Modern Girls: New Figures in a Consumer Age

The Tokyo Earthquake of 1923 (*Kantō daishinsai*) struck Tokyo and its environs on September 1 at 11:58 AM. Conflagrations reduced most of the city to rubble. Rebuilding from scratch, however, involved more than the construction of new buildings and main thoroughfares. The collapse of the capitol also filled the nation at large with the sense that their world, turned upside down by a natural disaster and its attending social upheaval, would somehow be different. Of particular interest were the consequences for women.

Within a year, the city gradually resumed its normal pace. The dramatic debut of the modern girl (*modan gāru*), a powerful symbol of the emergence of consumerism, began to capture the imagination. Among the more blatant references targeting the modern girl an unprecedented preoccupation with the conspicuous articulations of consumerism stand out: bobbed hair that emulated the style of Hollywood's silent film idols Clara Bow, Pola Negri, and Mary Pickford, lipstick, face paint, and thinly penciled eyebrows that informed the flamboyant behavior of Gloria Swanson, sexually alluring western fashions like softly-tinted dresses with hemlines reaching the knee or slightly below and accented by high-heeled shoes and nylon stockings that exposed the calf.[1]

For some middle-class women and above, consumerism reflected a fusion of old and new. Fake fur shawls embellished kimono, permanent-waved hair covered the ears (*mimi kakushi*) and challenged hair swept-back in a bun, and the foreign scent of toiletries lent a distinctively modern accent to women dressed in traditional attire. Surely, the image of women in art deco appointed coffee shops sipping coffee seated around marble-top tables on upholstered chairs and surrounded by exotic fauna was a leisure activity affecting a minority of women in Tokyo. However, this, too, identified subjectivity with consumer potential.

As is true of other social phenomena, whether the media created the image of the modern girl or merely reported her existence is a chicken and egg question. But without a doubt, Tokyo's modern girl attracted the attention she did because of the sensational coverage she received, mainly in mass women's magazines. At first portrayed as a change in women's fashions and hairstyles, the media created a perfect social backdrop for capitalizing

on what was labeled an object of depravity associated with amusement and loose morals.

Most Marxist, socialist, and conservative intellectuals, whatever their ideological leanings, joined the wider public in denouncing this so-called distortion of modernity that followed on the heels of the rising white-collared salaried workers who flocked to Tokyo at the time of the Great War (1914-18). Often interspersed in intellectual discourses about the modern girl are the words decadent (*taihaiteki)* and hedonistic (*kyōrakuteki)*. Both terms convey the intellectuals' misgivings about what was perceived as a by-product of middle-class culture with its roots in America. Marxists, in particular, believed that any social change influenced, even in part, by American consumerism was circumspect.

In 1925, German intellectual Rudolf Kayser put it this way: 'Americanism is a new European method. The extent to which this new method was influenced by America seems to me quite unimportant.'[2] Weimar specialist Detlev J. K. Peukert has argued: 'In the twenties Americanism' became a catchword for untrammeled modernity' in Germany.[3] Historian Irene Guenther, an authority on women's fashion trends under Nazism, has addressed the "fascination and fear" Americanism evoked emphasizing "the dilemma modernity posed for the preservation of traditional German society and culture (*Kulture*)."[4]

Because Tokyo's modern girl lacked a clear social referent, her identity did not hinge on whether she was a substantive entity who paraded the streets of the ultra-fashionable Ginza, worked as a café hostess, was depicted as a dancer in Murayama Tomoyoshi's play *The Spy and the Dancer* (*Supai to odoriko*, 1928), or resembled the young woman featured in the film Tokyo Rhapsody**,** 1936) who sold flowers at a modest shop rather than in a fancy emporium. Depending on the context, the modern girl, fit any of these women. In Germany, graphic artists like Ludwig Hohlwein also produced diverse characterizations of the modern girl (*Neue Frauen*) in the 1920s.[5] Image or reality, the modern girl resisted a fixed label and went beyond the crystallization of outward displays, intangible numbers, and the affixation of names.

Japan's modern girl made no verbal pronouncements about what she subscribed to, and, thus, intellectuals assumed the task of imparting her with an identity. In the summer of 1925 Kon Wajirō, a professor of

architecture with a penchant for cataloging the minutiae of daily life, surveyed over 1,000 men and women residing in Tokyo and nearby farm communities. Kon's findings confirm that 99% of the women who frequented the Ginza, already home to the conspicuous elements of consumerism – department stores, dance halls, or modern girls themselves - wore traditional Japanese dress.[6] The strength behind the modern girl lay not in Kon's numerical findings. The "modern" that identified the modern girl clearly was inconsistent with prevalent female norms. Rather, Kon's survey conveyed a message that gave voice to a hope for the possibilities the modern girl offered all women.

The concerted attacks on the modern girl in Japan may be read as an attack on commodification and the spread of capitalism. Yet, to speak of consumer culture as a static American construct is hardly commensurable with a consumerism that transformed the landscape in the United States, Europe, Asia, and elsewhere at approximately the same time or a few years later. From the early 1900s, consumerism pervaded everyday practices in Berlin. Sociologist Georg Simmel's essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903) concludes that in Berlin "only by screening out the complex stimuli that stemmed from the rush of modern life could the extremes be tolerated."[7]

As a figure of representation, Tokyo's modern girl was not representative of all urban women, much less Japanese women as a whole. Nevertheless, the "willful determination" underlying the image of the modern girl "posed a challenge to reigning social practices" and reflected women's changing identities.[8] An age had dawned in which the commodification of the everyday defied boundaries and helped define the dreams and anxieties emblematic of women's changing identities – women who were being pulled into the forefront of modernity and the unsettling image of the modern girl, the quintessential icon of modern consumerism.

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[1] Barbara Sato, *The New Japanese Woman: Modernity, Media, and Women in Interwar Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, Second Printing 2003).

[2] Rudolf Kayser, "Amerikanismus." Vossiche Zeitung, no. 458, September 27, 1925. Reprint, "Americanism," in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 395-97. For a similar quote by Rudolf Kayser, see

[3] Ibid.

[4] Irene Guenther, *Nazi Chich? Fashioning Women in the Third Reich* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2004), p. 70, p. 74.

[5] Uta G. Poiger, "Fantasies of Universality? Neue Frauen and "Others" in Weimar and Nazi Germany," forthcoming in *The Modern Girl around the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

[6] Kon Wajirō, "Tokyo Ginzagai fūzoku," (*Fujin kōron*, July 1925), in Kon Wajirō, *Kōgengaku* (1927), Kon Wajirō shū, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Shinsensha, 1986).
[7] Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," (1903), in *Cities and Society*, ed. P. K. Hatt and A. J. Riess (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1957).
[8] Miriam Silverberg, "The Modern Girl as Militant," in *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945*, ed. Gail Lee Bernstein (Berkeley, Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 261-264.