Female Nationalist Activism in Japan: Truth-Telling Through Everyday Micro-Practices

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Abstract
There is an emerging debate about the role and importance of women in right-wing nationalist movements. Drawing on research that highlights the need to study such women as active and complex political agents, this article examines a phenomenon that has previously received little attention—the activism of female Japanese nationalists. We approach the question of how such activism is practiced by analyzing a group interview with female nationalists, a nationalist manga centering on women's experiences, and autobiographic books on such activism by and for Japanese women. The article contributes by arguing that female nationalist agency in Japan is a complex phenomenon, which is enacted through everyday micro-practices. It outlines how female nationalist activism draws upon and enhances, as well as challenges and transcends, a traditional Japanese “housewife identity.” As such, the female Japanese nationalist is imagined as having access to certain truths. She takes on the role of “truth-teller,” who is playing a strategic role in “waking people up” to the nationalist cause by voicing anger but also making space for a more “joyful,” “cute,” and inconspicuous everyday activism.

Keywords
Japan, right-wing women, everyday activism, historical revisionism, micro-practices, nationalism, woke

Introduction
Over the few past decades, the political landscape has shifted to the right in many parts of the world. New conservative, nationalist, and alt-right political movements have appeared, and existing ones have gained strength. While these movements have traditionally been male-dominated, a male bias has also been reproduced in analyses of their activities. Women’s experiences as part of such movements have been largely downplayed or ignored (Power, 2004). The same tendency is arguably seen in the study of social or political movements more generally (Farr, 2011). Yet, in the past decade, research has begun to analyze the role of women as influencers, leaders, supporters, founders, political representatives, and grassroots activists in right-wing nationalist movements (Dauber, 2017; Dietze & Roth, 2020; Fangen & Skjelsbæk, 2020; Köttig, 2017; Mattheis, 2018/2019; Mehta, 2015, 2017; Miller-Idriss, 2020; Power, 2004). Women’s political participation in movements based on a markedly

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anti-feminist and even misogynous ideology is typically seen as highly counterintuitive (Bachetta & Power, 2002; Agius, Edney-Browne, Nicholas, & Cook, 2021). Recent scholarship has nonetheless highlighted the need to understand nationalist women activists as active and complex political subjects who exercise political agency in multifaceted and sometimes surprising ways (Blee, 2020; Dietze & Roth, 2020; Downing, 2018; Félix, 2017; Mehta, 2015, 2017).

Much of the existing research on right-wing women has dealt with movements in various European countries, and addressed topics related to evangelical Christianity in the United States, white supremacy, and the racialized non-Western Other in the form of refugees or Islam (Agius et al., 2020; Blee, 1991, 2020; Bonds, 2020; Dauber, 2017; Fangen & Skjelsbæk, 2020; Köttig, 2017; Mattheis, 2018/2019; Miller-Idriss, 2020). Part of the literature, however, has begun to direct some attention to “Europe and beyond,” “Europe and elsewhere,” or “the world” (Agius, Bergman Rosamond, & Kinnvall, 2020; Bachetta & Power, 2002; Dietze & Roth, 2020), and scholars have analyzed movements in India, Africa, and the Middle East, suggesting a phenomenon that transcends the global North or West (see in particular Bachetta & Power, 2002; Mehta, 2015, 2017). This article contributes to the existing research by focusing on the Japanese female nationalist context. Earlier engagements with this topic have focused on either the causes or the consequences of female Japanese nationalist activism (Asahina, 2019; Yamaguchi, 2013, 2018). In this article, however, we rather square in on the discourses that mobilize Japanese women to this kind of activism, and investigate how female nationalist agency is articulated and enacted through everyday micro-practices (See Hagström, Ha, & Öberg, 2022).

As Solomon and Steele (2016) note, the study of micro-practices is useful as it can provide an understanding of characteristics that tend to go unnoticed or disappear as part of larger analytical categories. Since it is difficult to access the life-world of female Japanese nationalists, our analysis in this article is based on three empirical materials, each of which reflects how everyday agency is articulated and enacted: a Japanese nationalist manga series centered on women’s activism; autobiographical accounts of activism by important female Japanese nationalists, namely Chiba (2017), Oka (2018), Sanami (2013), and Yoko (2014); and a group interview conducted with eight members of Hanadōkei—arguably the most important female-oriented Japanese nationalist group. The materials enable engagement with different and complementary inroads to the micro-practices through which women enact their nationalist agency.

The article makes two contributions. First, and in line with certain strands of feminist research, female nationalist agency needs to be understood as a complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a certain ideology. It is often articulated as different from male-oriented nationalism (Félix, 2017)—an “alternative identity,” which in the case of Japan arguably centers on the role of the “traditional housewife” (LeBlanc, 1999; Ueno, 2004). In analyzing various micro-practices, we outline how female nationalist activism both reifies and enhances, but also transcends and challenges, this housewife identity. Second, the female Japanese nationalist is imagined as having access to certain truths. She takes on the role of “truth-teller,” whose role it is to wake the Japanese people up to reality and forge a nationalist consciousness. This is strikingly similar to humanitarian activism on social issues and it poses an interesting question to future research, namely, to what extent female nationalist activism mirrors, or even appropriates, the “woke” discourses that it sets out to challenge.

The next section reviews the existing research on female nationalism, outlining how it conceives of women’s activism and how Japanese female nationalism draws legitimacy from the housewife identity. We then analyze the Japanese nationalist context as well as the micro-practices that emerge from the empirical material, demonstrating how women are conceived as “truth-tellers,” in particular regarding the interpretation of contested historical events.
Women’s Nationalist Activism and the Japanese Housewife Identity

Women’s participation in movements that are often outrightly hostile to female emancipation from patriarchal structures naturally raises questions (Blee, 1991). It seems paradoxical that women would participate in activism that seeks to limit them to traditional family-oriented roles. This puzzle has been noted by Bachetta and Power (2002), who argue that “it is a fact that in many cases right-wing women, leaders and activists, alike, fight for societies that would totally eliminate women who behave as they do” (p. 6). For this reason, gender-oriented scholarship has had somewhat “uneasy encounters” with the phenomenon (Mehta, 2015, p. 416). Historically, there was a reluctance to understand women right-wing activists as political agents. Instead, they were assumed to be merely “pawns,” who participate in activism to protect or empower themselves. For example, in her analysis of Chile, Power (2004) argues that scholars “saw no need to study pro-Pinochet women” because they were seen as lacking “independent initiative and were merely pawns in the male-dominated political game” (pp. 138–139).

According to Downing (2018), the tendency to ignore potentially more complex notions of female political agency can be explained in part by how women are seen as naturally left-leaning and inclined toward collectivism and consensus-building. While men are understood as complex and ambivalent political agents, women’s identities risk being reduced to a particular political stance. Even though women’s roles, motivations, and actual practices may be diverse, their political activism—for example, as part of peace or animal rights movements—is widely associated with an allegedly “benign” female nature and experiences of motherhood (El-Bushra, 2007; Gaarder, 2011; Tidy, 2015). By contrast, women’s participation in practices that are not seen as morally justified—or as unhelpful to female emancipation—have often been downplayed, neglected, or erased, to the point that women who act aggressively are seen as flawed or less feminine (Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015). The study of women in movements that may seem counterintuitive for them to take part in, however, could help us to understand the more multifaceted aspects of women’s activism and political identity (Blee, 1991).

The assumption that right-wing nationalist women need to be analyzed as active and complex political subjects, who exercise political agency, leads us to the starting point for this inquiry: that women’s participation in such movements draw on multiple practices, voices, and ideological positions (Mehta, 2015, 2017; see also Blee, 2020; Dietze & Roth, 2020; Downing, 2018; Félix, 2017; Mattheis, 2018/2019). To understand this activism, it is arguably important to turn to context-specific experiences rather than invoke claims of an allegedly essential nature based on “female characteristics.” In order to avoid reducing women’s political agency to stereotypes, we need to analyze activism as “an ongoing array of social practices that produce, reproduce and constitute … subjects and social formations” (Tidy, 2015, p. 455). Moreover, when trying to understand female activism, it is important to do so by asking not whether women are being duped by an ideology, but rather, as bell hooks puts it, the extent to which they are “political thinkers making political choices” (quoted in Gaarder, 2011, p. 72).

Arguably, to grasp nationalist women, we need to engage more deeply with the discourses that enable their activism, as well as the everyday realities of its enactment. In particular, everyday micro-practices may be of interest to better grasp how nationalist agency is mobilized (Blee, 2020; Linstead & Pullen, 2006; Mehta, 2015). The significance of micro-practices has been increasingly articulated in political analysis (Solomon & Steele, 2016). Solomon and Steele (2016) have emphasized how micro-practices can challenge and negotiate structures of political power. As an example, consider Harkness’ (2019) study of the way Muslim women have used micro-practices around religious clothing (such as the hijab) to resist and challenge Islamic patriarchal structures. Outlined through an analysis of Qatari women’s micro-practices around clothing, the author illustrates how the modification, adjustment, and removal of hijabs may indeed create space to exercise agency in novel ways. Micro-narratives, one aspect of micro-practices, can moreover be understood as stories that “are created in groups … and are
uniquely relevant to the members of those groups” (Devine, Quinn, & Aguilar, 2014, p. 274). They are particularly useful for capturing how practices of self-transformation function as social spaces where discourses are negotiated and tested (Friis Søgaard, Kolind, Thylstrup, & Deuchar, 2016).

As Harkness clarifies, micro-practices are easy to disregard, which is why engagements with them can enable a richer and more complex understanding of political agency. In her research on Jobbik, the Hungarian conservative and radically patriotic Christian party, Félix (2017) has further noted that one dominant motivation for female activism is to enact various types of alternative identities, all of which emphasize nationalist and feminine traits. At times, women’s engagement in nationalist activism may thus involve framing ideas in a “softer” manner, for example, “to promote traditional gender roles around motherhood and homemaking” as part of more hardline claims (Miller-Idriss, 2020, p. 489).

In the case of Japan, one important alternative identity is that of the housewife. While it is not necessarily a factual representation of contemporary reality, as most Japanese women are now in the workforce, the housewife identity remains an enormously important ideal in Japanese society. Prior to and during World War II, an era that is often idealistically invoked by right-wing nationalists, women were prohibited from participating in political activism as it was believed to interfere with their main activities of nurturing and mothering (Ueno, 2004).

As LeBlanc (1999) has outlined, the Japanese housewife places focus on an enigmatic and gendered tension in Japanese politics. While the politician embodies the public sphere, the housewife enacts an alternative way of seeing and making sense of the world. In confronting the political system, she is understood as embodying a “unique political perspective” (LeBlanc, 1999, pp. 2–3). In part, the separation of men into public figures and women as belonging to the private sphere is no different from how issues of womanhood and caring/family have traditionally been restricted in many societies. Yet, in Japan, the housewife identity also feeds into notions of womanhood in general, enabling political participation that differs from other more standard practices of being and seeing. The housewife is described as “good with details,” “dependable,” “honest,” “practical,” and “clean” (LeBlanc, 1999, p. 89). As LeBlanc notes, this identity can be leveraged as a political advantage, as it can “justify a oneness with the ethics that ‘ordinary’ people would espouse” (LeBlanc, 1999, p. 25). She summarizes this as follows:

As “housewives” women are, by definition, outsiders to the ugly modern world of competitive individualism and insiders to the old-fashioned world of communalism, of mutual self-sacrifice, outsiders to the world of amoral, man-crushing organizations and insiders to the world of personal creativity, moral development, and unfettered expression (LeBlanc, 1999, p. 25).

The link to home and family, and to an ethics of care and community, thus creates an understanding of the housewife as different from the political sphere. Most importantly, because “the housewife is consigned to be viewed by society as a born caretaker, she can draw convincingly on the authority of her identity to speak the truth on how society falls short of its role of caring for its own” (LeBlanc, 1999, p. 203). In the analysis below, we deepen the understanding of how this female identity relates to truth-telling and scrutinize how nationalist-oriented micro-practices both reify and transcend it.

### The Micro-Practices of Female Japanese Nationalists

This section analyzes how female nationalist agency is articulated and enacted through everyday micro-practices. As mentioned above, our analysis is based on a group interview conducted with eight members of Hanadokei, as well as observations of their street activism, and several nationalist books and manga that focus on the role of women in these movements. We have chosen to analyze manga and nationalist books as such materials both reflect and affect power relations within a society (Hall, 2006). In so doing, we aim to understand how they comprise “primary sites, practices and frames
through which people make sense of the world” (Rowley cited in Rowley & Weldes, 2012, p. 514). Higuchi notes that Japanese pop culture is particularly useful for analyzing Japanese nationalism, and that nationalist manga has helped to popularize right-wing issues and bring them to a wider audience (Higuchi, 2014). In analyzing this material, we strive to understand how activism is defined and represented, as well as how activists act towards the world (Milliken, 1999; see also Johnstone, 2018; Öberg, 2019, 2020). The study of micro-practices represented in popular culture may enable a better understanding of how everyday life contains engagements with political activism (see Rowley & Weldes, 2012). As a gateway to the analysis, we will begin by providing a background to Japanese nationalist activism.

A Background to Nationalist Activism in Japan

From the 1950s to the turn of the new millennium, Japanese far-right (uyoku) activism was dominated by men driving around the streets in vans, dressed in paramilitary uniforms while playing noisy political messages and military songs. Unlike in Europe and North America, such groups have not primarily been associated with overt racism or xenophobia. Rather, their political agendas have centered on topics such as revering the emperor and honoring Japanese war dead at the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, opposing communism, and claiming territories contested with Russia, China, and South Korea. While such groups were politically influential until the 1970s, they gradually lost clout in the decades that followed (Gill, 2018; Smith, 2018; for an overview, see Higuchi, 2014).

In the mid-2000s, a new form of right-wing movement emerged on the streets of many urban areas in Japan: a phenomenon known as Kōdō Hoshu Undō, or the “Action Conservative Movement” (ACM). Its campaign style is characterized by demonstrations in casual clothing and the extensive use of the Internet (Gill, 2018; Yamaguchi, 2013). The ACM can, in part, be situated among other parallel social movements rejuvenated by the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster, as issues traditionally considered non-political in Japanese society, such as science, food supply, and gender, became increasingly politicized (Hirata Kimura, 2016). Yet, the new wave of right-wing activism shares with more traditional activism a strong focus on Japan’s colonial past and historical revisionism (Higuchi, 2014). It was arguably reinvigorated by the addition of the “comfort women” issue to Japanese junior high school history textbooks in the 1990s. Questions of historical interpretation have since seen a polarized debate, with nationalist groups and Japan’s neighboring countries making opposite claims about how Japanese history textbooks should be written or revised (Takayama, 2009). Leading Japanese right-wing activists stress that their key concern is “the proper interpretation of Japan’s colonial history” (cited in Yamaguchi, 2018, p. 200).

The revisionist discourse has long influenced Japanese political debate and foreign policy, to the extent that criticism of Japan’s historical role is widely considered a threat to representations of national identity (Suzuki, 2019). Revisionism means not only rejection of the idea of Japan as a perpetrator during World War II, but also support for a more assertive, proud, and patriotic Japanese citizenry and state, particularly in relation to the surrounding East Asian states (Hagström, 2015). Revisionists have suggested that dominant historical narratives in Japan are “masochistic,” and stigmatize and weaken “innocent people” (Suzuki, 2019, pp. 304–308, 318). Some have thus emphasized the need to construct “Japanese history from a Japanese perspective” for the purpose of national unity and identity, something that has been echoed in the Japanese media (Nozaki, 2005, pp. 8–9). For nationalist movements, this effort takes place as part of what is perceived as a “war” over how the past and the present are conceived. This has been referred to as a “history war,” a “propaganda war,” a “war without weapons,” and a “100-year war,” where particular historical issues—notably the “comfort women”—are considered the “main battlegrounds” (Suzuki, 2019, pp. 314–315).

However, recent nationalist activism has not been confined to questions of historical revisionism. It has also been directed against anti-nuclear movements, leftist rallies, criticism of the imperial system,
the Buddhist religious movement Sōka Gakkai, the Burakumin (an outcast group with origins in the feudal era), various “liberal” media groups and the government, and in support of Japan’s whaling rights. There has also been an increase in anti-China rhetoric in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. One important issue that has divided right-wing nationalist groups is how to address the so-called Zainichi—the Korean minority that lives permanently in Japan (Gill, 2018; Yamaguchi, 2013). An explicit aim of one of the most influential ACM groups—Zaitokukai—is to deprive this minority of its special status and alleged privileges (Gill, 2018). Yet, nationalist discourse in Japan is far from monolithic and there are examples of right-wing activists clashing on the Internet due to their opposing views on Asian minorities, ranging from the positive to the negative (Smith, 2018).

In contrast to the heavily male-dominated uyoku (far-right) groups, more recent nationalist activism has encouraged women’s participation. While Japanese women do not support nationalist movements to the same extent as men, they are playing increasingly active roles in them, and it has become common to see women leaders delivering speeches and taking part in demonstrations and street activism (Gill, 2018; Higuchi, 2014; Smith, 2018; Yamaguchi, 2013). Yet, there are also indications that at least some female nationalist activists have little interest in party politics or ideological affiliation, despite the fact that they have joined a group that displays a nationalist ideology (Higuchi, 2014; Yasuda, 2012).

**Angry Nationalist Women in a “War of Information”**

The underlying premise of the influential nationalist manga series *Hi no maru gaisenotome*, which follows a young woman, Kanade, on her journey from ordinary high school student to full-fledged nationalist activist, is that Japan is in a war between truth and lies rather than of armed forces. The idea of an information war also features in an account by the celebrity blogger, Random YOKO, who writes about it in religious Shinto terms: As a country handed down to current generations by their ancestors, Japan’s history and achievements are now being stolen by South Korea, and Japan’s role in history must be protected at all costs (Yoko, 2014). Arguably, the information war between the right and the left is the underlying premise in how activists understand the world, and female activism as part of it.

The idea that every Japanese person is caught up in an information war creates a sense of urgency that seeps into the everyday lives of those who are depicted as being at school, watching television, searching the Internet, as well as in social life more generally. The war is waged mainly in Japan, and the enemies include Zainichi Koreans (or Koreans more broadly), the Japanese state media, the political left, and other “self-hating” Japanese. In the manga, Kanade, who is a young, schoolgirl, gradually discovers one truth after another. She attends an activists’ meeting and learns how angry counter-demonstrators dehumanize nationalist demonstrators, and how Japanese newspapers slander and lie about nationalists. The more she learns, the angrier she gets. Kanade even gets a taste of “combat,” by fighting on Twitter with “left wing” media. In fact, women activists emphasize their anger both in pop culture and street activism. Anger also featured in our group interview with female nationalists as well as in the nationalist books. The message is that “anger is natural,” and “if you are Japanese you are angry.” However, in viewing the street activism it was evident that such anger is held back, and that activist women are also keen on showing their commitment and emotions in a more controlled way when interacting with passers-by.

So, what are these women angry about? The issues that women nationalists raise largely correspond to those that feature prominently in the Japanese nationalist movement more broadly. Korea is repeatedly mentioned as a source of anger, for example, in the idea that Japanese land is being bought up by Koreans. The “comfort women” issue is another source of anger. In our group interview, Hanadokei members expressed anger about the lies Koreans are allegedly telling about history (see Kitahara & Park, 2014). There is also anger that Japanese people do not or cannot show their love for
Japan more openly, and that nationalism is not considered more natural. Hanadokei leader Oka Makiko and other group members expressed anger at Article nine of Japan’s Constitution, which renounces war as “a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes” and pledges that war potential “will never be maintained.” However, they emphasized that the underlying problem is that many Japanese people do not identify with their country. The lack of a “sense of unity,” which Japan had before the war, is said to weaken the country, and constitutional revision is therefore considered a must (see also Kitahara & Park, 2014).

One Hanadokei member said that she previously had not cared that much about Japan’s flag or the national anthem, but that she has since come to see it as “awkward” and “scary” that these symbols cannot be used more freely. She emphasized that the norms around them must change. Nationalist discourse also directs anger at the way in which the Japanese allegedly ignore the “truth” that Japan is the oldest country in the world, with 2670 years of history (Yoko, 2014, p. 4, 27). Several books boost the unique and unbroken bloodline of the emperor, which is said to be the longest in the world (Chiba, 2017; see also Oka, 2018). Conversely, there is anger that the emperor is no longer revered as a God, and that some have proposed that female emperors should be allowed. Moreover, anger revolves around the notion that allegedly intrinsic differences between men and women, and between Japan and the rest of the world, are too little emphasized in contemporary Japan.

**Nationalist Women as Fighting “Truth-Tellers”**

In the manga, the majority population is depicted not as part of the enemy, but as “sleeping” through the war. Put simply, it is the duty of activists not only to combat the enemy forces, but also to expose their lies in order to “wake” the Japanese people from their “sleep.” The related issue of teaching “true” Japanese history to the Japanese people was raised in our group interview with female Japanese nationalists. The leader of Hanadokei said that “other Japanese are totally unconcerned” that the history of Japan taught in Korea is “absolutely wrong” and, even worse, “a lot of people even believe that Korea is telling the truth.” She said that she started to study history books in earnest after visiting Korea as a student and noting how Koreans were saying terrible things about Japan. The implication was that she had also been “sleeping” at one point and become an activist to teach the Japanese the correct history. Other members described reading mainstream newspapers and gradually realizing that their reporting was “incorrect” and “abusive.” One woman said it was scary that newspapers failed to disclose the Korean nationality of a murderer. Several others repeated phrases such as, “when we watch TV, we realize there is another reality” and seemed insistent on exposing the “horrible lies” of the media, often by searching the Internet for the truth. This worldview makes activist life a constant struggle.

The manga also addresses the costs of “becoming awake” and “telling the truth.” To wake up to the world through truth-telling is partly to give up on “normal life.” For instance, one may be forced to choose between the political cause and striving to get into a good university or having a boyfriend. The manga emphasizes how fighting is dangerous, partly since the enemy always “plays dirty” and activists risk jail. “Waking up” therefore means facing a number of difficult choices. Throughout the three-volume series, Kanade oscillates between wanting to become an activist and having second thoughts. For a while, she is stuck between both worlds, but eventually decides to embrace her awakening, “take responsibility” and “fight back.” Like other cartoon representations, this manga helps us to understand how everyday activism is shaped and normalized by means of mediation (Grayson, 2013).

The activist book Joshi to aikoku [Women and nationalism], written by former model and newscaster Sanami Yūko, contains interviews with various nationalist women. One describes how, as a woman, the fear of participating in nationalist demonstrations contrasts with feelings of wanting to “do something” to protect Japan. Eventually, she participates and arrives at the insight that “to love
and to fight is the same thing,” and vows to “find her own way to fight” (Sanami, 2013, p. 197, 198 respectively). In this account, nationalist activism is rearticulated in relation to the taboo of taking part in such activism as a Japanese woman. Questions arise such as: “Can she tell her family?” and “Will they understand?” In the end, the woman’s family does understand, but violence from counter-demonstrators and Internet “doxing” present “real dangers” to her. She continues with her activism but is forced to become more private. The moral of the story is that during an “info-war,” activism may well be scary and dangerous, but is necessary for the sake of protecting one’s own. Nonetheless, Sanami ends by emphasizing the importance of creating an environment, in which it is easier for women to become activists. Moreover, she argues that women need to raise their voices, “much like with the comfort women issue, and differently from men, as women’s viewpoint will make this country better” (Sanami, 2013, p. 206, emphasis added, see also, pp. 199–205).

The information war reaches its apex regarding the “comfort women” issue. The issue has received increased attention in the past decade, particularly in relation to the erection of memorial statues for the “comfort women”, in Glendale, California, among others. Several female members of Japan’s House of Representatives, including LDP lawmaker Sugita Mio, have visited Glendale to protest against the statue. In the manga too, Kanade is portrayed as fighting against the lies of Koreans in California and to protect innocent Japanese exchange students from being bullied and attacked (see Volume II). The overarching theme of the story is that US Koreans bully Japanese and try to affect the interpretation of history.

In the material, a “woke” female Japanese nationalist identity thus emerges. By being “awake,” the activist is uniquely attentive to “the truth” concerning issues of racial/cultural injustice. Despite of the dangers this entails, her ultimate responsibility is to wake others up and make them conscious of how the world works. Truth-telling as a concept commonly revolves around questions of “who is able to tell the truth, about what, with what consequences, and with what relation to power” (Peters, 2003, p. 217). While truth-telling is about “speaking truth to power,” in this case, it works to facilitate and enhance nationalist messages through the micro-practices that women articulate and enact as part of the nationalist cause.

**The Contradictions of Female Nationalist Agency**

In Japanese nationalist discourse, female activists are described as “strategically” employed against leftists and Korean women. They are also described as “knowing the truth” solely by virtue of being women, in ways that link them to the traditional housewife identity. Female nationalists in Japan have indeed emphasized the need to employ women instead of men as a counterweight to how feminist activists are working on issues that specifically concern women (Yamaguchi, 2018). It seems widely accepted that there are certain things women can say that men cannot, such as exposing the alleged lies about the “comfort women” issue. In this way, right-wing movements might consider women’s participation as a way of “incorporating women’s political savvy into the political arena,” to combat immigration, liberalism, and increased marketization (Blee, 1991, p. 70). A woman nationalist interviewed by Kitahara and Park (2014), for instance, noted that men who talk about “comfort women” in a critical way are often accused of bullying. In our group interview with Hanadokei members, moreover, one woman explained that it helps the nationalist cause to “front women and children” as it gives a “softer” form to the activism, which might be easier to identify with. Another participant stated that women are better positioned to combat the occasional allegations of sexual harassment against conservative politicians.

Nonetheless, our analysis indicates that female activism in Japan oscillates between two seemingly contradictory logics. First, Japanese female activists speak their minds clearly, and therefore do not succumb to more traditional conceptions of what a woman should be or do in Japanese society. There are many social taboos in Japan and our interviewees mentioned that if they, as housewives, talk about
politics they are sending a message that it is okay for women to do so. One woman said that her husband and sons do not listen to her, but as an activist she has a voice that stands out from the norm and, in a sense, transgresses the role that women are supposed to play. Thus, the activism not only helps to re-polticize issues that are considered taboo to address, but also transcends traditional gender roles—at least in part.

Second, and seemingly contradicting the first point, several female activists—both in popular culture and elsewhere—fall back on traditional gender roles. For example, as spoken Japanese is itself highly gendered, one activist emphasized the importance of perfecting women’s language in their activities. Other materials stress that women’s foremost role is that of a “housewife and mother” (Kitahara & Park, 2014, pp. 46–50). Osawa (2015) has argued that a major issue for conservative women, which prompts them to act, is the perception that traditional gender norms are under attack. Based on interviews with 15 conservative women, she illustrates the tension between acting within the constraints of traditional gender norms and making space for political activism. Chiba’s book, which is framed around the “mother as nationalist,” also raises issues that idealize traditional motherhood while putting forward “a mother’s point of view.” She attacks current “Western” views on gender equality by invoking notions such as the naturally nurturing instinct in women, and the need for more “let the men die, save women and children first” type of thinking (Chiba, 2017, p. 23, 74, 188). The tension between the essentialized female characteristics described above and activism is resolved in the manga, as several older female characters support the younger nationalists.

It is not uncommon for women to create separate women’s groups, for example, in business or politics. Many political institutions have adopted women’s legislative caucuses (Adams, Scherpereel, & Wylie, 2019). Yet, while such groups increase the visibility of political movements, Fangen (1997) shows how the creation of women’s organizations as part of rightist underground movements may also reflect “…a pre-existing dissatisfaction with conditions and opportunities for females in a highly male-dominated environment” (p. 122). She further notes:

By creating their own organizations, women on the far right have a chance to voice their opinions, develop leadership skills and gain self-confidence. Thus the presence of all-female groups on the far right indicates the dissatisfaction women feel with their opportunities in a male-dominated hierarchy. (Fangen, 1997, p. 122).

Yet, the groups under scrutiny in this article are not exclusively for women and it is not uncommon for men to participate in them. In Kitahara and Park’s (2014) observations, for example, around 20 men watched over the Hanakokei street activism they witnessed in 2013, indicating a certain gendered division of labor. That said, as the final part of the analysis illustrates, we also find micro-practices that not only complement but also differs from more male-centric aspects of Japanese nationalism.

Cute and Joyful Activist Practices

Women’s nationalist activism is commonly represented as part of their everyday lives. The manga, for example, centers on seemingly trivial and mundane issues—how to access a park, the construction of a historical monument, a school history assignment or a field trip—that are often taken directly from real events. Interestingly, Sanami’s (2013) activist book suggests that inconspicuous activism is a solution for women who may want to do something but are reluctant to become full-fledged activists, perhaps due to demands from family, or the dangers of activism discussed above. By interviewing such women, she highlights the importance of micro-practices, such as joining the armed forces as a woman, helping with cleansing rituals at the abovementioned Yasukuni Shrine, or, like one female singer, including war anthems that are generally considered taboo into her repertoire.
As mentioned above, in appealing to collective emotions, Japanese right-wing activists—both men and women—often express anger (see also Asahina, 2019). At other times, however, and perhaps less noted, female activists mediate other more subtle emotions, such as joy, and evoke “cuteness.” One female addition to nationalist activism in Japan is thus the way in which some women draw on and invoke the “kawaii-culture,” which originally stems from Tokyo’s Harajuku district. Kawaii is allegedly one of the most popular words in contemporary Japan and is taken to be representative of Japanese pop culture more broadly (Nittono, 2016). It means “cute” in Japanese, and represents and includes a mixture of colorful and child-friendly aesthetics, fantasy, and various fiction-related themes in clothing and accessories. This feature is also part of street activism, where handmade trinkets such as cellphone covers and straps with cute nationalist symbols are sold at events fronted by stylish women in kimonos acting in a cheerful manner. Kitahara and Park (2014) similarly note that the atmosphere created by the glittery handmade posters at some women-oriented nationalist events differ significantly from the loud roars of traditional male-dominated far-right (uyoku) events. The intermingling of kawaii culture and nationalism in micro-practices, conscious or not, can also be seen in popular culture more generally. One famous example is how one of the best-selling pop idols of all time in Japan, Hamasaki Ayumi, caused controversy in 2017 by wearing a trendy jacket with a sew on patch of the “Rising sun” imperial war flag during a live performance (Koh, 2017).

Overall, we found the street activism we encountered to be “happy” rather than angry. In our meeting with Hanadokei activists, but also in the popular culture representations of nationalist activism, the ideas “let’s have fun” and “let’s do activism at our own pace” predominate. The women seemed to believe that traditional nationalist activism is too strict and may put excessive pressure on participants. One member explicitly stated that “no one should feel pressured” as an activist, and the women emphasized that they enjoy participating in Hanadokei precisely because it allows them to perform activism in accordance with their own wishes—a sort of “soft” everyday activism. This also became obvious to us after the street activist meeting finished, when many of the women went to have lunch together, and then on to ohanami, that is, to eat, drink, socialize, and look at the cherry blossoms.

In her work, Yamaguchi (2013) argues that the combination of anger and joy gives a “staged” look to far-right activism. On witnessing an activist event she writes:

After several other members gave their speeches, [the leader of the group] announced the end of the demonstration. Then a sudden transformation occurred among the activists: their demeanor changed dramatically from being loud and aggressive to calm and cheerful. At that moment, I realized that the aggressiveness and hostility exhibited in the demonstration was largely a performance staged by the activists (p. 106).

A different way of seeing this would be to say that for female Japanese nationalist activists, possibly unlike most other types of right-wing nationalism, there is no contradiction between the expressions of anger and joy. Female right-wing activists seem to understand that agency is heterogeneous and multifaceted, and that it does not need to be either angry or happy. If conceived of through everyday micro-practices, we perceive the articulation and enactment of a type of agency that is not necessarily about channeling hate, but more about “gently” waking people up to the nationalist cause.

**Conclusion**

This article has addressed women’s participation in right-wing movements by focusing on a case, with which the existing research has seldom engaged—Japanese women’s nationalist activism. Our
analysis emphasizes how female activism facilitates, complements, and possibly also challenges gender roles in traditional far-right activism. It also illustrates how women are represented as “truth-tellers” who play specific roles and embody traditional female characteristics when waking people up to the nationalist cause.

However, such truth-telling is not unique to nationalist activism. The role it plays is, somewhat paradoxically, reminiscent of arguments used by groups at loggerheads with right-wing nationalism. Consider, first, the idea of wakefulness or, in its more popular form, “woke culture.” The idea of woke, as in staying alert to racial prejudice and discrimination, finds its reference point exactly in the idea of mobilizing people by waking them up to political or social injustices. Interestingly, and not unrelated, nationalist truth-telling also shares features with basic notions of Feminist Standpoint Theory, understood as epitomizing attempts to disrupt notions of truth that are taken to reside within certain masculine or normative ideals through truth embodied by women (see Paradies, 2018). Ironically, the truth-telling of Japanese women’s right-wing activism shares the same functions—indeed it mirrors it—as it is supposedly envisioned as “speaking truth to power” through an embodied perspective, although it views the details of such power in a radically different light.

While Japanese women’s nationalist activism should not be reified as unique, it is important to take note of its diverse nature. Everyday activism might amount to anything from getting access to a park or helping to normalize nationalist songs by singing them in public, to making, selling, or wearing nationalist trinkets, or simply showing up at demonstrations. In this way, Japanese female nationalism both reifies many of the core tenets of Japanese nationalism, but also carves out and cultivates an alternative agency rooted in traditional housewife conceptions of community ethics in ways that go beyond and challenge how political activism is typically understood.

Paradoxically, the enactment of micro-practices as a way of carving out space for agency enables an activism that is open to those who may feel constrained as women in both their everyday lives and their sense of political agency. Their micro-practices draw on an emotional spectrum that goes beyond the stereotypical anger of male far-right activism and draws on “joy” or “cuteness” in ways that, through gendered trinkets and symbols, continue into consumerist culture. The calling for an activism that is “softer” and “without pressure,” thereby invokes a type of agency that is quite different from the white supremacy-oriented far-right activism in Europe and North America. In a political climate where traditional gender values are taken seriously, such inconspicuous activism functions as a way of both enhancing and challenging nationalist discourse. While the issue of truth-telling in relation to particular historical events may be unique to Japan, there is a broader question that may be useful to consider in future research, namely, to what extent nationalist activism indeed works performatively, by mirroring and appropriating feminist discourses.

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Notes
1. We use the term “nationalist” to refer to the micro-practices that we analyze, mainly because the empirical sources tend to self-identify as *aikokushugi*, which is the Japanese term for nationalism.
2. Manga can be defined as comics or graphic novels, of all possible genres, that originate in Japan. Outside of Japan, manga has been incorporated as a loan word that typically refers to comics published in Japan or work that is inspired by such comics. In Japan, manga is highly popular and has a broad readership.
3. We analyze *Hi no maru gaisenotome* [The street activist girl promoting the rising sun], a three-volume graphic novel that ranges over 450 pages (see Tomita 2015, 2016, 2017).
4. The group interview was conducted as a conversation with eight members of *Hanadokei* in Tokyo on 29 March 2019. *Hanadokei* was formed in 2010 and had 1040 members in August 2015 (see Hanadokei homepage, n.d.).
5. While female nationalist activists in Japan are concerned with several historical and current issues, the key topic is arguably the debate around the “comfort women,” and the way it has become the focus of intense argument and negotiation, mainly between Japan and South Korea, from where a large proportion of the women in question originated (Soh, 2000; Nozaki, 2005). “Comfort women” is a euphemism commonly used to depict the hundreds of thousands of women and girls who were forced into sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese Army in occupied countries and territories before and during World War II. The term is a translation of the Japanese word *ianfu*, which can be translated as “comforting/consoling woman.”
6. The shrine commemorates almost 2.5 million Japanese war dead, from 1868 onwards. It is considered controversial mainly due to the way in which its commemoration also includes 1068 convicted war criminals, including 14 Class-A war criminals.

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