

Saito Sumiko's Struggle in Horse Racing during the Showa Era: A Case Study of Gender Inequality and Social Constraints

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on Saito Sumiko, a female jockey in Japan during the Showa period. It aims to analyze the underlying reasons for the difficulties she encountered in the horse racing field, thereby revealing the gender inequality in society at that time and its implications for modern gender equality issues. By analyzing historical documents, news reports and other materials, it elaborates on Saito Sumiko's journey from aspiring to become a jockey to the ultimate shattering of her dream. The study finds that under the social atmosphere of male superiority and the horse racing operation background with military priority at that time, the Imperial Horse Racing Association of Japan ignored the significance of female jockeys due to the purpose of military horse breeding. Traditional social concepts restricted women's social participation, and there were many prejudices and discriminations against women in the horse racing world, and a lack of institutional support. As a result, although Saito Sumiko strived to pursue her dream of becoming a jockey, it was difficult to achieve. Compared with Hiratsuka Raicho, a Japanese writer active in the same era, differences in the times, fields of activity and social support led to their completely different development trajectories. Saito Sumiko's experience highlights the constraints of social structures and institutions on women's development, providing an important historical reference for attaching importance to ideological reform and institutional support in promoting gender equality in modern society. Future research needs to further explore historical materials, conduct comparative and witness analyses, etc. to deepen the exploration of its historical significance.

KEYWORDS

Showa period; women; horse racing; gender equality; social constraints

1 Introduction

This paper discusses the life of Saito Sumiko(斎藤澄子) (1913 - 1942) (also known as 齊藤すみ Saito Sumi), a pioneer of Japanese female jockeys and the world's first female jockey.

Since Yasuda Izaemon founded the Tokyo Yushun (Japan Derby) modeled after the Epsom Derby in 1932, Japanese female jockeys have faced many difficulties such as public pressure and low social evaluation, and Saito Sumiko is a typical representative. She officially entered the horse racing world in 1929 and overcame numerous difficulties. Finally, she obtained a jockey license in 1936 but was not allowed to compete. In 1942, she died of pulmonary hematoma and bid farewell to her beloved horse racing career forever.

This paper aims to focus on Saito Sumiko's life to explore how women tried to participate in horse racing in the 1930s in Japan and what impact these attempts had. In the research process, newspaper articles, magazines, relevant materials and historical records of that time were widely collected and analyzed, and historical research methods were adopted. Based on this research, the cultural and gender norms of Japanese society at that time were clarified, and it was revealed how women strived to blaze their own trails under such norms. In addition, it is expected that the research results can provide a reference for the discussion of gender equality in the Showa period and even modern Japan.

Regarding the previous research on Saito Sumiko, although there are novels, comments and magazine articles based on her, there is no historical research using the same method as this paper. Even using search engines like Google, the information about her experience is extremely limited. Therefore, this paper is the first historical research on Saito Sumiko. The materials, historical records and facts revealed by the author are expected to provide an important reference for future related research.

The structure of this paper is as follows: Taking the period from 1929 (Showa 4) to 1936 (Showa 12) as the research object, first, the Japanese horse racing and social situation in this period will be summarized in Chapter 2; Chapter 3 will tell the life of Saito Sumiko; Chapter 4 will analyze why Saito Sumiko was not allowed to compete and finally had her license revoked in combination with the content of Chapter 2; Chapter 5 will reexamine Saito Sumiko's life experience; finally, the conclusion of this paper will be drawn in Chapter 6.

2 The Social Background and Japanese Horse Racing at That Time

During the period from 1929 to 1936 involved in this paper, militarism began to rise, and national service gradually became more important than personal freedom. In addition, the traditional atmosphere of "male superiority and female inferiority" was deeply rooted, and women were positioned to guard the family, and their social participation was

extremely limited. Therefore, the horse racing world at that time was inevitably affected by this era background, and the actual situation will be confirmed below.

First is the influence of militarism. During this period, horse racing was not only regarded as entertainment but was clearly positioned as an important means to promote the production and breeding of military horses. The establishment of the Japan Racing Association in 1936 symbolized that the horse racing activities previously held in various places were unified under national control. In the same year, it was at the end of the "Second Horse Administration Plan", which aimed at "improving the endurance of horses" and "using medium-sized horses as the standard", and adopted the policy of focusing on the production of draft intermediate breeds. Moreover, the design concept of the racecourse was closely related to the military perspective, and its vast site could be considered as a barracks or training ground in wartime. Part of the horse racing proceeds was used for national defense funds and military facility construction, forming a structure in which horse racing contributed to enhancing national military strength.

Second is the influence of the traditional gender concept of "male superiority and female inferiority".

In the horse racing world, jockeys, trainers and other main roles were occupied by men, and there was almost no active space for women. The same was true for the people who enjoyed horse racing. In the first half of the 1930s, affected by the Great Depression, the Japanese economy fell into a serious recession, the urban unemployed population surged, and social unrest increased. In this situation, horse racing, as one of the few entertainment activities for citizens, gradually increased its presence. However, mainly men went to the racecourse, and women mostly accompanied them.

Japanese horse racing from 1929 to 1936 was in a situation where the strengthening of the militarist social background and the deep-rooted atmosphere of male superiority and female inferiority were intertwined, and its form was thus shaped.

3 The Life of Saito Sumiko

Saito Sumiko was born on January 23, 1913 (Taisho 2) in a peasant family in Iwate Prefecture and was the fourth of five children. Her father was engaged in horse brokerage and carriage driving, and horses were closely related to family life. Among her siblings, Saito Sumiko had a particularly strong interest in horses.

Later, when Saito Sumiko was 16 years old, her parents died, and she dropped out of school and returned home. According to the social customs at that time, girls from poor families generally got married at the age of 17 to 18 and entered their husbands' families. That is, they worked as live-in maids for 4 - 5 years and then ended their maid work at the age of 17 or 18 and married men they had never met. Sumiko's family was in financial distress, and her brother advised her to get married according to social concepts, but Saito Sumiko refused. She clearly stated that "I want to work with horses all my life."

During her apprenticeship, she watched a horse race at the Golden Racecourse (the old Morioka Racecourse) and thus aspired to become a jockey. At that time, it was extremely rare for a woman to become a jockey, and her determination was a challenge to the social norms at that time.

To become the first female jockey in Japan, at the age of 16, she apprenticed under trainer Honda at the Fukushima Racecourse. The admission condition was that trainer Honda required her to "behave like a man", which showed that there was a strong prejudice in society against women engaging in male-dominated occupations at that time.

So, Sumiko cut her hair short, wrapped her chest, and lived in men's clothes, hiding the fact that she was a woman from those around her. She started working like a man in Honda's stable in Fukushima, but living together with men in the same room, sharing bathrooms and toilets brought her physical and mental burdens. About two months later, she confessed to her colleagues that she was a woman. Her colleagues sympathized with her situation and began to help her. But because there were other relevant people, she still had to maintain a male image and continue working in the stable.

After about three years of apprenticeship, when it was almost time to take the jockey exam, her master, trainer Honda, fell ill and the stable was dissolved. Sumiko had no choice but to return to her hometown in Iwate.

In the spring of 1932 (Showa 7), she heard the live broadcast of the first Tokyo Yushun (Japan Derby) on the radio and decided to pursue the almost abandoned jockey dream again. She apprenticed under trainer Tani Eijiro at the Tokyo Racecourse and took the jockey exam in 1934 (Showa 9). She passed both the academic and skills exams, but the Imperial Horse Racing Association, which oversaw various horse racing clubs, refused to issue her a jockey license on the grounds that she was a woman.

After that, Sumiko followed trainer Tani, who moved to the Kyoto Racecourse, and continued to work as an assistant (jockey's assistant) and continued to act like a man, trying to smoke a pipe, etc. to make herself look more masculine.

In February 1936 (Showa 11), at the age of 23, she finally passed the jockey exam again and obtained a license. However, a few days before her jockey debut, a satirical cartoon was published in a Tokyo newspaper with the title "The Appearance of a Female Jockey", depicting a female jockey looking at a male jockey, reflecting the prejudice in society at that time against the appearance of female jockeys.

In response, the Imperial Horse Racing Association suspended Sumiko's jockey debut and then issued a notice that "female jockeys are not allowed to compete". After that, all horse racing clubs and the Imperial Horse Racing Association were dissolved, and the Japan Racing Association was established.

Sumiko had expectations for this new organization. But the articles of association of the Japan Racing Association clearly stipulated that "jockeys must be men over 19 years old who have completed compulsory education", and female riding was still not recognized.

After her jockey career was blocked, Sumiko still hoped to work with horses and continued to work as a stable staff. In 1940 (Showa 15), she moved to Kato Asajiro's stable in Nakayama and continued to work in a male identity. It is presumed that the burden was heavy. On August 22, 1941 (Showa 16), she died at the age of 28 due to pulmonary hematoma.

4 Speculation on the Reasons for Rejection

After introducing the life of Saito Sumiko in the previous chapter, how should we evaluate her from a historical perspective, and what can her life convey to us now? To explore this, this chapter will analyze the reasons why she was not able to be active from the following four aspects: The positions of the Tokyo Racing Club and the Kyoto Racing Club; The position of the Imperial Horse Racing Association and social atmosphere; The status of women in the horse racing world at that time; Comparison with women of the same era.

4.1 The Positions of the Tokyo Racing Club and the Kyoto Racing Club

Before the establishment of the Japan Racing Association in 1937, there were 11 horse racing clubs in Japan, and the Imperial Horse Racing Association was responsible for overseeing these clubs. Each club had its own rules.

For example, the Kyoto Racing Club, founded in 1908, stipulated in Article 43 of Chapter 7 that "the horse racing rules and other detailed rules of this club shall be separately formulated by the council resolution", which means that the detailed rules such as horse racing rules were formulated based on the council resolution. In the rules announced by the Tokyo Racing Club, which was established in 1910, there was no restriction on the gender of jockeys. In fact, whether a jockey passed the exam was determined by the horse racing club. Therefore, even if a jockey scored high in the exam, he or she might still be judged disqualified. Saito Sumiko took the jockey exam at the Tokyo Racing Club in 1934 and passed, but was still disqualified by the Tokyo Racing Club. Later, she obtained jockey qualifications at the Kyoto Racing Club and became a jockey affiliated with the club, but was disqualified again due to the intervention of the Imperial Horse Racing Association.

From the decision-making at that time, the difference between the Kyoto Racing Club and the Tokyo Racing Club was that the upper management of the Kyoto Racing Club was more open-minded about women's participation in horse racing activities.

Saito Sumiko's experience reflects the complex and unfair situation in the Japanese horse racing world at that time. Although the establishment of the Imperial Horse Racing Association contributed to the modernization and unification of horse racing, it also deprived local horse racing clubs of their autonomy and forced the implementation of unified operations. In addition, the general prejudice against women in society also hindered the development of talented women like Saito Sumiko, which cannot be ignored.

4.2 The Position of the Imperial Horse Racing Association and Social Atmosphere

The Imperial Horse Racing Association, as an organization overseeing 11 horse racing clubs across the country, had two responsibilities: To popularize horse-related ideas; To improve horses. The "horse improvement" here was part of the above-mentioned "Horse Administration Plan", aiming to "take many active measures to obtain good horses".

At that time, horse racing was not only held as entertainment but was positioned as an important activity for breeding military horses. The racecourse played the role of selecting and training military horses, and its aspect as entertainment for the audience was secondary. All activities such as the operation of the racecourse, the holding of races, and the breeding of horses were for military purposes.

In a wartime or quasi-wartime system, this form of horse racing had a significant impact on the emergence of female jockeys. For the Imperial Horse Racing Association, female jockeys were not necessary.

On the other hand, looking back at the social atmosphere at that time, although Western culture flowed in after the Meiji Restoration, the patriarchal system in Japanese society was still deeply rooted. Men led the family as the head of the household, and women usually followed men's instructions. At that time, the value of male superiority and female inferiority was prevalent in society, and the gender role division consciousness of "men work outside and women guard the family" was strong, which greatly hindered women's social participation.

4.3 The Status of Women in the Horse Racing World at That Time

The status of women in the horse racing world at that time was extremely unsatisfactory. The concept of "women should guard the family" was deeply rooted, and it was abnormal for women to be active in society like men, and the horse racing world was no exception. Except for Sumiko, there were almost no women in the popular profession of jockeys. Therefore, as a "rare existence", Saito Sumiko had to face these social restrictions. In the horse racing world that required physical and mental strength, it was difficult for a woman to survive as a jockey and gain the understanding of those around her. Prejudice and discrimination also plagued Saito Sumiko. Due to unfounded prejudices such as "lack of physical strength" and "poor judgment", her efforts and talents were not fairly evaluated. Even if she received the same training as male jockeys, she might not get opportunities or be underestimated. Admittedly, Sumiko became the focus of the media, but the media reports were not necessarily friendly. Sensational reports or reports that emphasized appearance often ignored her strength and efforts.

In the social environment full of misunderstandings and prejudices and the status of women in the horse racing world at that time, Sumiko was forced to pursue her dream. She needed to break through her own path while facing social barriers.

4.4 Comparison with Active Women at That Time

As mentioned above, Saito Sumiko was a victim of the atmosphere of "male superiority and female inferiority". However, in the history of Japanese women, despite this atmosphere, there were still women active in society, and Hiratsuka Raicho was one of them.

Hiratsuka Raicho (1886 - 1971) was a Japanese thinker, critic, writer, feminist and women's liberation activist, active from the late Meiji period to the early Showa period. At that time, women were expected to give birth and raise children as good wives and mothers and guard the family. But Raicho was famous for skipping classes with her companions in girls' school and calling herself the "Pirate Group". After graduating from university, she was dissatisfied that women could not be active in society.

In 1911, Raicho and her university friends decided to create a platform where only women could freely express their opinions and founded the literary magazine "Seito". She wrote in it: "At first, women were the sun. Now, women are the moon." She also declared that talent had nothing to do with gender, and women should also exert their respective talents.

"Seito" caused a huge response, and many women came to express their sympathy, greatly promoting women's independence. After that, Raicho established the "New Women's Association" and continued to carry out activities such as fighting for women's suffrage. Thus, after the late Meiji period, many women inspired by Raicho stood up to pursue freedom and rights.

So, where did the differences between Saito Sumiko and Hiratsuka Raicho in women's social participation come from?

First and foremost is the difference in the times. The period when Raicho launched the women's liberation movement was during the Taisho Democracy period, when relatively free social thoughts spread widely. In this era, the resistance to women's social participation weakened, and it was easy to give birth to new values. In the early Showa period when Sumiko was active, militarism rose, national service was more important than personal freedom, women's social participation was suppressed, and male-centered values were strengthened. Therefore, in the male-dominated horse racing society, it was extremely difficult for women to be active.

Second is the difference in the fields of activity. Hiratsuka Raicho was active in the field of women's liberation movement, aiming to promote social change and appeal to the whole society. Her thoughts aroused the sympathy of many women. While Saito Sumiko aimed at obtaining the special qualification of a jockey in the relatively narrow field of horse racing. Although horse racing was a popular entertainment at that time, it was different from the movement for social change, and its influence was only limited to a certain extent.

Finally, there is the difference in social support. Hiratsuka Raicho obtained many supporters in the process of making the women's liberation movement a social trend. Her activities attracted the attention of women and received various supports such as funds and information. In the case of Saito Sumiko, since the horse racing world was a male-dominated society, there was a lack of institutional training and support for female jockeys. She had to continue her activities but could not fully exert her talents.

Saito Sumiko's life trajectory shows that there are obstacles that cannot be overcome by personal efforts alone. This also applies to modern society where gender equality has not been fully realized. In any era, women's pursuit of their dreams cannot be separated from the transformation of the overall social consciousness and institutional support.

5 Reexamination of Saito Sumiko's Life

In previous discussions, Saito Sumiko's life was often regarded as a "tragedy" caused by social patriarchy, male

superiority and female inferiority and other social trends. However, in such deductive discussions, there are some facts that cannot be explained. For example, male trainers accepted Saito Sumiko as a woman, and Saito Sumiko took the exam and actually obtained a jockey's license. These all indicate that the society at that time cannot be simply summarized by "tragedy", in other words, it has complexity. Previous novels and comments overemphasized "tragedy" and the "evil" of society and may have overlooked these facts and their significance. On the contrary, these facts can also be explained as the achievements of the women's liberation movement since the Taisho Democracy. Even at the individual level (the trainer who accepted Saito Sumiko) or the regional level (the Kyoto Racing Club that recognized her license in 1936), men's understanding of women may have become more tolerant and open-minded.

In historical research, it is very important to clarify the context and causal relationship of events based on historical materials through inductive discussion, rather than easily criticizing the past. Therefore, this paper divides Saito Sumiko's life into two parts: (1) The part where she made progress in her jockey career thanks to her unremitting efforts and the partial change of the social view of women (there is a certain degree of tolerant and open-minded understanding) (the highlight was obtaining the jockey's license in 1936); (2) The part where she was still blocked by the heavy barriers of society and suffered setbacks despite this (the highlight was being prohibited from competing in 1936 and the subsequent negation of female jockeys). On this basis, this complex and intertwined situation is carefully analyzed. If (2) was the "insurmountable limit" in society at that time, it indicates that the social view of women in the 1930s had two sides surface principle and real thought).

6 Conclusion

This paper uses primary sources to analyze the life of female jockey Saito Sumiko from multiple perspectives such as social background and the structure of the horse racing world. On this basis, it examines her dream of becoming a jockey, the reality she faced in the process of pursuing the dream, and the conflicts that arose between them.

At that time, the social patriarchy was deeply rooted, and women's social participation was extremely limited. Especially in the horse racing world, the male-dominated structure was significant, and female jockeys were extremely rare and faced many prejudices and discriminations. Saito Sumiko still pursued her dream under the constraints of such society and the structural barriers of the horse racing world.

She tried to exert the ability of a jockey, but the institutions and customs at that time did not fully support the cultivation and development of female jockeys. Her life trajectory highlights the problems of social structures and institutions, as well as the harsh environment in which female jockeys were at that time - how social prejudices played a role in restricting the activities of female jockeys under the male-dominated social atmosphere. The reality she faced symbolizes the difficult situation of female jockeys at that time.

Saito Sumiko's life is not only an event in the past, but also provides an important lesson in modern society that pursues gender equality. Her story is an important historical material for understanding the difficulties faced by women in the past and a valuable material for revealing the factors that hinder women's social participation.

In future research, based on the key points revealed in this paper, further detailed investigations of historical materials and interviews with relevant personnel should be carried out to more clearly depict the image of Saito Sumiko. In addition, through comparative studies with women of the same era, analysis of the testimonies of horse racing-related personnel at that time, and historical investigations of institutional reforms, etc., the historical significance of her life should be deeply explored.

Saito Sumiko's life contains many unsolved mysteries, but the footprints she left are important indicators of gender equality and the pursuit of personal possibilities in modern society. It is hoped that this paper can contribute to clarifying Saito Sumiko's life and its significance and promoting the development of research in this field.

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