

# Beauvoir in Japan: Japanese Women and *The Second Sex*

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15:30–17:00

Room 8015

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## Abstract:

Simone de Beauvoir's monumental work of feminist philosophy, *The Second Sex*, was translated into Japanese in 1953, just four short years after its first appearance in French. The timing of this translation, *Daini no sei*, was fortuitous—Japan had just emerged from the shadow of the Allied Occupation and was struggling with the legacy of its postwar reforms. These reforms offered Japanese women an unprecedented array of rights and opportunities, but those who sought to exercise such rights still had to confront conservative norms that expected them to channel their ambitions into “careers” as wives and mothers. To many who sought an unconventional life-course, Beauvoir's vision of “freedom” through financial independence and professional projects offered an enticing alternative to the prewar “good wife, wise mother” model of femininity—even if, or perhaps because, this vision was difficult to attain in actuality.



Simone de Beauvoir on her 1966 visit to Japan

In this presentation, I explore the way Japanese women in the 1950s and 1960s understood the value of Beauvoir's theories for their own life and work, responses that ranged from homage and appropriation to parody and critique. We'll see Beauvoir's Japanese readers “write back” to her, in fictional and non-fictional form, on marriage and motherhood, career and family obligations, romantic relationships, and the struggle to reconcile cultural constructions of femininity with their own personal philosophies and inclinations. We'll see Asabuki Tomiko, the beleaguered interpreter who served as Beauvoir and Sartre's tour guide and primary handler while in Japan, take the French philosophers at their word when they suggested her own life would make as good a story as anything they had written. We'll see fiction writer Kurahashi Yumiko, a college student whose debut story upended the Japanese literary establishment, take inspiration from Beauvoir's advocacy of career over marriage and motherhood, only to find herself a victim of her own success. A young wife named Okabe Itsuko will read *The Second Sex* and promptly divorce her abusive husband, reinventing herself as a successful and beloved essayist. Setouchi Harumi, another controversial female fiction writer, will swoon at Beauvoir's fashionable persona and intellectual swagger, yet still wonder aloud whether she regretted not having Sartre's babies.

These women and many others will complicate and critique Beauvoir's philosophy, even as they admire it and try to implement it in their own lives. Their stories not only offer us a valuable window onto that historic encounter between Beauvoir and her Japanese public in 1966. They also presage the many ways that the lives of women in Japan, and elsewhere, would change over subsequent decades, as norms of gender and sexuality shifted following the “women's lib” activism of the 1970s.

## To Attend Online (Zoom):

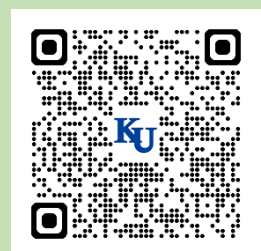
Access the Zoom Meeting via the following Meeting ID and Passcode. Preregistration is NOT required to attend via Zoom.

Meeting ID: 981 0011 0125 Passcode: KUMMC

## To Attend in Person:

Preregistration via the adjacent QR code at least a day in advance for those coming in person from outside the KU community is greatly appreciated. If you are coming from off campus, please also register as a Guest at the Information counter near the entrance before coming up to the room.

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Bullock, Preregistration

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