Gender Studies and Challenges of Historical Exhibitions

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This article responds to the question posed by the National Museum of Japanese History: How is gender represented in historical exhibitions? Adopting the perspective that the purpose of museum exhibitions is to serve and inspire the public, the article considers how the museum can develop an effective way to incorporate gendered thinking and methods as it plans its exhibition, represents its artifacts and narrates the materials. The article first clarifies the concept and usage of the term “gender” and then introduces examples of gendered interpretations of archaeological findings and museum of exhibitions.

The term “gender” cannot be easily translated into Japanese. Partly because there is no native Japanese term to translate “gender” into, the meaning of jendā in katakana syllabary remains opaque. Moreover, in Japanese, jenda tends to refer to a person’s individual identity, not transformative social or institutional situations, making it difficult to incorporate gendered thinking into effective social change toward greater gender equity.

After considering the theoretical advance made by the so-called gender archaeologists, the article turns to a quantitative textual analysis of captions displayed at an Austrian exhibition and an innovative measures taken to expose the highly gendered practice that was found at the Manchester Museum. According to the analysis in Austria, humans carrying tools were typically assumed to be men, and women were involved only in a limited range of activities, with little contribution to political, economic, and survival activities. In the case of the Manchester Museum, there were more exhibits of males than females, and it was found and at both museums, that the stereotype modern gender roles were being socially reaffirmed through the displays and captions.

Useful in addressing these issues is the concept of intersectionality, which goes beyond research frameworks such as gender, class, and race to examine how power imbalances in certain social and political contexts are compounded. Moreover, to avoid importing stereotyped modern gender roles into exhibitions, it is essential that the number of researchers who realize the importance of gender increases and that museums recognize the need to promote gender equality as an organization.

Key words: Gender and museums, representation, gender roles, intersectionality, gender equity