

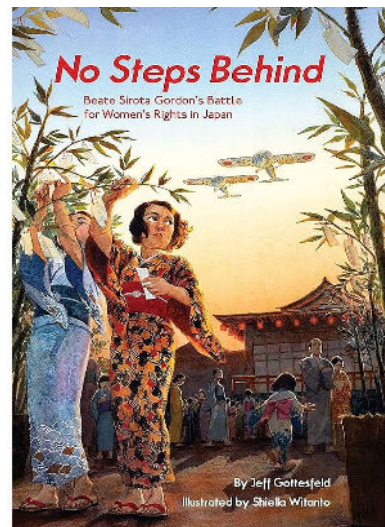


Culture Notes

No Steps Behind:

Beate Sirota Gordon's Battle for Women's Rights in Japan
by Jeff Gottesfeld **Illustrated by Shiella Witano**
Creston Books, 2020 **Non-fiction, set in Japan**
2020 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

In *No Steps Behind*, Jeff Gottesfeld tells the story of Beate Sirota Gordon, an American woman who had a significant impact on the trajectory of women's rights and gender equality in Japan. This is a unique chapter in Japanese history, U.S.–Japan relations, and women's history, made possible by the convergence of opportunity, cross-cultural knowledge and empathy, individual agency, and perseverance. This book offers a highly engaging way to approach the issues around women's rights for students in intermediate grades through high school. (Although it is designed for intermediate grades, the book is adaptable for students beyond its intended reading level.)



Beate Sirota Gordon's contributions to both the Japanese postwar constitution and women's rights in Japan are well known among historians of modern Japan. Gordon's contributions are worthy of inclusion in world history, Japanese history, and women's history as taught in high school, and her story is covered in several academic resources appropriate to those grade levels. (See resource list below.) For younger readers, background on the historical period may not be essential but would provide valuable context for elementary teachers. Younger students will benefit from a broader cultural context for the story, which will offer greater knowledge and balance in their understanding of Japanese culture in the years before and after World War II.

Historical Background

Women in Early Modern Japan

In the course of Japan's history, the status of women has fluctuated. According to Japan's creation story, the imperial family is descended from Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess. It is thought that this creation story reflects the high status women in early Japan, when there were several women rulers.



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By the twelfth century, a combination of philosophical influences and social and economic factors had contributed to changes in the status of women. Confucian philosophy, adopted from China, ranked all people in hierarchical order and relegated women to a position inferior to men. Women's role and status were summed up in the Confucian dictum of "Triple Obedience": in youth, girls obey their fathers; in marriage, their husbands; in old age, their sons.¹

In the Tokugawa era (1603–1868), Confucianism was incorporated into the country's political ideology, impacting the social and economic structures as well. Confucianism outlined a specific hierarchical social and economic class structure. Age and gender roles and relationships were clearly defined. Within families and society, younger were subservient to their elders, and women were subservient to men. Occupational categories also fell into a prescribed economic hierarchy. Although Confucian directives in Tokugawa Japan laid out the norms of society, there were, of course, exceptions. Recent historiography sheds light on the diverse roles and contributions of Japanese women in art and literature, for example.

Widespread modernization and industrialization during the Meiji and Taishō periods (1868–1926) ushered in an expansion of opportunities for women. For example, women were included in universal education. Women from the countryside in particular assumed an economic role as they migrated to cities to take jobs in factories. But while industrialization and a consumer economy made women more visible within society and the economy, they enjoyed little enhancement in status. Traditional responsibilities were reinforced by the Meiji government. One guiding slogan of Meiji-period modernization was "Good wife, wise mother," emphasizing a woman's primary responsibility was to raise the next generation. In a series of laws enacted in 1890, women were denied membership in political parties, and higher education for women was discouraged.²

¹ "Three Obediences and Four Virtues," Wikipedia, n.d.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_Obediences_and_Four_Virtues.

² Rebecca Hong et al. "Moga, Factory Girls, Mothers, and Wives: What Did It Mean to Be a Modern Woman in Japan during the Meiji and Taishō Periods?" In *Becoming Modern. Early Twentieth Century Japan Through Primary Sources* (Boulder: Social Science Education Consortium, 2015).



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During the mobilization for war beginning in the 1930s through 1945, women were called into the workforce. But their status within families and in the larger society did not significantly change, and their rights did not expand.

As *No Steps Behind* recounts, following World War II, the Japanese Constitution was revised under the direction of the American Occupation forces. In this process, Beate Sirota made a singular contribution to women's rights through Articles 14 and 24. Equally important were changes to the Japanese Civil Code at that time. Together, the new constitution and civil code guaranteed Japanese women the right to vote, obtain equal public education, attend public universities, inherit and hold property, and enter into marriage only by mutual consent.

The U.S. Occupation of Japan and the Postwar Japanese Constitution

In July 1945, Allied leaders met at Potsdam near Berlin to discuss postwar policies. Discussion included the decision to occupy Japan once victory had been achieved in the Pacific. Among the measures to be taken during the Occupation would be widespread democratic reforms. The Potsdam Agreement declared that the Occupation of Japan would end only when a "peacefully inclined and responsible government" had been established in Japan.³

U.S. General Douglas MacArthur was appointed Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers to oversee the Occupation. MacArthur promoted the development of democracy in Japan by suspending laws that had restricted political, civil, and religious liberties. To maximize cooperation within the defeated nation, MacArthur chose to work through many existing Japanese government channels, including the Japanese legislature (Diet), the cabinet, and the government bureaucracy. He called for the Japanese Diet to pass a new election law providing for free democratic elections, including, for the first time, the right of women to vote.

<https://www.colorado.edu/ptea-curriculum/becoming-modern/moga-factory-girls-mothers-and-wives-what-did-it-mean-be-modern-woman-japan-during>

³ "The Potsdam Declaration. July 26, 1945," Columbia University Asia for Educators, n.d.
<http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/japan/potsdam.pdf>.



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Early on, MacArthur identified the need to drastically change Japan's existing Meiji Constitution of 1889 to enable Japan to become a more democratic nation. MacArthur communicated his views to the leaders of the Japanese government, who then formed a committee to revise the Meiji Constitution. After several months of work, the Japanese governmental committee submitted to MacArthur a revision with only minor, superficial changes. MacArthur rejected this and turned to his own staff, charging them with the task of writing a "model constitution." MacArthur set a very short timeline—a new constitution needed to be in place before Japan's first postwar general election, just two months away. The task of writing MacArthur's "model constitution" was assigned to a small team of Occupation military officers and American civilians on staff. These "constitutional convention" members looked to the U.S. Constitution, the British parliamentary system, and other constitutional models from nations around the world. Some aspects of the new draft drew heavily from mid-twentieth-century American New Deal ideology that emphasized social and political rights and freedoms that exceeded what was guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution. Article 14, by Beate Sirota, detailed women's rights and was among the Japanese constitutional measures that guaranteed to Japanese citizens rights that were not included in the U.S. Constitution.

The drafting committee wrote its proposal in six days. The proposal was then reviewed by Japanese leaders. The overall process involved negotiation and compromise. A final version—largely American but with Japanese revisions—was accepted by the Japanese cabinet, then approved by Emperor Hirohito and General MacArthur.⁴ To create an informed citizenry, widespread campaigns were undertaken to educate the Japanese population about the details of the new constitution. Japan's new, democratically elected Diet was responsible for final approval in summer 1946, and the constitution went into effect in spring 1947.

⁴ Kyoko Inouye, *MacArthur's Japanese Constitution: A Linguistic and Cultural Study of Its Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).



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Key Figures in the Book

General Douglas MacArthur. Douglas MacArthur had a long career, including serving as Commander of the U.S. Armed Forces in the Far East during World War II. He was named by President Truman to lead the U.S. Occupation of Japan, 1945–1951, as Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers. As the de facto ruler of Japan during that period, he was responsible for massive economic, political, and social changes designed to purge the military and nationalistic influences that had led Japan into war.

General Charles Kaddes. Charles Kaddes was assigned to the U.S. Occupation forces under General MacArthur in August 1945 and became a key actor in the writing of a new constitution for postwar Japan. MacArthur ordered Kaddes, in his role as deputy chief of Occupation forces, to chair a steering committee on revising Japan's constitution in February 1946. Kaddes was given one week to complete a draft, which he did by creating a writing committee, drawing on his staff, including the twenty-two-year-old Beate Sirota. For two of many sources on Kaddes's role as head of the Occupation's constitution writing project, see:

<https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/framing-japans-constitution-an-eea-interview-with-colonel-charles-l-kades/> and

<https://www.nytimes.com/1996/06/21/world/charles-kades-90-architect-of-japan-s-postwar-charter.html>

Home Minister Matsumoto. Jōji Matsumoto (pronounced: JOE-gee mat-SUE-MO-toe) was a legal scholar who was instrumental in Japan's postwar constitution writing project. Matsumoto had served in the prewar government of Japan, and he returned to the government after the war as Minister of State. In that position, he was in charge of the "Committee to Study Constitutional Problems" established by order of the Occupation forces. He authored the "Matsumoto Proposal" for a postwar constitution, which MacArthur rejected for making little change to the existing prewar constitution.



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Additional Culture Notes

This essay touched on some of the significant cultural background within the Historical Background section. Additional cultural background for the teacher is provided below.

Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism in Japanese Social and Political Thought

The social relationships and gender roles that Beate Sirota and her family encountered when they arrived in Japan in 1929 were heavily rooted in Japanese cultural and social traditions, which were largely shaped by Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism adapted from China. Learning more about Confucianism as it impacted government and society in Japan can help students contextualize the norms that challenged and later inspired Beate to try to influence change in that country.

Confucius was a Chinese philosopher believed to have lived around 500 BCE. He offered his students rules and guidelines of behavior. According to Confucius, the world of nature follows certain immutable laws. Confucius taught that in the orderliness and functioning of the natural world lay a model for achieving order in human society. Order in human society could be achieved when every person knew their proper place and upheld the responsibilities of that place. Confucius articulated five basic relationships that established the responsibilities and hierarchy of obedience within families and society: child to father, wife to husband, friend to friend, subject to ruler, and younger to elder. In Confucian society, the husband and father was the unquestioned authority in all family relationships. All family members had a duty to obey and respect the male head of household.

Confucianism appealed to the Japanese in part because it reinforced Japanese reverence for nature. In the early 1600s, Confucian ideas of hierarchical relationships were woven into the political doctrine of Japan's ruling Tokugawa government, as noted earlier in this essay. For a more thorough discussion of Confucianism, see the "Culture Notes" for the Freeman Book Award recipient *Confucius, Great Teacher of China* at: <https://www.nctasia.org/award/confucius-great-teacher-of-china/>



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Cautions Regarding Generalization

The author has conducted careful research, including fact-checking quotes attributed to Beate Sirota Gordon. Some issues exist with presentations of women's rights, or lack of same, which teachers may want to address with students to avoid misinterpretations or stereotyping.

The author of *No Steps Behind* notes that girls and women had no choice in marriage. He also writes that girls were sold by their fathers "like fish in the market." In working with students on this book, it is important to put these statements in the context of the times.

In the early 1900s, arranged marriages were quite common in many parts of the world, and Japan was not unique in this way. Through history, many cultures have considered marriage to be primarily an economic and social union of families. In Japan, Confucian ideals of filial piety and obedience are significant factors in this practice. It is also true that many cultures have traditional religious reasons for arranged marriages. Some cultures still practice arranged marriage in the twenty-first century.

Selling of girls is another complex topic that is dropped into this story without adequate context. We recommend it be explored in more depth if it is discussed in relation to the narrative in this book. In Japan, it is true that girls were sold by their families, predominantly in the case of impoverished rural families, as an economic necessity in times of depression. Often, rural daughters were sold into indentured servitude to save families from financial ruin or even starvation. Within the culture of the times, these transactions were perceived as girls fulfilling their filial duty. While such servitude was practiced, it is important to recognize that the trauma families endured in such instances cannot be evaluated. The author's statement may be read to imply a pervasive dehumanization of young girls that is excessively inflammatory. While the practice of selling children cannot be rationalized or excused, it should be considered carefully, within the historical context.



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Terms

Hanetsuki: (pronounced ha-NEIGH-tsu-key) *Hanetsuki* is a traditional Japanese game similar to badminton. It uses rectangular wooden paddles and colored shuttlecocks with feathers, but no net. It became a popular game for girls beginning in the 1300s and was traditionally played during New Year celebrations.

Taiko drums: (pronounced: TIE-koh) In Japanese, taiko literally means "drum," though the term has also come to refer to the art of Japanese drumming, also known as *kumi-daiko*. Throughout history, taiko drumming has been integral to military activity, Japanese Buddhist and Shinto rituals, theater, and the imperial court. A kid-friendly page on taiko drums can be found at: <https://web-japan.org/kidsweb/meet/taiko/taiko02.html>

Yukata: (pronounced: you-KAH-TAH) A yukata is a robe typically made of cotton. Yukata were originally worn before and after a bath and the term translates as "bathing cloth." For a student-friendly reference, see: <https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2103.html>

Ginza: (pronounced: GEE-n-zah) Ginza is a shopping and cultural district in downtown Tokyo. It originally developed during the Tokugawa period (1603–1868), deriving its name from a silver-coin mint established there in 1612. The entire area was destroyed in an 1872 fire, and when the Meiji government rebuilt it in the late nineteenth century, the area was designed to be a model of modernization. Ginza has maintained its image as the commercial heart of Japan's capital city, showcasing Tokyo as a cosmopolitan center for cutting-edge fashion, technology, and culture since the late 1800s.

Themes

Picture books are often effective resources for use with students beyond the targeted reading level to consider broad themes, perspective, narrative, and visual



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literacy. For middle-school students, *No Steps Behind* lends itself to discussions of the following topics:

- Women's rights and gender equality in cultural and global contexts
- U.S.-Japan relations
- Postwar Japan
- Human rights
- Individual agency and advocacy
- Visual representations of cultures and gender roles

Additional Resources

There are many excellent resources on Beate Sirota Gordon and her work on the Equal Rights sections 14 and 24 of the Japanese Constitution, including video interviews and presentations. Some of these are highlighted on the resources pages of *No Steps Behind*. All online sources below accessed September 15, 2023.

Asia for Educators. "The Constitution of Japan 1947. Primary Source Document with Questions." Columbia University. n.d.
http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/japan/constitution_1947.pdf.

Beer, Lawrence W. and John M. Maki. *From Imperial Myth to Democracy: Japan's Two Constitutions, 1889–2002*. Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2002.

Dower, John. *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*. New York: Norton, 1998.

Fox, Margalit. "Beate Gordon, Long-Unsung Heroine of Japanese Women's Rights, Dies at 89." *The New York Times*, January 13, 2013.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/02/world/asia/beate-gordon-feminist-heroine-in-japan-dies-at-89.html>.



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Parisi, Lynn. "Lessons on the Japanese Constitution." Stanford: SPICE, 2002.
https://spice.fsi.stanford.edu/docs/lessons_on_the_japanese_constitution

Pulvers, Roger. "Beate Sirota Gordon: An American to whom Japan remains indebted." Asia Pacific Journal, Japan Forum. November 11, 2013.
<https://apjif.org/2013/11/2/Roger-Pulvers/3886/article.html>.

Wilce, Matt. "ASIJ Stories: The Only Woman in the Room." American School in Japan. n.d. <https://www.asij.ac.jp/asij-stories/the-only-woman-in-the-room>.

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