resting from strenuous work was believed to help prevent complications later in life, such as miscarriage and premature labor (Dan 1986: 2). The right to take menstruation leave was enforced after World War II⁵. Here we see acknowledgement and understanding of menstrual health framed around childbirth and motherhood, a strong connection that continues today.

The slogan of “good wife, wise mother” was not only recited at adult Japanese women, but it was also a large part of the rhetoric of government officials and teachers that was aimed at schoolgirls. In 1872, the Meiji government issued an education conscription which required all boys and girls of a certain age to attend school; before this time many girls did not receive any formal education (Kondo 1990: 265). However, for the girls who did now attend school, this standardized education was focused predominantly on home economics and thus the production of a new generation of “good wives, wise mothers”. In terms of sex education, again, stress was put on the importance of becoming a mother, as reflected in this hypothetical sex education lecture a mother would give to her daughter:

You have come so far that you can produce the spring from which a human arises in your body…You will bleed for two or three days…That will happen once every four weeks and is only proof that you have grown up. However, it is important that you do not overwork, and that you wash yourself carefully and take better care of yourself during these days. This is not simply an experience but the preparation for you to become a mother one day. Therefore you must take proper care of yourself. You might worry about when it will happen and it is indeed an important time but please be pleased with yourself that one day you will be a mother (quoted in Frühstück 2003: 69; emphasis added).

Higher education was considered unnecessary for the girls’ future roles as wives and mothers, as well as potentially taxing on their minds and bodies, which were believed to be weaker than males’ (this belief is also found among Victorian intellectuals of the same era) (Frühstück 2003: 69). In

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⁵ See Taguchi 2003 for a detailed history of menstruation leave in Japan. While companies do still offer menstruation leave, it varies depending on employment contracts and is often unpaid.
1900, the Ministry of Education, following the same vein of thought that led to menstruation leave for workers, called for female students to limit or refrain from active movement during menstruation (Nakayama 2007: 57). Thus, since physical exercise was part of the school regimen, it was necessary for girls to notify their teachers when they were menstruating so they could be excused from such activities. Ono argues that this reflects the idea generated during this time period that menstruation was a personal issue that “should be concealed” (kakusu beki 隠すべき) and was “an embarrassing thing that disrupted everyday life” (Ono 2009: 154). She sees these practices and ideologies of the state as contributing to the medicalization of women’s bodies: “In this way, female bodies in relation to menstruation, pregnancy, and birth came to be controlled by school teachers and doctors and became objects that should be [medically] examined and treated. In other words, women’s bodily physiological functions relating to reproduction became objects of medicalization” (Ono 2009: 153-154).

Magazines and journals focusing on hygiene and sex abounded during the first few decades of the twentieth century (Frühstück 2003: Narita 1999). Found in popular women’s magazines like Fujiin Kōron (婦人公論, ‘women’s public opinion’) and Shufu no Tomo (主婦の友, ‘housewife’s friend’), articles and special issues that discussed sex mostly focused on procreative sex, although non-reproductive sex was written about to an extent (Narita 1999: 349, 357-358). These magazines often ran advice columns written by doctors, as well as advertisements for medicines and other “cures” for infertility, frigidity, and hysteria. About this, Frühstück says, “In these magazines at least, medical doctors were preoccupied with married women’s sexual functioning almost exclusively in the context of ensuring their reproductive capabilities, thus reinforcing earlier claims of the uterus as a vehicle of empire building” (Frühstück 2003: 174). Indeed, many articles in Fujiin Eisei Zasshi (婦人衛生雑誌, ‘women’s hygiene magazine’) and the other-above mentioned magazines focused on how to achieve and protect a healthy “mother’s body” (botai 母体). During menstruation, one should not ride horses, rickshaws, or bicycles; one should not dance, exercise, stand or walk for long periods of time, carry heavy bags, use sewing machines, or drink alcohol or coffee; one should also avoid mentally taxing activities like reading novels. Failure to follow these proscriptions could lead to reproductive diseases or lifelong ailments, according to many doctors writing in these magazines. Of course, the target audience was upper-class women who actually had a chance at avoiding these actions, unlike working women who could not rest or take time off.
(Tanaka 2013: 6-8, 17-19). In addition, the fact that women would write in to doctors’ advice columns about their menstrual troubles and other health issues shows again the extent to which menstruation had become something to be concealed. Rather than talking face-to-face with family members or friends about menstruation, women would write to total strangers, thus contributing to the invisibility of menstruation outside the pages of magazines (Ono 2009: 154).

The Introduction of Commercial Menstrual Management Products
Because of the spread of the concept of hygiene, there was a shift in the mode of production of menstrual management products beginning in the Meiji Period. Before this time, women would mainly use certain plant fibers or old cloth to absorb their menstrual blood. Although many women in the early twentieth century continued to make and modify their own menstrual products at home, commercial menstrual products began to be marketed at this time. These products were often considered to be more sterile and hygienic by doctors and writers of women’s magazine articles. Such public backing of commercially produced menstrual products and condemnation of ‘unhygienic’ homemade products marked the beginning of women’s menstruation management being directly tied to the market (Ono 2009: 154). As the twentieth century progressed, commercial menstrual products improved in absorbency, comfort, ease-of-use, and style. Magazines continued to be an important platform for advertising and discussion of these products. What was considered a hygienic practice or product and what was considered unhygienic would continue to pop up as an evaluation tool to judge the quality and acceptability of menstrual management methods and products throughout the twentieth century. The modern menstrual napkin as it is known today became widespread during the 1960s, due to the manufacturing and marketing success of the Anne Corporation and its ‘Anne napkin’ introduced in 1961. The napkin also purportedly provided women more comfort and greater freedom of movement than previous products; this increase in mobility thus led to increased ability or desire to actively participate in the working world (Sakai 2014: 69). Moreover, since many women felt buying menstrual management products to be embarrassing, Anne Corporation, through its advertising, worked to change this way of thinking, for the sake of market expansion and economic success. It is in part to the publicity efforts of the company that menstrual napkins came to be treated like other commercial goods (Ono 2009: 155). However, even though these menstrual products were on display in stores, they were often hidden when being carried out of
stores by customers. Even today, it is customary to put such products in opaque, black plastic bags when purchased, rather than the usual thin, translucent shopping bags.

How did the Anne napkin and its groundbreaking advertising campaigns impact views of menstruation during the 1960s and onward? Although some scholars have argued that Anne Corporation’s advertising played a large role in influencing women and shifting notions of menstruation, Sakai (2014) argues that these assertions are over-generalizing and lacking actual supporting evidence, that is, testimony from women who were the receivers of mass media messages. Through her interviews with women who grew up around the middle of the twentieth century, she found that hardly any of the women said that mass media or advertising had an effect on them (Sakai 2014: 72). In fact, for the older women born in the 1930s and 1940s, the way menstrual management products are discussed so brazenly and openly in advertisements gives them a feeling of discomfort (iwakan 違和感) (Sakai 2014: 76). While the introduction of television commercials for menstrual products in the late twentieth century is significant in its own right, any changes in views of menstruation during this time may be more easily explained by looking at changes in sex education in school curricula, rather than at the messages of advertisements.

Changes in Sex Education in the Mid- to Late-Twentieth Century

Sex education in schools during the 1930s was unstandardized or non-existent in some areas. It was not until after World War II that sex education was systematically put in place in the Japanese school system. The goal of the 1947 “Basic Guidelines for Purity Education” (junketsu kyōiku kihon yōkō 純潔教育基本要項) was to promote proper “sexual morality” (seidōtoku 性道徳), that is, abstinence until marriage and then reproductive sex. Sex education at this time was also referred to as “menstruation guidance” (gekkei shidō 月経指導), since its teachings focused on menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth, things that only happen to females. However, in the 1949 “Junior High School Health Plan Procedures” (chūgakkō gakkō hoken keikaku jisshi yōryō 中学校学校保健計画実施要領), there was no mention of specific guidance on how to deal with menstrual blood, and so there were many girls who never had a chance to learn how to properly deal with menstrual blood, even though they had “menstruation guidance” class. Compounding the lack of menstrual management education in schools, during the 1940s and into the 1950s, there was a stigma around talking about menstruation among family and friends. Many of the women that Sakai (2014) interviewed who were
born in the 1930s and 1940s, and even in 1950, reported that they could not talk to their friends or family about menstruation or sex, as it was “taboo”. This is reflected in statements such as, “‘When I got my first period, I didn’t tell anyone and dealt with it on my own’”, “‘I never talked to my parent(s)/mother about menstruation’”, and “‘When I got my first period, my mother stealthily taught me how to use cloth for dealing with menstrual blood’” (Sakai 2014: 75). These feelings of secrecy, concealment, and taboo stuck with them as they grew older, as evidenced by their shock and unease at how frankly menstruation is talked about in advertising today.

In contrast, the next generation of women born after the early 1950s received better education about menstruation in schools. In 1965, “the Ministry of Education replaced ‘purity education’ with ‘guidance in sexual matters’ (sei ni kan suru shidō 性に関する指導 [kanji added by the author]) or ‘sex education’ (seikyōiku 性教育)…” (Frühstück 2003: 193). Before or around the time of menarche, girls at school were taught about the biological functioning of menstruation as well as methods for dealing with menstrual blood. Paper napkin companies would also give samples of their products to schools, which girls could then take home. This way, they would be prepared for their first menstruation. Overall, these women were able to receive a better education and to talk more freely about menstruation than the preceding generation (Sakai 2014: 76). This difference in education is reflected in the older generation of women’s feelings of discomfort in terms of their own daughters’ school sex education, who would have been in grade school around the 1960s or 1970s. One woman said, “‘My daughter learned about menstruation at school, so at home we pretty much never talked about it. I’m glad I didn’t have to teach her myself…but when I imagine her talking to her teachers and friends so casually about paper napkins, I get a weird feeling’” (Sakai 2014: 74).

**Menstruation Today**
Themes of embarrassment and concealment continue today, as I found in my recent ethnographic fieldwork. In an interview⁶, I asked a young woman if she would talk to someone she was dating about her period. She replied, “‘No, definitely not. [Why?] Well, I guess it’s embarrassing, it’s not

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⁶ I conducted ethnographic interviews with twenty-three young women who were attending universities in the Tokyo area in 2018. These were qualitative, semi-structured interviews; I had a list of interview questions but allowed the order of the questions and the general topics of conversation to flow naturally. Interviewees were asked about their (formal and informal) education on menstruation, their experience of menarche, the characteristics of their typical menstrual cycle, and their menstrual product preferences, among other things.
a nice image – blood coming out, it’s dirty, embarrassing.” In Japan today, menstruation has a complex and almost contradictory status. While menstrual product advertisements on television and in women’s magazines are not uncommon, rarely is menstruation brought up in public discourse outside of these platforms. Even when women do talk about it with friends or female relatives, they use euphemisms like seiri (生理, literally ‘physiology,’ commonly meaning ‘period/menstruation’), ano hi (あの日, ‘that day’), and are (あれ, ‘that’), rather than gekkei ‘menstruation’, which is now almost exclusively used in the field of medicine. Much like in the recent past, menstruation is strongly connected to reproduction and sex, and it is a hygiene issue that must be dealt with in private, never to be revealed to unfamiliar others. This is discussed below, with a focus on the relationship between sex and menstruation, how menstrual product usage and advertising helps to conceal menstruation, and women’s negative and ambivalent experiences with menstruation. Menstruation is an often burdensome and unpleasant experience, but one that is necessary for having children, which many of the women I interviewed planned for in their future.

Tampons and Sexuality
While guidance in schools helped better prepare girls for their first period and for using napkins, discussion of tampons is rarely on the agenda. By far the majority of Japanese women use menstrual napkins as their primary menstrual product, while a small number of women use tampons. 7 Usually, a mother or a friend will introduce them to the product. Only three of the twenty-three women I formally interviewed regularly use tampons, having first tried them out in college. One of the young women said that she started using tampons because she was fed up with feeling uncomfortable and getting stains on her bedding at night; she now uses tampons while she sleeps and during heavy flow days. It is likely easier to judge, visually, when a sanitary napkin is reaching its fluid capacity than when a tampon is, and it is this learning curve, among other reasons, that steers many women away from the product. Several of the women I talked with were interested in tampons, but they were worried they would not be “good at using them,”

7 The Japan Hygiene Products Industry Association (JHPIA) reports that ninety-four percent of women use disposable napkins, with six percent using tampons (JHPIA 2008). The low rates of tampon use are partly due to fear of toxic shock syndrome (Ono 2009, 157; Ono 1985, 37); I have heard this as a reason for not using tampons during my interviews and discussions with Japanese women. It is also telling that the famous toxic shock syndrome outbreak in the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s is often referred to as the ‘tampon shock incident’ (tanpon shokku jiken タンポンショック事件) in Japan.
potentially resulting in a dreaded ‘failure’ (shippai 失敗: in this context ‘menstrual blood leaks/stains’).

Reluctance to use tampons is in part due to not wanting to touch one’s genitals or menstrual blood directly. Even women who do use tampons may view this aspect of them quite negatively. One of the tampon users I interviewed recounted a time when she traveled to New Zealand and discovered that a common type of tampon there had no applicator; she viewed this as “dirty” and refused to use them. Additionally, several women said that inserting tampons seemed scary (kowai 怖い) and expressed concern that it would hurt, with one saying, “I definitely do not want to use them (sekkyokutekini tsukaitakunai 積極的に使いたくない).” This fear or reluctance to insert something into the vagina may reflect beliefs picked up from sex education classes and societal views on appropriate expressions of female sexuality. The focus of sex education for a long time was on ‘purity’, abstinence, and repression of ‘unhealthy’ sexual desires; sex was, at least for girls, something to be done after marriage with one’s husband and for the purpose of producing children. Although, now, methods for preventing transmission of STDs and HIV/AIDS is taught to junior high and high school students, the underlying message is that sex is, first and foremost, for reproduction (Frühstück 2003: 193). Sexuality and masturbation are not discussed in a positive light, if they are discussed at all. Education on menstrual products can be potentially lacking as well; if menstrual management methods are taught, it is extremely rare for girls to be taught about tampons and how to use them (Ono 1984: 56). This is because educators did not want young girls to use tampons, since their use requires touching the vagina. Such physical familiarity with the vagina could be a gateway to masturbation and reckless and ‘unhealthy’ sexuality. In fact, the first commercial tampons in Japan were marketed toward married women only, in order to protect unmarried women’s hymens and thus their chastity. The Japan Hygiene Products Industry Association (JHPIA) made it obligatory in 1951 for menstrual product manufacturers to discourage unmarried women from using tampons. This continued until 1970, when the JHPIA relented and allowed for tampons to be targeted at unmarried women, with the

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8 Sex education in high schools has also been called “education for the prevention of AIDS” (eizu yobō kyōiku) since the late 1980s (Frühstück 2003: 193).
9 The Japan Hygiene Products Industry Association (JHPIA, Nippon Eisei Zairyō Kögyō Rengōgai 日本衛生材料工業連合会) was established by the Ministry of Health and Welfare in 1950. It deals with domestic products such as absorbent cotton, gauze, diapers (both baby and adult), and menstrual products (including napkins and tampons) (Ono 2006: 44).
stipulations that “unmarried women should use [tampons] with extreme caution and should use them according to doctors’ directions” and that “first-time users and uneasy women should consult with a medical specialist before using them” (Ono 2006: 18-19). However, use of tampons does seem to be slowly on the rise over recent years, with even tampon commercials making it to television broadcast. They are popular among athletes and other women who lead active lifestyles or do sports (Ono 1985: 37; Ono 1984: 55). So although education on tampons may not be present in schools, through word-of-mouth and television commercials, knowledge and use of tampons in Japan is indeed spreading. It is possible that the slow rise in tampon usage reflects changing personal views on sexuality and sexual behavior.

Using Menstrual Products to Conceal Menstruation
If menstruation is connected to sex and reproduction and thus should be concealed, then it is modern commercial menstrual products that make it possible for women to hide signs of menstruation from others. The most obvious sign of menstruation is a bloody stain on clothing or furniture. The women I spoke to referred to these stains or leaks, literally, as failures — shippai. When I asked interviewees if they had strong or lasting memories related to menstruation, several recounted embarrassing stories of public failures, leaving bloody splotches on chairs in libraries and restaurants. Moreover, while most of the women I spoke with experienced menstrual cramps of varying intensity, almost half of them said that leaks were one of the worst, if not the worst, aspect of their period.
Women constantly have to be aware of their flow in order to avoid failures. One interviewee told me, “The worst thing about my period is having to be conscious of it all the time. I worry about being able to change my napkin in time. Will I be too late, or will I make it? You have to think about it constantly. It disrupts your normal routine.” This creates a lot of worry (shinpai 心配) and unease (fuan 不安) for women, who make frequent bathroom trips, avoid sitting for long stretches of time, and abstain from exercise and sports during their periods, all in order to reduce their chance of failures. And, of course, these women make strategic use of various menstrual products to prevent leaks. The main ways that leaks happen are that the menstrual product is not absorbent enough or it slips out of place. It makes sense, then, that the two main characteristics of menstrual products desired by the women I interviewed were sufficient absorbency and wings that keep the menstrual napkin secured to their underwear. Comfort, price, brand name, and aesthetic design were all secondary to the
need to conceal one’s menstrual status from others. This emphasis on concealing signs of menstruation is (re)enforced through advertising for menstrual products. Besides highlighting the fluid- and odor-absorbing powers of their products, advertisements themselves conceal menstruation by using linguistic euphemisms (previously mentioned) and by using ‘sanitized’ visual imagery of menstrual experiences, such as blue liquid in place of menstrual blood and happy, beautiful models representing customers.

**Negative and Ambivalent Views of Menstruation**

Unlike the smiling models in menstrual product ads, all of the women I interviewed deal with unpredictable menstrual cycles, painful menstrual cramps, and/or uncomfortable menstrual flows. Irregular cycles can cause worries about possible unplanned pregnancy or general concern about one’s health, especially the ability to have a family in the future. A sudden, unexpected period can ruin special plans or interrupt daily activities like work and school. Menstrual pain is such an ingrained part of the menstrual experience that common euphemisms for menstruating are “my stomach hurts” (onaka ga itai お腹が痛い) and “I don’t feel well” (taichō ga warui 体調が悪い). Pain is unavoidable but manageable to an extent, with over-the-counter medication as well as heating pads. Because it can be painful, messy, and difficult to track, menstruation is often thought of as an annoyance or inconvenience. Many of the women I talked to expressed that they disliked or even hated their period, but it is necessary for them to go through it because it is the key to having children. One woman told me, “I don’t like it. I’d rather not have my period, if that were possible. Changing napkins is annoying, stains are annoying, and so is when the napkin slips out of place. I am mendokusagariya (面倒くさがり屋 ‘a person who tends to find most things bothersome or annoying’)…But it’s necessary for having children.” She was far from the only one to express this sentiment. Despite the overall negative views of menstruation and its annoyances and associated worries, many women told me that menstruation is good for one’s body and health. One young woman described it as like a “detox” for her body, and another woman, mirroring the menstruation leave advocates of the previous century, said her period was like “a barometer for my body…I can objectively surmise my health from it”. For many of my interviewees, irregularity, along with menstrual cramps and blood stains, is just an expected aspect of their menstrual experiences that they have to deal with – but maybe just not every month. And yet, despite the view that regular menstruation was necessary for future reproduction, most of the
women who experienced irregularity, including missed periods, have not gone to a doctor, because seeing a doctor/gynecologist is “embarrassing” (hazukashii 耻ずかしい).

**Rite of Passage: Swim Class**

Indeed, these young women hardly ever talked about menstruation with anyone, not just doctors. Among my interviewees, even those who attended all-girls schools rarely talked with their peers about menstruation, except occasionally asking for a spare napkin or commiserating about menstrual cramps. One exception was a situation that often forced girls to acknowledge menstruation to others: swim class. Getting one’s period meant that one could not participate. However, telling the teacher was sometimes a tricky and embarrassing task, especially if it was a male teacher. Parents would write a note for their daughter, or the child would say something vague like “taichō ga warui” or “onaka ga itai”, to avoid directly admitting their menstrual status. About half of the young women I talked to had memories of their menstrual cycle conflicting with swim class in either elementary or middle school. These memories showcased two recurring themes: bonding with other female students and conflicting feelings over not participating in the class. One interviewee had a whole strategizing session with her friends about how to tell – but not tell – their male teacher that she had her period and needed to sit out class. Another recounted to me how she made friends with another girl who had to skip the lesson; the two bonded over the fact that they both had heavy menstrual flows.

While in the early twentieth century, girls would not participate in physical education classes during their period because physical activity was believed to be bad for their own physical and mental health, girls today often do not participate in swim class because it is believed to be bad for possibly other people’s health. There are worries of menstrual fluid contaminating the swimming pool. If it were not for this mistaken notion, then all girls could purportedly participate in school swim lessons. Indeed, some of the women I interviewed were ambivalent or unhappy about having to sit out of swim class; they talked about how they “had to” or were “forced to” sit on the sidelines. On the other hand, there have been reports lately that schools, citing that it is not in fact unsanitary or unsafe, are rejecting menstruation as an excuse to not participate, which has caused problems for girls with menstrual pain or heavy flows (Tamaki 2018). Either way, figuring out what to do during swim class when they have their period seems to be a rite of passage for many girls.
Discussion and Conclusion
Frühstück theorizes that throughout Japanese history, there have been repeated cycles of “liberation” and “repression” of sexuality by different actors (Frühstück 2003: 5). I argue that, looking at Japanese history, one can find similar cycles in regard to menstruation, as well as periods of simultaneous liberation and repression, or rather, openness and concealment. After the powerful mysticism of menstruation in ancient Japan gave way to more negative notions of pollution around the ninth century, women, from a particularly religious as well as social standpoint, were seen as sinful, dangerous, and unclean. Powerful yet dangerous, women’s bodies were cast as uncontrollable and a threat to male authority and connection to kami and Buddhist deities. Although beliefs of menstrual and birth pollution were present among the populace during the Muromachi and Edo Periods and women practiced various taboos to separate themselves during their time of the month, menstruation was a strong symbol of fertility and vitality of the community. The use of seclusion huts and other practices relating to the polluting qualities of menstruation were then wiped out by the Meiji Period government which deemed them backwards and uncivilized traditions. However, menstruation as a symbol of fertility and health continued, especially in the context of early twentieth century state ideology that called for Japanese women to “be fruitful and multiply” and help build up the strength of the “national body.” It could even be argued that menstruation was perhaps more respected as a phenomenon during this time since it was a necessary function for procreation. However, due to various practices put in place in schools and workplaces, menstruation came to be seen as something that was incompatible with strenuous movement, exercise, and work; disruptive to everyday life; and something to be hidden. Although the middle of the twentieth century and beyond saw increased mass media discourses relating to menstruation, in the form of menstrual product advertisements, concealment of menstruation still occurs on a day-to-day basis. Although women do not view it as something that is polluting, some do regard it as “troublesome”, “annoying”, or “dirty” and express a desire to hide it (e.g., Ono 1985: 36). Cashiers still provide opaque shopping bags to put menstrual products in for customers, advertisements continue to use linguistic and visual euphemisms in their messages (Ono 2009: 157), and informal education on menstruation focuses on how to conceal signs of menstruation. Beliefs about menstrual pollution do still crop up from time to time though. For instance, in 2000, Ōta Fusae became
the first female governor in Japan when she was elected as governor of Osaka Prefecture. Each year, one of Japan’s three major sumo tournaments is hosted in Osaka, and traditionally the governor is supposed to present a prize at the tournament. However, the Japan Sumo Association barred Ōta from entering the ring, claiming that a woman entering the ring would pollute it. She remained governor for eight years, but she was never allowed to present the prize in the tournament ring (Hindell 2000). Even in 2018, a referee at a sumo match ordered women to exit the sumo ring, which they had entered in order to provide first aid to a politician who had collapsed (Tarrant 2018).

I will conclude here with a brief look ahead at some of the potential practical applications of this research. One of the most important things to take away from this investigation into the treatment of menstruation throughout Japanese history is that specific views of menstruation reflect general views of women in society. These beliefs often have negative connotations and put women in an inferior position to men. Views of women’s bodies are extremely important to understand; as long as women are continuously essentialized into reproductive beings, then recent scandals, like the Tokyo Medical University rigging exams against female applicants, may continue to happen (Tanaka 2019). Moving forward, it is important to consider how the climate surrounding discourses on menstruation and menstrual products can improve. If negative views of menstruation reflect negative views of women, then perhaps positive thoughts and experiences in relation to menstruation could lead to more positive treatment and positioning of women (and vice versa). As discussed above, the content of sex education classes can have an impact on views of menstruation and sexuality, as well as what kinds of menstrual products girls choose to use. Changes in sex education curricula that include information about tampons and healthy discussion of female sexuality beyond marital procreative activities have the potential to improve young women’s self-image and experiences with menstruation. Lastly, creating more mainstream public formats (beyond menstrual product advertising) that allow women to express their own personal menstruation experiences – both good and bad – is another avenue for developing more positive and complex views of menstruation in Japanese society as a whole. The story of menstruation in Japan is one of religion and politics, foreign conceptions and domestic adaptations, and innovations and traditions.
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91
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