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“Dangerous Thoughts”? Margaret Sanger’s World Trip Journal, Japan, 1922

Peter C. Engelman¹

On her passport, Margaret Sanger listed herself as a writer, though most everyone knew her as something else: a feminist, reformer, activist, subversive. But in point of fact, she *was* a busy writer and an efficient one at that. Aside from letters and intermittent entries in a diary and dream journal, nearly everything else Sanger wrote went to feed the birth control movement’s insatiable need for propaganda. Her travel journals were no exception.

Sanger’s travel journals differ from most other early twentieth-century travel writing in that they serve primarily as historical accounts and only secondarily as records of geographical journeys and observations of place and time. Even early in her career, Sanger understood that she was writing the very history she made. She usually wasted no time in turning some of her journal entries into short articles, often well before she returned home from a trip. She also incorporated entries into her speeches and interviews—verbatim at times—and included long passages in later autobiographical writings. These accounts of her groundbreaking tours to organize birth control groups, educate public health officials, and open clinics all over the world became important chapters in her dramatic life story—a story that for much of the twentieth century doubled as the history of the birth control movement.

Sanger’s longest and, I would argue, most significant piece of travel writing was her 1922 World Trip Journal, which chronicles her six-month tour to discuss birth control in Japan, Korea, China, Hong Kong and Ceylon, with stops in Yemen and Egypt, vacation time on the European continent, and a major conference in London. Coming just a few months after she formed the American Birth Control League in New York, the world tour raised Sanger’s international

¹ Many thanks to my colleagues on the Sanger Project, Esther Katz and Cathy Moran Hajo, for their support and assistance with some of the research for this article, which is a revision of a paper I delivered at the annual meeting of the Association for Documentary Editing in 2008.

profile and gave her increased prominence at home, solidifying her leadership of the American movement.

My focus in what follows is on the first leg of that trip, Sanger's voyage to and lecture tour of Japan. Sanger's 1922 World Trip Journal is probably the piece of travel writing she recycled the most; parts of it were featured in the *Birth Control Review*, the movement's chief publication, shared with large lecture audiences when she returned to the States, and she used it as the basis for several chapters in her two autobiographies. It also exhibits Sanger's remarkable perseverance and unparalleled ability to attract publicity. And it tells a great story.

The Japan portion of Sanger's World Trip journal runs about sixty pages, and we are including a number of entries in *The Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger, Volume 4: Round the World for Birth Control, 1920–1959*, the final volume of the edition, which is currently in the research phase. Editing these journals and her international correspondence has proven to be our most challenging work to date as we must overcome a number of obstacles related to information access and language. For instance, changes in how Asian names have been transliterated, paired with Sanger's idiosyncratic rendering of personal and organizational names (she wrote them as they sounded to her, but not necessarily as they may sound to us) has made our task of identification extremely difficult and time-consuming.

Sanger's tour originated with an invitation from a Japanese publisher to deliver between five and ten public lectures in Japan on birth control and population issues as part of an international lecture series that had previously featured Albert Einstein, H. G. Wells, and Bertrand Russell. Sanger then lined up other meetings in China and elsewhere, though some of her itinerary was not pinned down until she was *en route*.

Booked to depart from San Francisco in late February 1922, Sanger had every reason to believe her journey would be clear sailing. Her bags were packed; her thirteen-year-old son Grant had been whisked away from school to join her on the adventure; and sixty-one-year-old J. Noah Slee, the wealthy founder and president of the Three-in-One Oil Company, and Sanger's new suitor, was ready to join her, his fat wallet in hand (though few knew of his connection to Sanger, and he planned to be inconspicuous). Friends and supporters had thrown *bon voyage* parties for Sanger, and the press seemed keen to cover the trip, thus keeping the issue of birth control in the headlines.²

Then, just four days before she was scheduled to sail on a Japanese passenger ship, Japan's Home Minister directed the Japanese Consul-General in San Francisco to deny Sanger an entry visa.

Why did the Japanese government decide to keep Sanger from entering Japan? Though some surmised that it was related to sparring between the U.S.

² Margaret Sanger, *An Autobiography* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1938), 316–17.

and Japan over immigration policy, in all likelihood Sanger was the first victim of a proposed new law. While she had been making her way to San Francisco, Japan's Home and Justice Ministries were drafting a "Law to Control Radical Social Movements," better known as the "Dangerous Thoughts Bill," an effort to control the spread of socialism, anarchism, and Bolshevism in Japan. The law was intended to give officials more power in silencing propaganda and keeping out foreigners they believed might disrupt the moral order. Birth control was not included in this bill, introduced into the House of Peers on February 21, the same day Sanger was to sail. But the bill's vague language and broad scope allowed the authorities to crack down on any ideas they found repugnant or inflammatory. There were no laws that specifically outlawed birth control in Japan, but birth control clearly threatened a long-standing policy that encouraged Japan's population growth and military and political expansion.³

When Sanger asked the polite and apologetic Japanese Consul-General in San Francisco whether Japan objected to her or to her cause, he told her it was both. After all, she still was considered a dangerous radical in the U.S. with ties to anarchists and socialist groups and a long police record. This was not the first time that her reputation had preceded her. News of the ban was picked up by U.S. and Japanese wire services and made headlines in both countries, testing a fragile U.S.-Japanese diplomatic relationship.⁴

Some in the press applauded Japan's protective inclination and frowned upon Sanger's missionary zeal. The *Los Angeles Times* called Sanger's proposed speaking tour "a rather gross piece of impertinence," and asked how she could force herself on Japan to advocate birth control when it remained illegal in the U.S. "For the sake of international amity," the *Times* editorial implored, "for the sake of the reputation of the United States, for the sake of your own good manners stay at home, Margaret."⁵

But Sanger had no intention of staying home. She said she was confident that the Japanese refusal was "due to a misunderstanding of her message," and that she would be able to change minds once she met with officials on board the ship where she would have ample opportunity to press her case. More than a hundred Japanese who had traveled with the Japanese delegation to the just-concluded Washington Naval Conference—diplomats, professors, doctors, and

³ "Dangerous Thoughts Under Control," *Japan Times & Mail*, March 2, 1922; "Editorial" *Toyo Keizai Shimpō*, February 25, 1922 (translated in *Japan Times & Mail*, March 2, 1922); Elise K. Tipton, "Birth Control and the Population Problem," in *Society and the State in Interwar Japan*, Elise K. Tipton, ed. (London: Routledge, 1997), 43–44.

⁴ Sanger, *Autobiography*, 317; "Barred By Japan," *Japan Weekly Chronicle*, Feb. 23, 1922; "Our Undesired Emigrant," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 18, 1922; "Japanese Authorities Alarmed Over Birth Control Advocate," *New York Times*, February 20, 1922.

⁵ *Los Angeles Times*, February 22, 1922.

military men—were returning to Tokyo on the *Taiyo Maru* passenger ship. Sanger's immediate challenge was to secure a ticket without a visa. Since the ship sailed on to Chinese ports after Japan, Sanger was able to get a Chinese visa and a ticket to Shanghai as long as she agreed in writing not to leave the ship when docked in a Japanese port.⁶

"I always chose to go forward," Sanger later wrote, "and there was always a chance that a way might open." Once on board the *Taiyo Maru*, Sanger set out to insure that she could not only disembark in Japan, but also keep her scheduled speaking engagements. She released a statement from the ship saying that she had no specific plans to discuss methods of birth control, but would confine her remarks to "the necessity of birth control for social improvement." Two days out at sea, a group of Japanese passengers requested that she address them on the birth control movement. Afterwards, she had a discussion with Admiral Baron Kato, the head of the Naval Conference delegation and a rising political leader in Japan who became prime minister just three months later. She also charmed the Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs. These men and others on board did not fully embrace Sanger's rationale for birth control, but they clearly wanted to know more. In fact, some of them sought information from Sanger on specific contraceptive methods. Sanger wrote in her journal that "a delegation of several Japanese came to my cabin to be informed. They want to know the best advice." After meeting with Sanger, both the Admiral and the Vice Minister cabled officials in Tokyo asking that Sanger be allowed to land and lecture without constraints.⁷

Yet even as the ship pulled into the Yokohama port, Sanger had not yet received any official word that she would be permitted to disembark. "From the various invitations I am receiving to speak before representative groups," she wrote at sea, "it would seem I must be going to land." Conflicting telegrams told her she might be allowed to speak but not in public; that she might be permitted to speak in public but not on birth control; and that she would only be able to speak to private groups. There were press reports stating that the Home Office in Tokyo continued to weigh its "misgivings as to the perils of birth control" and would assign police investigators to follow Sanger. The director of police for the Home Office said that he was determined to keep Sanger from touching land. She also was told that thousands awaited her arrival. She wrote, "I await with interest the results of all this publicity—There has been tremendous interest all through Japan & if I address all the people who are asking me I shall be worked

⁶ *New York Times*, February 19, 1922.

⁷ Sanger, *Autobiography*, 317–19; Sanger, World Trip Journal, March 9, 1922 (*Margaret Sanger Microfilm Edition, Smith College Collections*, S70:29–31 [hereafter *MSM S*]); *Japan Times & Mail*, March 7, 1922.

thin.” She appeared, however, to relish the opportunity: “I have had a good lazy trip rested fully and am now ready to ‘eat em alive.’”⁸

Her ship anchored in the harbor in Yokohama on March 10 and was surrounded by police launches, health department boats, mail tenders, and boats carrying reporters. Japanese officials and the press marched onto the ship. The police, who in private jokingly referred to Sanger as “Mrs. Sangai,” a term that means “destructive of production,” handed her detailed questionnaires to be filled out, while government agents asked who paid her expenses and inquired about her contacts in Japan.⁹ Sanger wrote in her journal:

After much minute questioning it was told me that it would be necessary for me to apply to the American Consul to use his influence for me to land or enter Japan. Also I was to sign a statement that I would not give a public lecture on Birth Control during my stay here. . . .

In two minutes after the door was closed upon the government officials, I was besieged with reporters. At least twenty-five crowded into my cabin to ask me questions, to sign cards or to take a photograph. . . . Had to go on deck to be photographed at least by a dozen photographers. Then more interviews. . . .

Every reporter expressed his regrets that the government was acting this way & said the people of Japan want me to come here and desire to hear about birth control. . . .

Mrs. Kohashi the woman reporter or Editor of *Womans Magazine* [*Shufu no tomo* (The Housewife’s Friend)] came & also a delegation of six women representing New Womans Movement in Japan.

These adorably perfect doll women came in costume, bowing so stately & courteously from the waist to the floor almost, took ones thoughts away from the difficulties of officials & the trials of the day and brought first the perfume of a fairy land with gnomes & delightful wise old ladies to the realization that these little new women in Japan are the instruments to carry out the real dreams of an emancipated womanhood in Japan.¹⁰

⁸ Sanger to Anne Kennedy, March 8, 1922 (*MSM* S2:125); *Japan Times & Mail*, March 7, 1922; *Japan Weekly Chronicle*, March 2, 1922; Sanger, *World Trip Journal*, March 9, 1922 (*MSM* S70:29–30); Sanger, *Autobiography*, 319.

⁹ *Japan Times & Mail*, March 9 and 11, 1922; Sanger, *World Trip Journal*, March 10, 1922 (*MSM* S70:31–36).

¹⁰ Sanger, *World Trip Journal*, March 10, 1922 (*MSM* S70:33–34).

Apparently, final permission for Sanger to land had been given only the night before, after a series of negotiations between prefectural authorities in Yokohama and the Home Minister, the Foreign Office, the House of Peers, and the Police Bureau in Tokyo. After five hours spent on the ship in quarantine, Sanger descended the gangway and set foot on what one Japanese newspaper called “the Land of the Rising Sun and the Closed Mouth.” Customs promptly confiscated forty copies of Sanger’s birth control guide, *Family Limitation*, before she and her son Grant were hurried off to the Tokyo home of Baroness Shidzue Ishimoto, Sanger’s good friend and a leading feminist and birth-control advocate in Japan. J. Noah Slee slipped away to a hotel.¹¹

Sanger wrote in her journal that it was:

Raining torrents, no special impression yet, except parasols, jin-richas [jin rickshaws] and women with babies on backs, also wooden shoes making queer noise especially at Stations where crowds of people come out of trains, while waiting at station for automobile reporters snapped & flashed light photographs. Then home to Barons house where fires in fireplaces cheered us after a long fatiguing day. More flash lights for out of town papers, and Grant & I went to bed in large airy bright room, fire burning nicely. Maid prepared hot, oh so hot, bath in which one sits & soaks & gets warm, one washes & scrubs before getting into tub. Anyone else wishing bath gets into the same tub of water. It seems complicated so far, but familiarity eases & simplifies every problem.¹²

During the next month Sanger gave many interviews and a dozen public lectures, overcoming the ban on speaking to public groups by addressing crowds that the police had been told were specially “invited” by various private organizations. As she had promised, Sanger did not discuss contraceptive methods except in private meetings. The police kept an eye on her public appearances but did not interfere. Birth control became the topic of the day as newspapers reported daily on Sanger’s activities and magazines ran profiles and articles about her ideas.

Sanger recorded every event and meeting in her journal, writing at night and while traveling from city to city. She was also writing letters home and preparing speeches. It left her little time to reflect on her personal life. There are only a few passages on her son, Grant, and barely a mention of J. Noah Slee, who was trying to seal the deal on marriage to Sanger (they were married in London at the end of the trip). A public figure always under scrutiny, especially by her

¹¹ *Japan Times & Mail*, March 9 and 11, 1922; *Japan Advertiser*, March 11, 1922; Sanger, *World Trip Journal*, March 10, 1922 (MSM S70:36).

¹² Sanger, *World Trip Journal*, March 10, 1922 (MSM S70:35-36).

March 9 - 1922

This is indeed a mysterious voyage. Every Japanese ^{on this boat}, both first & second class know more about me & my future actions than I do. They know about the cables I receive before I get them. They know what I can do in Japan, tho I do not know it. It is very mysterious. Yesterday I received three cables. one from Baron Ishimoto - saying "anticipate your remaining with us" another from Kays - saying "Possible both land Goholoma. Welcome discourse" another from N.Y. Society Nagoya extending welcome. Today Kays sends cable saying "Possible land Goholoma impossible discourse"

First page of Sanger's March 9th journal entry written as she neared the port in Yokohama. (Courtesy of the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College)



Sanger and her son Grant in Japan, March 1922. (Courtesy of the George Grantham Bain Collection, Library of Congress)



Margaret Sanger seated in a rickshaw in Yokohama, March 1922. J. Noah Slee, whom she married that summer, is standing on the right. (Courtesy of the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College)

opposition, Sanger was the model of discretion and seldom discussed her love life, either in journals or letters.

In recording each day's activities, the juxtaposition of places and events is at times startling. Sanger wrote one minute about the preferred contraceptive technique of an activist doctor who treated prostitutes, and the next about her formal dinner at the Peers Club, the social outlet for Japanese aristocracy and government leaders, where it was highly unusual for a woman to be invited, let alone to be the focus of the evening. She wrote:

At noon we went to Dr [Koji's] hospital, where he holds a place for patients—charges 1 yen—70 cents a day for bed, all food, medicine and care included— Nurses squat on floor at bedside.

About twenty of the nurses dressed in white and seven doctors came to welcome me. Then followed us from room to room. . . .

Dr Koji told of the methods of B.C. he found successful— plain soft Japanese paper folded & inserted against cervix—then as this absorbs the sperm it is removed and a clean piece wet in antiseptic solution and wiped the vagina dry and clean. 1000 cases no failures.

And then this follows immediately in the same entry:

At four thirty we were due at the "Peers Club" where Count [Kawamura] invited me to speak before a select group. We spoke very frankly—talked of methods & the art of love— It was very inspiring to hear their questions & to hear their perfect English. Baroness Ishimoto sat throughout the discussion very bravely. We went from the Peers Club to have dinner with an Industrial group of twenty five select men. This was very very Japanese. I had to remove my shoes at the door and put on house slippers to shuffle on to the dining room. There we had to remove those also and enter the dining room in stockings. . . .

The dinner with chop sticks was excellent—hot sake wine was also good. I'm sorry now we gave away the bottle on the boat to the waiter. It is so charming & artistic the way dinner is served. The plain walls & floors—only a screen decorated. I improved with the chopsticks & finished dinner with little trouble. Then began the questions on birth control. These men all had wives, but none of them ever out. It's like Spain and other man countries. Intelligent questions of every sort & shade. All agreed birth control a good thing & said they were in accord with my work & not in agreement with the government attitude at all. Though many of these men were government officials. . . .

No women's club here—no power to vote for women.¹³

Another day, after giving a speech on the morality of birth control to a group of over 100 professional men, Sanger toured Yoshiwara, the Tokyo prostitution district. She related these events in her journal as follows:

I spoke on Morality of B.C. & gave an outline of the movement in other countries.

Its morality that seems to trouble these people. They fear B.C. will lower morals of young people, but when I visited [Y]oshiwara after the reception. . . . I wonder just what is meant by that fear.

The unlicensed quarters are avenues of small two story houses—small alcoves where behind a window sits the girl with only a slit for her eyes to be seen. There are thousands of these girls in this quarter. The streets were full of men walking up & down occasionally talking to one of the girls. Some men going into the houses while others were coming out.

It gave one the horrors—The price of the girl was above the door—per hour—per night.

After walking a half hour in this district we crossed the bridge to the Licensed quarter & there one sees a new world. The houses are like large hotels, lanterns or electric lights sending out a soft warm glow. The wide streets are inviting and clean—The houses are built so large & spaciouly, they all have courts with flowers or small gardens. There is an entrance like a driveway through which the men walk to view the various photographs of the inmates ready for use. In some frames there were no pictures but writing which said 'just arrived not time for picture.' This would usually be the girl most in favor & I was told a new girl has nine or ten visitors an evening to the other girls two or three. All of these photographs look young, none of them look like girls over twenty-two or three—

Certainly this quarter is the most attractive part of Tokyo. Is it any wonder the girls prefer to live there than in the factory visited this morning or at home where there is squalor, & poverty & suppression.

There were less men wandering in the streets in this quarter than in the unlicensed, it was after eleven o'clock, so perhaps they were inside. It was very depressing, but it makes one think deeply.

¹³ Sanger, World Trip Journal, March 17, 1922 (*MSM S70:53–58*).

I felt helpless in my work against that swarming crowd of men. They do not want these conditions made different. The women of these quarters seem to have no children.¹⁴

These passages from Sanger's journal cover only a few days of nearly a month spent in Japan in one of the most historic visits ever made by a Westerner to that country. Baroness Ishimoto, the great Japanese pioneer for women's rights, claimed that those few weeks in March and early April of 1922 transformed Sanger's name into a household word in Japan for many years after. A public relations triumph, Sanger's tour also inspired a Japanese birth control movement to coalesce in her wake. Ishimoto later wrote, "Not since Commodore Perry had forced Japan to open its doors to foreign commerce, in 1852, had an American created such a sensation"; she added, "if the government had deliberately tried to focus interest on birth control, it could not have done a better job."¹⁵

Apart from a few letters and many newspaper stories, Sanger's journal provides the most complete and insightful account of her lecture tour in Japan and is among the best sources on the founding of the Japanese birth control movement. This journal has also been used over the years by scholars looking at Western conceptions of Japan and Asia in the immediate post-World War I period. Relatively few Americans in Japan traveled as extensively as Sanger, nor are there very many surviving impressions of this time from Western women about aspects of Japanese culture related to women, child-bearing, and sexuality.

Though it carries an agenda to educate people in the U.S. and abroad about the birth control movement and the need for postwar population policy, this journal is also written with an open-eyed sense of wonder and acceptance of another culture. Sanger was neither highly educated nor parochial, and she seldom fell into the trappings of either informed preconception or outright prejudice. She was rarely judgmental and made an effort to get to know individuals. Sanger is speaking to an audience in these entries, but she remains honest in her impressions.

Looking critically at her writing here, it is hurried and sketchy, and her descriptive language is redundant and frequently not up to the task of translating the exotic. But at the same time her writing is energetic, of the moment, and comfortably colloquial. Even though her journal writing may not double as good journalism or succeed as dispassionate literary narration, it is rare to find other travel journals in the early twentieth-century that take a reader so far off *Baedeker's* beaten path or open doors to scenes and situations unseen by other Westerner travelers.

¹⁴ Sanger, World Trip Journal, March 18, 1922 (*MSM S70:60-65*).

¹⁵ Shidzue Ishimoto Kato, *A Fight for Women's Happiness: Pioneering the Family Planning Movement in Japan* (Tokyo: Japanese Organization for International Cooperation in Family Planning, 1984), 52.