
The Martyring of Kanba Michiko

Chelsea Schieder*¹

¹Meiji Gakuin University – Japan

Abstract (in French and English)

This paper focuses on the intersection of emotional mobilization and a politics of representation in the 1960 death of Kanba Michiko, a female student involved in mass demonstrations against the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty (Anpo). The context in which popular sympathy emerged for Kanba as a "maiden sacrifice" for postwar democracy encompassed a broader discourse of anger as a legitimate form of political expression for certain segments of the population, in particular young, middle-class women. I also explore, however, how Kanba's own radical politics were undermined by various attempts to speak on her behalf and fit her into shared frames of popular empathy. This dynamic, in which young women with elite access to higher education in the postwar period both obtained a measure of political influence yet also served more frequently as symbols of postwar peace and liberal democracy, is repeated in subsequent social movements in Japan. I contrast the case of Kanba with female student figures from the later student movement of the late 1960s to demonstrate how young women who did not allow for an image of vulnerability failed to arouse popular sympathy for the movements in which they were active. I use this case to open up a more general discussion of political voice and agency, and to consider how a discourse of vulnerability and victimization, while mobilizing popular sympathy to a political cause, also threatens to reinforce existing values and emotional standards.

Keywords: emotional mobilization, politics of representation, Kanba Michiko

*Speaker