

## 研究報告

# Aviation, Gender, and Fashion : How the Aviator Katherine Stinson Influenced Japanese Schoolgirl Culture

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## Introduction

The first decades of the 1900s heralded a new chapter in Japan's entertainment history. Barnstorming aviators from the United States such as Charles Niles and Arthur Smith came to Japan. The Japanese who flocked to their air shows were thrilled with the flights of biplanes with open cockpits and the performance of aerobatics such as loop-the-loop and upside-down flying. According to a report in *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* in December 1915, five members of the imperial family witnessed Charles Niles's feats.<sup>1</sup> The same newspaper reported in April 1916 that Arthur Smith accomplished the skywriting of the word TOKIO in the sky.<sup>2</sup>

Niles and Smith astonished Japanese audiences. However, their popularity as barnstormers was soon eclipsed by an American aviator from Alabama, Katherine Stinson, who visited Japan in 1916. Like Niles and Smith, Stinson was widely reported in the newspapers. However, despite actually being 25 years old and long out of school, she was accorded the special appellation of "flying schoolgirl." According to Matsumura Yuriko, she was slender and her promoter Kushibiki Yumindo thought she would receive increased attention in Japan if she was projected as a much younger person.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, Matsumura reports that this 25-year old aviator captured the imaginations of Japanese schoolgirls, who were so inspired by Stinson's aerial performances across Japan that they sent fan letters to her. Most Japanese men asked Stinson for responses to their fan letters and requested her pictures as a celebrity; instead, most of her fan mail from young girls expressed admiration for what was, in their perception, a totally novel skyward orientation.

Previous studies by Matsumura and Arayama Akihisa on Katherine Stinson have described her visit to Japan and have noted her popularity with Japanese audiences.<sup>4,5</sup> These texts depict her as a pioneering young aviator but do not explain why and how she inspired Japanese women in general and schoolgirls in particular. This paper suggests that Stinson, who used streamlined modern technology to fly through the skies eventually brought new mobility to the culture of Japanese schoolgirls who were prompted to deviate from their patriarchal gender norms. Specifically, this paper scrutinizes newspaper and magazine articles to determine the ways in which Stinson helped the transformation of female garments in Japan and to ascertain her role in arousing their interest in new mobilities made possible by technology.

## The American Aviator in Plane Clothes

Despite her American origins and the fact that she was Japan for the first time, the Japanese media noted and even highlighted her Japanophilia. She reportedly evinced a pro-Japanese attitude and took

a keen interest in Japanese culture. She practiced inscribing her autograph using *hiragana* before sailing to Japan. The *Tokyo Yomiuri Shimbun* reported on December 13, 1916, that she had long looked forward to visiting Japan.<sup>6</sup> She purchased several kimonos during her stay in Japan and wore them frequently throughout her visit.

Stinson's plane clothes often comprised a jacket and riding breeches. She wore the same type of plane clothes as male barnstormers. However, she wore a *furisode*, a long-sleeved kimono designated for unmarried women for one of her flights. Photographs of the Stinson in a kimono were widely circulated among the Japanese. The *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* of January 12, 1917, printed a photograph depicting Stinson in a kimono and sporting a *Bunkin-shimada*, a traditional Japanese hairstyle for young females.<sup>7</sup> This picture showed Stinson as a slender young girl whose ethnicity was not evident because she wore heavy make-up. In fact, she appeared identical to a Japanese girl in that photograph.

Notably, foreigners wearing kimonos were not always welcomed by the Japanese. For instance, *Shojo Gaho* [Girls' Pictorial] printed a picture of an American girl wearing kimono in June 1912.<sup>8</sup> who was described in the accompanying editorial note as an American who loved Japan and wanted to appear like a Japanese girl. This note finally asked readers for their opinions on the photograph. The editor's question may be interpreted as an implicit critique of non-Japanese people wearing traditional kimonos to pass as Japanese.

Arguably, Stinson's adoption of the kimono on her flight changed Japanese perceptions of both women and flying: Stinson evinced that women were capable of flying planes and also proved that women pilots could even take control of planes in the seemingly constraining traditional clothes worn by Japanese women. Stinson thus made possible a new envisioning of a "Japanese" girl.

Japanese women's fashion was transforming in the 1910s from the traditional kimonos to Western-style dresses. The shifts in contemporary trends were visualized in gendered print media such as women's magazines. By the 1920s, women wearing Western-style clothing became iconized as a symbol of "modern girls." The critic Kitazawa Shuichi first used this term in a series of articles published in the *Yomiuri Shimbun*. In one such article (January 8, 1923), he wrote that Japanese female bodies would become more modern, attractive, and European if Japanese women who were used to wearing kimonos began wearing Western-style dresses.<sup>9</sup> According to him, the bodily and fashion-related changes would transfigure the ideas and behaviors of Japanese women. While Western clothing represented the modernization desired at that time, the revolutionary reconstruction of women was not whole-heartedly celebrated by Japanese intelligentsia. Instead, male writers and critics accused modern girls of being immoral, unhealthy, and disrespectful of traditional Japanese values.<sup>10</sup>

It must be noted in this context that the fashion culture of schoolgirls did not follow the same path as adult women and must therefore be independently contemplated. Female students began to attain mobility at the beginning of the 20th century by wearing the *hakama*, a divided skirt used in school uniforms for girls. According to the scholar Namba Tomoko, schoolgirls wore kimonos in the late nineteenth century but in 1899, a girl's school in Tokyo instituted the *hakama* as part of its uniform for girls because it allowed increased freedom of movement.<sup>11</sup> Such an allowance was indispensable

for the health of girls, whose bodies were considered reproductive apparatuses for the bolstering of Japan's patriarchal system.

Stinson's youth and her unmarried status accorded her recognition as a girl in Japan. A magazine titled *Gakusei* [Students] referred to Stinson as a *nihon musume* [Japanese maiden] in an article about her.<sup>12</sup> However, educators did not welcome Stinson because she inspired schoolgirls to aspire to new mobility and no educational magazines for girls praised her. In fact, the *Tokyo Yomiuri Shimbun* of January 8, 1917, reported that an educator in a girls' school admonished students against being influenced by Stinson. This academic believed that unlike Stinson, Japanese ladies should not speak to men or shake their hands in public.

### **Mobility and Exercises in Education**

In the early 1900s, girls who desired and attained social mobility were censured as being "corrupt." Schoolgirls riding bicycles, for instance, became symbols of such corruption in the new era. The schoolgirl protagonist of *Makaze Koikaze*, a serialized novel published in the *Yomiuri Shimbun* in 1903, rides a bicycle in her introduction to the reader in the first scene. Described as wanton and tomboyish, she eventually fails both in academic achievement and in love and dies.

Some Japanese women were granted the opportunity of riding planes as passengers during the 1910s. They wore kimonos when Smith, Niles, and other pilots offered them such rides. These women were also criticized for their alleged "female vanity." In an article in the *Tokyo Yomiuri Shimbun* in January 1917, the principal of Yamawaki Girls' School Yamawaki Husako tried to explain why Japanese women welcomed Stinson. According to her, Stinson symbolized an important face of the friendly relations between Japan and the United States. She claimed that the possibilities of new social mobility that would help them deviate from their traditional gender norms inspired Japanese women, not Stinson's skyward orientation.<sup>13</sup>

The traditional patriarchal grounding of Japanese education did not, however, imply that girls in Japan were constrained or socially immobile. Educators believed that exercises were important because girls would become mothers and thus needed to be healthy. According to Namba, academics understood the importance of women in the workforce when they learned that women in Europe had stepped in to fill the labor gaps left by men who quit their jobs to join national war efforts during World War I. *Shojo Gaho* [Girls' Pictorial] carried pictures of girls playing tennis and football, swinging swings, and doing and doing gymnastics.<sup>14</sup>

Given this context, schoolgirls were encouraged to undertake physical exercises, and the *hakama* guaranteed "proper" activeness. Nonetheless, women were denounced as "corrupt" if they desired and attained new mobility.

### **New Mobility in Classic Garments**

Clothes become an aspect of physical and social mobility. The *hakama*, for instance, was crucial to the process of schoolgirls achieving mobility: they could now dance, play tennis, and ride bicycles.

The *hakama* represented freedom of movement because the tightly bound kimono did not motivate the undertaking of physical exercises. Stinson changed this mindset by connecting traditional garments to new forms of mobility.

The kimono was detrimental to girls' health. In his lecture to raise public awareness about the health of Japanese women, Doctor Erwin Von Bälz opined that tight and thick belts and long sleeves were not amenable to physical exercise and tended to keep female bodies underdeveloped. He also stated that the *furisode* was worse than the ordinary kimono because of heavy and long sleeves that obstructed movement.<sup>15</sup> The kimono began to be associated with passivity and people assumed that women, the weaker sex, should not attempt to invade male realms such as air space. A *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* article titled "Hone no Oeru Onna Dojo Hiko [Troublesome Female Plane Riding]" (February 10, 1916) implied that a woman wearing a kimono should not climb into a plane by describing the plight of a woman who had to be carried up into the cockpit by a man.

By flying in a *furisode*, Stinson created a new image of Japanese girlhood that was not restricted or limited by clothes. She also showed that technological mobility could boost physical mobility for women. Her performances indicated that flying was appropriate for girls, and they inspired activist and writer Yosano Akiko.<sup>16</sup> It is noteworthy that Stinson captured the imaginations of schoolgirls and made them soar. The *Kobe Shimbun* reported on May 5, 1917, that schoolgirls went to meet Stinson because they wanted to emulate her.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, Stinson offered Japanese schoolgirls a new envisioning of female mobility in the skies.

## Conclusion

As discussed above, the "flying schoolgirl" Stinson helped to reshape associations between aviation, gender, and fashion. Imai Komatsu was inspired by Stinson's performance as a schoolgirl and later became an aviator.<sup>18</sup> Stinson thus significantly changed the cultural landscape of Japanese schoolgirls in the 1910s.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Arayama Akihisa, *Nihon no Sora no Paionia-Tachi: Meiji Taishō 18-Nenkan no Koku Kaitakushi* [Pioneers of the Japan’s Sky: Pioneering Aviation History] (Tokyo: Wasedaigaku shuppanbu, 2013), 174-177.

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