

2019

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U.S.-Japan Women's Journal, Number 55/56, 2019, pp. 108-127 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwj.2019.0001>



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# Lt. Ethel Weed through Her Letters: The Personal Reflections of a Woman in the U.S. Occupation of Japan

私信に見るE・ウィード少尉：米国の対日占領下における女性像

**Malia McAndrew**

## **Abstract**

Ethel Weed (1906-1975) was one of the few American women who devised and implemented U.S. foreign policy during the U.S. occupation of Japan from 1945-1952. As Chief Women's Information Officer she was in charge of all initiatives aimed at the "democratization" of Japanese women. While previous works on Ethel Weed have examined her public persona, this article turns to her private thoughts by examining letters that Weed wrote home during her time in Japan. These letters show that Weed drew great inspiration from the Japanese women with whom she worked during the occupation. As this article contends that Weed was awed and inspired by the struggles of the women, both prominent and ordinary, whom she came to know. Moreover, through her work in Japan, she came to believe that the people of the world, including those in once warring nations, must begin to learn from one another.

**Keywords:** Ethel Weed, U.S. Occupation, Civil Information & Education, Personal Papers

Ethel Weed (1906-1975) was one of the few American women who devised and implemented U.S. foreign policy during the U.S. occupation of Japan from 1945-1952. Weed first served as a Women's Army Corps officer and then, after 1947, served as a civilian contractor on programs and policies that directly affected the lives of Japanese women. Weed was a member of the Civil Information & Education Section (CI&E), the propaganda wing of General Douglas MacArthur's military government, which was charged with distributing the message of "freedom" and "liberty" to the Japanese people.

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In the Policy and Programs Branch of the Information Division, she carried the title of Chief Women's Information Officer and was thus in charge of all initiatives aimed at the "democratization" of Japanese women.

A self-authored resume that Weed kept in her personal papers points to the immense scope of her work in Japan. First, her job included promoting women's suffrage and other female interests through speeches that she delivered and meetings she led across the nation, particularly in rural areas. In these settings, Weed held brainstorming sessions with local female leaders and arranged further training opportunities for them at occupation-sponsored leadership training institutes. In this way, her work included fostering the creation of thousands of robust and independently run women's organizations across the nation, which were intended to engender a democratic ethos in ordinary women. Next, her responsibilities required her to develop and oversee the distribution of informational materials aimed at Japanese women in the form of pamphlets, posters, public displays, guidebooks, press articles, radio segments, cinematic scripts, and virtually every other means of reaching mass audiences. While inside CI&E headquarters, Weed also served as the point person for all policy determinations and programmatic initiatives that might raise women's legal, social, or economic status.

As time passed, Weed took on additional responsibilities. She became a liaison for local civil affairs teams, small groups of personnel imbedded in local communities, including the training and oversight of more than twenty additional female information officers. Additionally, Weed frequently interfaced with American female leaders who wanted to assist in improving the situation of Japanese women. In this regard, she was key in developing scholarship-sponsoring projects that sent Japanese women to study in the United States via funding provided by American donors. Many of the funding sources came as a direct result of professional connections that Weed had fostered through her work as a public relations consultant before the war. Finally, Weed arranged, and at times led, study tours of the United States for Japanese female leaders. In this capacity, she coordinated directly with General MacArthur's office to fund her trips, which took female leaders to major U.S. cities including New York and Washington, DC, as well as rural areas throughout the United States. Thus, although Weed came to Japan with the lowest possible officer rank, that of second lieutenant, she ended up running a complex and robust operation that functioned as the de facto women's rights desk in occupied Japan.

Not surprisingly, because of the nature her work, Weed has been an important historical figure for scholars who analyze women and gender during the occupation, a field that took shape by the 1980s. The first and most comprehensive analyses of Weed's work came from the political scientist Susan Pharr (1977, 1980, 1987). Pharr's scholarship

shows how Weed was able to accomplish her work in Japan, mainly by fostering and maintaining close relationships with such Japanese female leaders as Katō Shizue (1897-2001) and Fujita Taki (1898-1983). These feminists helped Weed to plan and implement the outreach efforts she aimed at ordinary Japanese women and provided the lieutenant with the policy ideas and other goals that she would advocate for within the occupation hierarchy. Meanwhile, the members of what Weed called her “advisory group” attempted to address these same goals in society at large. At times, the plans of Weed and her brain trust were more ambitious than either male occupation leaders envisioned or the Japanese government was ready for (Pharr 1987, 223). For example, the work of American Studies scholar Manako Ogawa (1997) shows that Weed and her brain trust played a pivotal role in the establishment of the Women’s and Minors’ Bureau in Japan, an entity that secured women an important position in the previously all-male Japanese bureaucracy despite deep opposition from many American and Japanese men working on government reform. Likewise, the scholarship of Kurt Steiner (1987) argues that in the face of male resistance, Weed took a hands-on and active role in helping to enable reforms to the Civil Code, which were pivotal in securing property, inheritance, marriage, and other rights for Japanese women.

Newer works on the legacy of Ethel Weed have refocused their attention on how to best characterize the gendered interventions that she took on behalf of Japanese women. Both scholars Yuka Tsuchiya (1993) and Mire Koikari Mire (2008) have seen the reforms that Weed forwarded as, at heart, part of a neo-colonial foreign project that sought to make Japan more like the United States. To Koikari (2008), Weed’s work helped to justify and promote “imperial hegemony” in the post-World War II world order (5). Contrastingly, Michiko Takeuchi (2016) has argued that single American occupationnaire women such as Weed were not simply acting as white imperialists. Rather, as unmarried women working outside the home, she points out that they were people who themselves lived on the outskirts of what it meant to be a normative female in either the United States or Japan. Women such as Weed, Takeuchi argues, should be understood not simply as colonizers but as persons who used Japan as a site for their own “liberation from the postwar domestic paradigm” (5).

The literature on Ethel Weed has primarily analyzed Weed’s public persona. To do this, historians have relied upon previously classified government documents, interviews with those who knew her, and the writings of women who worked alongside her. These sources have richly documented the contours of Weed’s official duties. For example, occupation records held at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., contain speeches and radio addresses Weed delivered as a part of her work, occupation reports and

memorandums she authored, documents from events her office sponsored, and other sources that chronicle her work in Japan. Little, however, has been known about the contours of Weed's private life and what she thought about the work she was doing in Japan. This is due in part to the fact that Weed died in 1975, before much scholarly interest in her career, and, unlike the American occupationnaire women Beate Sirota Gordon (2014; 1923-2012) and Carmen Johnson (1996), Weed never wrote publicly about her experiences. Moreover, while Gordon's papers are available for research at Mills College (and partially exhibited online), Weed's are still held in a private family collection.

Through her letters, this essay seeks to analyze Weed's private thoughts and feelings about what she was doing in Japan, a topic that no scholarly account has tackled thus far. It uses Weed's personal papers as its primary data set. Susan Pharr was granted access to view at least some of Weed's personal papers during her research in the 1970s. No scholar since that time has had access Weed's family-held papers. However, in 2017, Weed's cousin Harold Peters self-published a source book on Weed's life, which included a few letters that Weed wrote home during her time in the occupation. While I am trained as a historian of women and gender in the United States, after several years of getting to know Weed's relatives, the family granted me access to Ethel Weed's papers. This yet-unprocessed collection includes correspondence Weed wrote to seven members of her family between 1945 and 1952, letters from Japanese women who worked with Weed, and extensive mementos and photographs that Weed saved from her time in Japan, along with countless other papers that she collected over the course of her life.

Weed's letters to her family, most of which were handwritten and on stationery, show her to be a kind, inquisitive, and generous person who liked traveling, hiking, and gardening. She valued the relationships she had with her family and wanted to keep abreast of their lives in the United States while she was stationed in faraway Japan. She was a warm person but also had an assertive personality. She was not one to mince words. Her letters were at times direct and instructive, especially when she thought a family member was in need of advice or wise counsel. Particularly during her first years in Japan, Weed's letters describe in rich detail what she was thinking and seeing around her. It is on this last topic this essay will focus.

Although Ethel Weed was sent to Japan to teach Japanese women about "freedom" and "democracy," this essay argues that Weed herself was awed and inspired by Japanese women, including the women who served as her mentors, the women who worked for her, and the ordinary women she met in the field. This essay will document Weed's thoughts about each of these groups in turn, as well as give some of Weed's more general thoughts about the occupation itself. The relationships that Weed formed with Japanese women

were not simply “business” or mere professional interactions to her. Indeed, the interactions she had with Japanese women became the most important interpersonal relationships that Weed wrote home about during this chapter of her life. This essay contends that Weed was awed and inspired by the struggles of the women, both prominent and ordinary, whom she came to know. Moreover, through her work in Japan she came to a belief that people of the world, including those in once warring nations, must begin to learn from one another.

### **Weed’s Close Relationship with Her Japanese Mentors**

Weed’s letters show that from her earliest days in Japan she enjoyed her work and was concerned with doing a good job. On November 5, 1945, just days after Weed arrived in Japan, she wrote to Rose (Schmotzter) Weed, the thirty-two-year-old wife of her brother Charles. “I’m very busy and love my work,” she wrote to Rose. “It’s the type of public relations work I like, for I have my hands in all pies and am working directly with Japanese people” (Weed Papers). In addition to enjoying the nature of her work, Weed found it significant and consequential. In January 1946, following her first press conference encouraging women’s participation in their first election, Weed reflected on the gravity of her duties in another letter home. Writing to her sixty-one-year-old mother Berenice (Benjamin) Weed on January 20, 1946, she rhetorically asked, “When again in my life will there be an opportunity to do as much for people?” She further explained, “I want to live up to the occasion” (Weed Papers). Such reflections show that, from the beginning, Weed’s job meant a great deal to her. It was something that she wanted to succeed at, and she felt competent doing.

Having worked in public relations for many years before World War II and having worked as an Army recruiter during the war, Weed came to Japan with a skillset that would help her to execute the technical aspects of her job. Articles about Weed’s career found in her college alumnae association newsletter show that the thirty-nine-year-old Women’s Army Corps officer had run public information drives, had sponsored government initiatives aimed at women, and was comfortable working with large public relations campaigns (*The Alumni Folio*, May 1943: 2). The context of Japan was, however, something she knew very little about before being selected to serve in the “Far East.”

In February 1945, Weed’s letters indicate that she was sent to attend the School of Military Government in Charlottesville, Virginia, where the military trained officers to perform the duties and tasks associated with governing territories the United States had won on the battlefield. In late April, Weed went on to attend the Civil Affairs

Training School at Northwestern University, where she was given a crash course in the language, culture, and psychology of the Japanese people. The Weed Papers include some of her course materials and quizzes that she took. Students in the class were drilled on Japanese vocabulary and simple sentences that would be useful in their field work. Weed's studies were to last six months, but when the war ended in August 1945 she and her classmates were graduated early. Similar to other occupiers, Weed thus came to Japan as a beginner in terms of what she knew about the country and its language and would therefore need to rely on Japanese collaborators who could help her to execute the mission of her office once on the ground in Japan.

As the scholarship of Pharr and Ogawa shows, Weed came to rely upon a network of Japanese female leaders to do her work. Weed's letters further show that she learned from and looked up to the Japanese women she worked with. Her brain trust included a number of powerful and elite Japanese women such as the birth control activist Katō Shizue (1897-2001), lawyers Kume Ai (1911-1976) and Watanabe Michiko (1915-2010), educator Fujita Taki (1898-1993), writer Matsukata Haru (1915-1998), journalist Hani Motoko (1873-1957), novelist Miyamoto Yuriko (1899-1951), activist Yamakawa Kikue (1890-1980), and many others (Weed Papers). As Weed wrote in a letter to her twenty-five-year-old sister Elizabeth (Weed) van Hamersveld on November 28, 1945, the Japanese women who became part of her advisory group were "selected because of their liberal beliefs—and actions—during the war" (Weed Papers). Weed's reflections in letters to her mother Berenice, sister Elizabeth, brother's wife Rose, and ten-year-old niece Nancy also show that she was singularly impressed and humbled by the members of her advisory group, speaking of them with high praise. For example, writing to her sister Elizabeth on March 15, 1946, Weed described Matsukata Haru as "brilliant" (Weed Papers). She soon followed up with her thirteen-year-old niece Nancy on April 7, 1946, explaining that Matsukata was "working in every possible way to make her country more democratic" (Weed Papers).

While before the war Weed had experienced professional success in a moderately-sized American city, she had no history of social activism or political organizing. In contrast, women such as Katō, Yamakawa, and other members of her advisory group had been part of the first wave of feminist activism and labor politics that swept the globe during the early decades of the twentieth century. For their activism and association with anti-war groups, several of Weed's female advisors were persecuted by Japan's wartime government, a commonality that Weed remarked upon. Explaining the impetus for one such collaboration, that with author Miyamoto—who had written proletarian literature, had joined socialist groups, had traveled to both the United States and the Soviet



Union, and had been imprisoned for her political views in the 1930s and 1940s—to her sister Rose on November 5, 1945, Weed wrote:

Mrs. Yuriko Miyamoto is a very brilliant writer and a woman who says what she thinks no matter what the consequences. As a result, she spent several months in jail during the war and was so mistreated that she suffers an irreparable heart ailment. Her husband, because he's a communist, was in for 8 years. I might add that almost all of the best people here have been in jail at one time or another. In fact, a jail sentence is almost a passport to social success these days. (Weed Papers)

On September 7, 1947, after working together on the formation of the Women's and Minors' Bureau for twenty months, Weed similarly described the bureau's first female chief, Yamakawa Kikue, to her mother. As she wrote:

She's a little, seemingly shy thing, but a person who has spent a couple of sessions in jail for thinking liberal thoughts at a time when the government thought nothing of tossing people in jail on the slightest provocation. I might add that some of the best people in this country have been in jail at one time or another . . . and that to have been so is a mark of distinction. (Weed Papers)

Standing up for their beliefs and laboring during difficult times was thus something that Weed prized in the members of her advisory group. Indeed, even after the war, the contrast between what Weed's advisory group had to offer Japan and the grim conditions that they continued to work under was also humbling to Weed. As she confided in her American feminist mentor Mary Ritter Beard (1876-1958) on October 15, 1946, "I could write a book on the courage of those women and the miracles they've accomplished in the face of such tremendous odds" (Mary Ritter Beard Papers). During the occupation, the members of her brain trust were no longer persecuted by the government, but the standard of living they faced during the occupation remained bitterly grim. While Weed was provided with food, clothing, and shelter by the occupation, the women she worked with struggled alongside the rest of the Japanese populace as they coped with price inflation, hunger, disease, and desperation.

Further evidence of the fact that Weed saw the Japanese female leaders she worked with in more than just professional terms comes from the reaction she had to their personal predicaments. Not long after arriving in Japan, Weed began writing to multiple members of her family with food requests. Over the years, she repeatedly asked for cases of canned

milk, pounds of sugar and salt, packages of dried soups, cereals, raisins, fruit juices, and other nonperishable foods. Weed had always asked her family to send her cookies and other sweets when stationed away from home, but the quantities of food she now requested in Japan were enormous. Her family's suspicions as to what she was doing with all of this food might have first been piqued in a letter to her sister Elizabeth on November 5, 1945, when she asked for jars of baby food, which she stated she would use to "fix breakfast in my room Sunday morning" (Weed Papers). Before long, however, Weed was forced to come clean with her family—she was giving the food away to members of her advisory committee. As she explained to her mother on December 2, 1945, "The women who are working with me have small infants, and it's terrifically difficult to get food for them. Almost everything has to be purchased in the black market at high prices and even so it's almost impossible to get. The situation is really terrible" (Weed Papers). Fending off the protests she thought she might receive, Weed continued in the same letter:

I'm not being sentimental. I know they killed our men unmercifully and all that but, even so, there's many good among them, and they're the ones I'm working with—who have been political prisoners throughout the war because of their beliefs. Now they're free but they have no homes—nothing—and they are trying to help us in our work. (Weed Papers)

In this way, Weed started a years-long, informal food chain by which she helped to supplement the diets of those she both worked with and cared deeply about. Such actions were something that Weed thought had the possibility of getting her in trouble. "It's illegal to give the Japanese things you know," she told her sister Elizabeth on July 2, 1947, "but I manage judiciously" (Weed Papers).

Of all the women whom Weed would go on to form relationships with in Japan, the birth control activist Katō Shizue would become her closest ally and someone she wrote home about frequently. Weed described Katō as "a truly great person" and an "inspiring person to know" in a letter to the American feminist Dorothy Brush (1894-1968) on June 25, 1946 (Dorothy Hamilton Brush Papers). Famous for her stalwart support of family planning, Katō had traveled to and lectured in the United States and was also briefly jailed for her advocacy during the war. Weed urged family members to read Katō's 1934 autobiography, *Facing Two Ways: The Story of My Life*, sending her sister Elizabeth a copy of the book and following up with "Betty" after she read it in March 1947 (Weed Papers). For her part, it was Katō who first connected Weed to prominent American feminists

including Mary Beard (1876-1958), Dorothy Brush, and Margaret Sanger (1879-1966). In 1946, Katō was one of the first thirty-nine women elected to public office in Japan, serving first in the House of Representatives and later in the House of Councillors, while also continuing her family planning advocacy (Hopper 1996). In addition to all of her official responsibilities, Weed's letters show that Katō met with Weed to advise her on a regular basis.

In helping the former baroness, Weed provided Katō with food, clothing, and medicine. In addition to her own family, Weed wrote to Katō's friends in the United States telling them that they could mail packages for Katō to Weed's occupation address. "Worry about her health has constantly gnawed at the innermost recesses of my mind," Weed wrote to Mary Beard on October 15, 1946 (Mary Ritter Beard Papers). After Katō returned from a particularly strenuous speaking tour in Saitama Prefecture shortly after winning her first seat in the Diet, Weed thought the woman looked especially sick and cold. "I was concerned about her because she's terribly needed now and can't afford to be sick," Weed explained to her mother on May 26, 1946 (Weed Papers). Feeling the need to take some sort of additional action, Weed continued:

So, I used a slight cough I had as an excuse and went to the dispensary, had my pulse and temperature taken, [and] my throat sprayed. There was nothing really wrong but by so doing I was able to get enough medicine, aspirin, and nose drops all of which I passed along to Mrs. Katō. It's almost impossible for these people to get medicine.  
(Weed Papers)

Such evidence suggests that Weed went out of her way to ensure Katō's health and wellness. The women were not simply colleagues. They were friends.

Weed's affinity for Katō is further evidenced by the fact that it was not just in times of desperation that Weed secured items for her mentor and friend. As time passed, she was able to provide Katō with purses, slips, and other gifts she thought the woman might simply enjoy. She even went as far as to send her mother Katō's clothing size as well as that of Katō's small daughter. As she penned in her typically directive nature on February 8, 1947,

Mother, you'll receive a letter shortly from Mrs. Kanju Katō, the former Baroness Ishimoto, one of Japan's most famous women, thanking you for the baby food, milk, etc. which you sent for her little girl. The little girl is two years old now and a swell little thing. . . . I think it would be nice if in answer to the letter you would send a child's dress, size 3 for the little girl. Remember, she has dark eyes and hair and

so yellow or rose would become her. . . . If you send the dress shortly she will receive it by March 3, which is a national holiday in honor of girls and is called "Girls Festival."  
(Weed Papers)

It was thus not only when Katō was in need that Weed sought to help her. The fact that Weed instructed her mother on clothing colors that might look good on Katō's daughter suggests that Weed also saw the girl in sentimental ways. Katō was not seen simply as a recipient of charity. She was someone the American cared greatly about.

Since Pharr's first scholarly work on Weed, historians have known that Weed did not act alone. As the above section additionally illuminates, the Japanese women who came to advise Weed were much more to the American than people she simply collaborated with. They were mentors and friends whom she cared deeply about. While Weed could have formed an advisory group for simply practical reasons, her letters suggest she got much more out of her interactions with Japanese women leaders than simple advice. The next section of this paper turns to Weed's interactions with less prominent Japanese women and the ways these interactions also left a lasting impression on Weed.

### **Weed Draws Inspiration from Japanese Women**

In addition to securing goods for the Japanese female leaders who made up her brain trust, Weed provided similar support to the young Japanese women who worked in her office. Unable to give speeches without a translator, Weed hired several educated interpreters, often graduates of Tsuda University, to work with her full-time as part of her staff. Many of these women had been referred to Weed by members of her brain trust. While in the office, Weed's staff also advised her on policy decisions, strategized implementation with her, served as sounding boards for Weed's own ideas, and otherwise supported her work (Pharr 1987, 240). "I couldn't get along here without them," she told her mother on August 28, 1947, before asking for shipments of food she could take into the office (Weed Papers). Weed was concerned that the women were not getting sufficient nutrition at home and, as such, instituted a daily mid-morning and mid-afternoon "snack," which she provided with the provisions she received from home.

Similar to her interactions with Katō Shizue, Weed also bought her staffers more sentimental gifts and formed lasting relationships with them. For example, on April 15, 1949, Weed wrote her sister Ruth to say that she had gifted Kabashima Toshiko, her chief interpreter, the wedding cake they would all eat at the woman's nuptials that weekend (Weed Papers). Playing her own role at the event, Weed had been asked to give a speech in honor of the bride at the wedding. When Kabashima had earlier studied at the



Figure 1: Ethel Weed and three members of her staff pose for a photograph in their CI&E office at the Radio Tokyo Building. Left to right: Tomita Nobuko, Kabashima Toshiko, Ethel Weed, and Kawakita Kazuko. Photograph courtesy of Ethel B. Weed Papers.

University of Michigan in Ann Arbor in the United States in 1948, it was important to Weed that the woman form a relationship with her family in Cleveland, although the family's location was over 170 miles from Kabashima's school. As Weed wrote to her sister Ruth on June 28, 1948:

I gather from her [Kabashima] she had a wonderful time with all of you. I'm so glad you had her come and hope that she will feel free to visit whenever she can. She is working very hard and a good home atmosphere is what she needs at times. We here are very proud of what she is accomplishing and she is now known throughout the country. Did you enjoy her? (Weed Papers).

When Kabashima eventually returned to Japan, she wrote Ethel Weed's mother Berenice on January 1952 to inquire about all of the members of the Weed family and tell them she had accepted a job at the Kyodo News service in Tokyo. Of her former boss Ethel Weed (who was still working in Japan), Kabashima wrote, "I returned to Japan on June 1. It's impossible to describe the feeling I had when I saw Miss Weed and my family at the peer in Yokohama" (Weed Papers). As was the case with the members of her advisory committee, Weed's staffers were thus comprised of people who were more than simple business associates to Weed. They were people whom she brought into her personal life.

The mother of three small children and a presumed war widow, Tomita Nobuko was in possibly the most precarious situation of Weed's office staffers. When Tomita received word from her parents in the countryside on the outskirts of Tokyo that her youngest child was sick with pneumonia, Weed sent Tomita north with packages of food that Weed had taken from her own supply, as well extra packages she collected from friends. Detailing the events in a lengthy letter to her brother's wife Rose on May 16, 1946, Weed noted that in addition to food, she was also able to secure the child medicine through an Army contact (Weed Papers).

The following year, a typhoon led to mass flooding in the region of Tomita's family home. Unable to get word on the condition of the family, who lived next to a river, Weed's letters detail how she was able to requisition a jeep from CI&E chief Colonel Donald Nugent. She then reviewed aerial pictures of the region via a friend who served as the area's military governor. As Weed tells it, on their journey, the two women were told several times by military officials, police, and firemen that they would never make it through the inundated landscape. Undaunted, after arriving at the place where the family's house used to be, Tomita and Weed were relieved to learn that everyone had escaped alive. She wrote in poignant detail about the above experience in a letter to her thirty-four-year-old sister Ruth (Weed) Chambers on September 16, 1947, explaining that Weed and Tomita were told that the family "had been rescued by a boat from the hilltop where [the grandmother] had tied the children to a tree so that the on rushing [*sic*] waters would not sweep away their bodies" (Weed Papers). The devastation seen by Weed long remained with her. While her fears were allayed by the news of the safety of Tomita's family, she also recognized that the catastrophe would mean ruined crops and therefore more hunger and starvation for the many homeless families they saw along their route.

The resilience of ordinary people was something Weed saw over and over again and took time from her busy schedule to comment upon. Writing a 900-word letter to her mother on December 21, 1946, while in Kōchi, Shikoku, Weed stated that she and her interpreter Kawakita Kazuko (who was not the noted postwar film promoter of the same name) experienced the massive Nankai Earthquake, an event that she noted had left 129 people in Kōchi alone dead by 11:00 a.m. (Weed Papers). Weed meticulously documented her observations that day and thought it cruel that people who had only a few years ago evacuated their homes due to wartime air raids now ran away again in fear of a tidal wave. Her own inconveniences—that she might be stranded for days—seemed to her unimportant compared to what the Japanese people were dealing with.

At the time of the Kōchi earthquake, Weed was engaged in a seventeen-day speaking tour of southern Japan. The trip took her across hundreds of miles of terrain to

meetings with an estimated 5,000 women who were organizing others to take collective action in their communities (*Nippon Times* January 8, 1947). In Yamaguchi Prefecture, Weed reported that representatives from newly formed women's organizations got up in the middle of the night and walked four or five hours in winter weather to reach their meeting (Weed Papers). Similarly, in Fukuoka, on December 9, 1946, she met 200 determined female leaders in a bomb-damaged meeting hall (Weed Papers). In the letter to her sister Elizabeth that Weed wrote the same day, Weed noted that snow and high winds blew straight through the uncovered windows of the hall as they met. Weed reported that she was so cold that her hands turned red and stiff. She watched in admiration as the gathered women simply tucked their feet underneath their bodies to keep warm as they listened to her. Finally, Weed decided that the conditions were just too unbearable to continue. She called the meeting to a close by politely stating that she would answer any further questions at the front of the room. At that moment, she reported that the entire room seemed like it moved forward at once and surrounded her. For another hour, she stood there and answered questions. In her letter, she expressed amazement that the women were not deterred in the least by the blizzard-like conditions (Weed Papers).

Writing at length to her thirty-seven-year-old brother Charles and his wife Rose on a train to Niigata on March 19, 1946, Weed shared her reflections on another particularly memorable occasion in Morioka:

I'll never forget the meeting. My train was two and a half hours late so I was taken by a group of newspaper men and army officials directly from the station to the meeting where the women were still patiently waiting. The meeting was held in [a] bare, poorly furnished room of the newspaper—we sat at the square table built around a wood stove that continuously had to be replenished with fuel. The women were all leaders of county organizations and some of them had come by train from some distance to attend this meeting. I talked about the responsibilities of women in democracy, emphasized the importance of their voting and then held an open discussion.

Such excitement! Everyone talked at once! The meeting went on and on—the room grew dark. There were no electric lights—no lights of any kind. I tried three times, without success to end the discussions. But there through the dark they continued to ply me with questions.

“Do boys and girls in the U.S. have the same education? How do we in the U.S. teach the connections between daily living and the government? If there aren't any good candidates, how do you vote? Should women vote for women candidates especially?”

Oh, there were dozens of questions, and it was so dark that I couldn't see the faces of the questioners and they couldn't see mine. But it didn't matter—Finally a Military Government Affairs officer came and said I had to leave because the officers were waiting [on] dinner for me. I went but, I'll never forget those women. (Weed Papers)

It was thus, quite possibly, ordinary women's tenacity in the face of great obstacles, a trait Weed saw over and over again, that gave her the resolve to continue her work as a tireless advocate for the rights of women in Japan.

Unlike MacArthur, who sat at the top of the occupation hierarchy and rarely left his headquarters, Weed came into close contact with ordinary Japanese people on a daily basis. Like other occupiers who worked at the grassroots level, her proximity to Japanese culture, life, and people had an effect on Weed. Not only did she allow herself to be taught by leading Japanese feminists, she allowed herself to be inspired by the actions of ordinary women. Through this openness, she was brought more fully into feminist activism than she had ever been in Cleveland, Ohio. In this way, Weed's work became more than a job. It became a vocation.

### **A Woman in the Occupation**

The previous two sections of this essay have reflected on what Weed thought about Japanese women, both prominent and ordinary. This section now turns its attention to what Weed thought about her own status as a woman in the occupation. As the scholar Michiko Takeuchi (2016) has pointed out, most of the American woman working in the U.S. occupation of Japan were unmarried, without children, and focused on work outside the home (3-4). In a postwar American culture that came to reassert the central place of the stay-at-home mother in the U.S. social order, Weed's status as a single career woman was out of step with predominant American gender norms. With the World War II manpower shortage over, American womanhood during the late 1940s and 1950s was increasingly defined through the domestic sphere. It is thus ironic that at the same time Weed was told to help Japanese women achieve greater autonomy from the home, American women were being encouraged to return to the home. The relationship that Weed built with Japanese women, especially the members of her advisory committee, can thus also be understood in contrast to the outlier status that Weed held in the very occupation force she served. While typically stoic about any challenges she herself faced, on a few occasions, Weed did discuss her peculiar place as a female in the U.S. occupation.

As soon as Weed was accepted for service in Japan, she attended the School of Military Government in Charlottesville, Virginia, where of the 250 students attending



at the time, she was one of only four women (Weed Papers). Here in a co-ed environment she sat alongside the male recruits as they learned the basics of public administration, international law, military regulations, and other matters that they would need a working knowledge of during their future assignments in Japan. In addition to commenting frequently on the intensity of her studies, Weed wrote that she felt as though she and the other Army women were on constant display. “We’re something of a curiosity here,” she told her mother on Feb 17, 1945, adding that “everyone is being very helpful, but I certainly never have been in the public eye as much as present” (Weed Papers). She reported that wherever the four women went, everyone made a big deal about them. “All the instructors stop us wherever they see us, look rather amused, and ask how we’re getting along. We put on a brave face, but inside we’re not so brave. Public relations work was easy beside this,” she told her mother before closing out the same letter (Weed Papers).

The men who sat around Weed in class were a decorated group of military officers from an array of backgrounds. Weed further described the masculine atmosphere embodied by her classmates when she described them to her family. As she stated to her mother on February 22, 1945:

We women in the classes are certainly taking a great deal of good-natured ribbing now that the men are relaxing a bit and becoming used to the school and the classes. We have men here from war fronts all over the world. Some of them have been wounded and have recovered. Others have had all sorts of interesting jobs in England, Italy, Persia, India, China—Many of them are lawyers other have been teachers, public safety men, public utilities experts, practically everything you can think of. They are all ages, all sizes—yes and all shapes—but one and all they each think they’re the smartest man in the world. And secretly wonder, I think, who let us women in. (Weed Papers)

It is evident that from Weed’s first days in the service of the occupation, she fully understood her status as a female was an exception to the male rule. While she was tasked with helping Japanese women stand for new opportunities, she herself felt under the microscope as a sort of female experiment in a male-dominated world.

Despite her male colleagues’ initial reticence to the idea of working closely with a woman, Weed relates that the men she worked with in Japan became accustomed to the idea of having her in their presence. Her differential status as a woman working on women’s issues became more or less a sort of “joke” that others in the CI&E teased her about.

Indeed, the men whom Weed worked with took to calling her “Eleanor,” the name of the former first lady of the United States, Eleanor Roosevelt, whom President Truman had just appointed U.S. Representative to the General Assembly of the United Nations, where she worked on behalf of universal human rights (Weed Papers). Weed reported to her sister Elizabeth on September 10, 1946, that she heard the name “Eleanor” to such a degree throughout her time in Japan that when someone would ask for “Ethel” she sometimes forgot to answer (Weed Papers). (Weed, in fact, had the opportunity to meet the real Eleanor Roosevelt when Weed hosted a group of Japanese female leaders on a trip to the United States in 1951.) In “joking” with her about the nature of her work, Weed told her sister Ruth in a January 21, 1946, letter that the men she worked with told her they were “regretful” that “Eleanor” was changing the position of women in Japan from that of men’s servants to persons holding a more equal status (Weed Papers). In addition to putting up with sexist comments that her male colleagues viewed as humor, in one instance, Weed spoke plainly about the actual inconveniences that being a woman in a male-dominated social organization caused her on a daily basis. As she wrote home to her sister Elizabeth on August 22, 1946:

It’s quite an experience to be a woman in this man’s world. One that is always creating problems as no rest rooms, etc. have been set aside for my convenience and as a result it’s a major problem just to go to the “John.” At the airport in Sendai, I was taken in the yellow and black checked jeep to facilities about a mile from the plane and the Army captain who accompanied me stood guard to keep instructing other officers away. Such things have long since ceased to be embarrassing. (Weed Papers)

While Weed was sent to Japan to be an ambassador of the world’s most liberated women, the truth of her situation was that she was a less than fully equal partner in the occupation herself. Instead of making itself a model of the type of gender relations it propagandized, the occupation expected Weed to make do for herself. Working within the context of an ultra-masculine, male-dominated social organization, it is thus not surprising why Weed would have been attracted to forming collaborations with strong women who had overcome obstacles far greater than her own.

### **Weed’s Thoughts on the Occupation**

In addition to her place in the occupation, Weed’s letters give us some clues as to what she thought about the occupation itself and the future for Japanese-U.S. relations. In the early years of the occupation, Weed was filled with excitement for her job and the work her office

was doing. However, as early as 1947, when the “reverse course” was starting to take root, Weed began writing home expressing her belief that a peace treaty with Japan needed to be signed quickly. She was continuously disappointed. As she told her sister Elizabeth in a July 2, 1947, letter, each summer, she dreaded the beginning of “the starving season,” the time after the previous year’s crops had run out and before the current season’s rice crop was harvested (Weed Papers). In her mind, the food situation in Japan would not be remedied until after a peace treaty with Japan was signed and the nation was able to negotiate its trade with other nations. Be it hunger, housing, the black market, price inflation, or other economic woes, Weed explained to her brother Charles and his wife Rose on April 22, 1947 that “our policy is to say that such problems are up [to] the Japanese, but, actually, they can do little until the reparations and treaty problems are solved. God alone knows when that will be” (Weed Papers). The prolonged and dire humanitarian situation that Weed encountered in Japan thus might have changed her views about what a military could and could not do in Japan. Indeed, some evidence suggests that she came to view her age cohort’s actions as failed in some respects because they resorted to war in order to solve their differences.

She expressed this sentiment most forthrightly in the letters she sent to her young nephew Chuckie and niece Nancy. On April 6, 1946 she wrote to her nephew from a train car approaching the bombed-out city of Mito while she was on one of her many extended speaking tours to promote women’s suffrage in Japan. The previous spring, she and the other officers in her military government class at the University of Virginia had drawn up plans to invade the beaches of Mito and take the whole of Japan from there as a part of their Army training. While the war games Weed played were simulations, the real city of Mito was not spared the consequences of war. As she told Chuckie, by the end of the war, America’s B-29 bombers had incinerated the whole many of Japan’s cities with their unrelenting nighttime bombings. “I’ve seen cities that were almost completely ruined in one three-hour raid . . . the destruction was terrible” (Weed Papers). The previous spring, Weed was planning war in Mito. Now she was working as a member of the U.S. Armed Forces to support women whose lives were ruined by it. In the same letter, she implored her nephew: “Learn all you can about people of other countries: England, France, Germany, Russia, China, Japan, all of them, so that as you grow older you will understand them and travel and see them and find out that people everywhere are much the same and they should be able to work and live together without fighting.”

Weed’s time in Japan, and the horrors she saw, brought her to a belief that non-military solutions to the world’s problems had to be found. As she instructed Chuckie in the April 6 letter, “I sometimes wonder if you and Nancy and other American children like you can have any idea of how terrible it is [here]—I wish you could see how much people

suffer because of fighting—so that you would know how responsible everyone is to see that there are no more wars” (Weed Papers). Over and over again in her letters to her nephew and niece, Weed urged the youths to learn about other peoples of the world, frequently sending them books and other educational materials about Japan and then following up to make sure they had read them. She also planned to finance her nephew’s and niece’s higher education costs, believing that the next generation could only find alternatives to war if greater dialogue and intercultural understanding existed in the world (Weed Papers).

At the end of the occupation, Weed’s letters indicate that she was offered jobs with the U.S. State Department in both Japan and Korea, as well as with the United States Information Service, to continue doing the type of public relations work she had been engaged in during the occupation. However, as Weed told Mary Beard on August 13 and December 3, 1951, she needed a break from assigned government work (Mary Ritter Beard Papers). By that time, she had served five years in the Women’s Army Corps and another five as a civilian military contractor. Nonetheless, Weed felt a special responsibility to give back to society in response to all she had been given in Japan. As she wrote to Beard in a December 19, 1951, letter, a time when she was beginning to hand off her responsibilities in Japan to the U.S. State Department: “I do feel that the United States to this point has invested a great deal in me in the way of providing me with experience and opportunity to know Japan. My question is what shall I do with this background in order to make it be of the utmost use to my country and the world” (Weed Papers).

The plan that Weed eventually came up with led her to settle down in New York City. There, in 1954, she and her widowed cousin Thelma Ziemer opened a book shop on East 61st Street. Called the East & West Shop, their enterprise sold books, prints, and paintings from Japan, Southeast Asia, and India. In announcing the creation of the store, Weed’s hometown newspaper noted that “Ethel, who feels strongly for the oneness of the world and the need of people to know each other, tries to have each country represented by native authors” (*Cleveland Plain Dealer* 1955). Weed’s goal was to create a space where people from the United States could come to learn from and gain a greater appreciation of lands that seemed far away and distant. She prepared travelers headed to Asia with practical information and provided an educational home for Asian visitors to the United States. Her customers included graduate students, professors, librarians, and university administrators, as well as artists, musicians and theatrical people. Weed and Ziemer successfully ran their shop in New York City for several years before moving it to a mail order business from their home in Newtown, Connecticut, during their retirement years (*The Alumni Folio* (May 1955): 26; *The Alumni Folio* (May 1957): 23; “On and Off the Avenue,” *The New Yorker* (New York: November 28, 1959).

The relationships Weed formed with Japanese women stayed with Weed, and she kept up correspondence with her friends and former colleagues throughout her life. In 1971, Weed returned to Japan for the last time at the invitation of ex-staff members and ex-members of the Women's and Minors' Bureau, which was celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary. Weed's friends pooled their funds together to pay for her plane tickets, and, during her two-week stay, she had an opportunity to meet again with Katō Shizue, Fujita Taki, Yamakawa Kikue, and dozens of the other women she had first connected with during the occupation (Peters 2017, 493). Taken as a whole, her life shows the story of an occupier who was profoundly inspired and changed by her experience in Japan. Indeed, her story reveals the life of a woman who came to know and appreciate Japan and its people, even though she was sent by the United States to convince the Japanese to know and appreciate America.

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