



Modern Girls on the Go

Photo: Evening on a train platform in Shinjuku Station, the world's busiest terminal, used by an average of 3.64 million people a day.

New words indicate that Tokyo working women are seeking happiness in more diverse roles in Japanese society

by Alisa Freedman, Assistant Professor of Japanese Literature and Film

Thanks to the help of a CSWS grant, I spent summer 2009 in Tokyo, conducting research for my books on changing images of workingwomen on Japanese television, *Modern Girls in Motion: Gender, Mobility, and Labor in Japan*, and *Tokyo in Transit: Japanese Culture on the Rails and Road*. In general, my interdisciplinary work explores how the city shapes culture and psychology, giving rise to gender roles that characterize Japan. My research takes two forms. The first involves analyzing stories—those told in literature, television, journalism, cinema, and other popular media—that capture Japanese women's experiences in a creative and thought-provoking way. The second entails wandering Tokyo to observe patterns of daily life and dominant trends and pondering the reasons behind them.

For example, an important current trend is the “eco boom,” “eco” for “ecology” and “boom,” the Japanese term for fads. (Japanese catchphrases are often abbreviations formed from first syllables of words.) As in the United States, the Japanese government is rewarding consumers for buying energy-saving appliances and cars. Climbing Mount Fuji has become a top vacation choice. Non-smoking areas are increasing in Tokyo, as are rooftop gardens and other spots that add green to this city strikingly devoid of grass. Department stores are cutting back on the lavish paper packaging for which they have been known. There is a proliferation of urban guides by young artists, who, although compassionate, glamorize the growing problem of homelessness as ecological living. Another boom has been the continued application of key words to groups of women, thereby making their lifestyles easier to understand and less threatening and turning them into symbols of social progress and problems.

One key term that has caught my attention is “ara-fo,” or “around 40.” Voted the most important word coined in 2008, “ara fo” connotes women born between 1964 and 1973, who came of age in the Bubble Era and entered the workforce as the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL) was being implemented. (“Ara-fo” tied for top new word with “gū,” from the

English “good.”) Derived from the lesser-used fashion marketing term “ara-sa,” or “around 30,” “ara-fo” has given rise to nicknames for women of different generations, including “ara-fifu” (around 50) and “ara-kan” (around “kanreki” or the age of mandatory retirement at 60). None of these usually apply to men, who are classified more by their occupations than by their ages.

Because of legal, educational, and economic developments and thanks to activist movements, “ara fo,” in theory, have more choices in employment, marriage, and childbearing than women have historically enjoyed. Perceived as marking a break with women of the past, “ara-fo,” have been viewed as a measure of the advancement of gender equality and of personal happiness, political topics during a time of national concern over falling birthrates and an aging society in ways different than before. Family care issues pertaining to “ara-fo,” and working women in general, were prime issues in the August national election, in which the right-leaning Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), in power for more than 50 years, was defeated by the more centrist Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ, formed in 1998). “Ara-fo” have also been widely perceived as representing the difficulties of individual freedom and have been described as demanding and selfish in the spate of television programs, books, and the magazines for and about them.

The term “ara-fo” and the gender trends the word encapsulated were brought to national attention by the fictional television drama “Around Forty: Women Who Want It All” (Chumon no ooi onnatachi), which aired Friday nights at 10 from April to June 2008 and provided role models for this demographic. Arguably discussed more in the mass media than any other television series of 2008, this character-driven narrative follows a few important months in the lives of three friends as they interact with men, who also represent national issues and archetypes, and make decisions about their futures. Left open ended and not ending in the main characters' happy marriages, “Around Forty” can be read as both a part of and a break in a

history of prime-time television dramas developed since the late 1980s that use urban workingwomen to present serious social messages in a lighthearted way that most often perpetuate rather than subvert dominant state discourses and gender norms.

While the generation of 35- to 44-year-olds is diverse, the unmarried, highly educated, and upper middle-class members, many of whom work in professions that used to be dominated by men, have been discussed the most. The central of the three “Around Forty” protagonists is a poster woman for this group. On one hand, they have been blamed for not having babies. On the other hand, their work outside the home is being taken seriously in a country that still has fewer female corporate managers and politicians than other developed nations. They are a target consumer bracket and have been, in recent years, finally able to secure mortgages. Because marriage has been viewed in government and journalistic discourses as a means to paternity, late marriage has also become an issue of national concern.

A new term that represents 2009 is “konkatsu,” or activities (katsudo) in which men and women with similar interests can meet potential spouses. (“Kekkon” is the Japanese word for “marriage.”) “Konkatsu” occur on the growing variety of online dating sites and in person. I inadvertently stepped into a Friday night “konkatsu” aerobics class for professionals around age 40 at my Tokyo gym. (The inverse of “konkatsu” is “rikatsu,” a now popular slang for the divorce process.) Matchmaking activities have been a large part of Japanese culture, taking such forms as gatherings among friends (gokon) and arranged marriage meetings (omiai). Yet “konkatsu” makes dating more of a public issue. Used in conjunction with “ara-fo,” the term alludes to a growing recognition that both men and women have multiple life choices, while showing that continued importance of marriage in Japan, where the family forms the backbone of society and often the sole unit of care.

As I saw last summer, the discussions about “ara fo” and related terms reveal larger patterns in Japanese society and the important role gender plays in Japanese politics. New words are evidence that women are seeking happiness in more diverse roles. Women have always worked in Japan. Female corporate

MODERN GIRLS CONFERENCE

Cosponsored by CSWS and organized by Alisa Freedman, “Modern Girls on the Go: Gender, Mobility, and Labor in Japan” met at UO in January 2010. The international conference involved scholars from the fields of history, anthropology, visual studies, and literature and investigated the lived experiences and cultural depictions of women who worked in jobs related to ideas of mobility in twentieth and twenty-first century Japan, including flight attendants, tour bus guides, beauty queens, professional athletes, educators, and soldiers. These women, often conspicuous in their uniforms, have influenced gender norms, patterns of daily life, and Japan’s international image. They performed jobs considered fashionable in their first inception and therefore represented ideas of modernity at different historical moments. Overlooked by scholars, they are an integral and highly visual part of the national workforce and show the important relationship between gender, modernity, and technology.



employees are a common sight on Tokyo trains. Fewer women wear uniforms that used to be required dress for secretaries, or “office ladies” (OL), to show their membership to the corporation and distinguish them from their colleagues working jobs believed to be less temporary. The custom of adopting high-pitched voices to be polite seems to have ended, and women speak in normal tones in business situations. (We were trained in my Japanese languages classes to have the voice inflections of Minnie Mouse.) Yet in popular culture and the national images the government promotes at home and abroad, women are still most often depicted in service roles. Hello Kitty, born in 1976 and thus an “ara-sa,” has been marketed wearing uniforms of various female service laborers, but she has never been seen as a professional, such as a doctor, politician, or professor. ■

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kinds of conventions that you have to use to tell stories about pain to make people hear them, and how you can be left out of public acknowledgment or erased or ignored if you don’t obey the rules, or for whatever reason your identity doesn’t really match what is validated. African American women are a case study of the book. The book is not just about saying, Well, black women have it bad; people ignore their suffering—that is not my point. I’m really interested in when black women’s stories *are* paid attention to. There are conventions that you can see with a variety of kinds of groups that try to make claims about their suffering, which can include conservatives, to children or advocates for children, to the disabled. People often have to make use of one or more of these conventions if they

want various institutions to hear them.

Q: Could you talk a little bit about the meaning of the word sentimentality in relation to your work?

I spent a lot of time actually just trying to trace the history of it. There’s a popular definition of sentimentality. Justice Potter said of obscenity, “You sort of know it when you see it.” And people say, “That’s sentimental,” or, “This escapes the sentimental.” You generally understand what it means even though people don’t articulate it. And generally, it means an excess of emotion. Unearned emotion is often a phrase that’s used. It’s attached to unreal emotion, emotion that’s designed just to provoke tears without some substance behind them. In literary studies there’s a more rigorous definition, but it’s not that far from popular articulations of it. It still has many of those aspects. But there’s

also an idea that in the United States sentimentality as a tradition is concerned with suffering of the oppressed, and it’s an attempt to tell stories about suffering that can move people to feel differently about the oppressed group.

In terms of the longer history, it comes with its relationship to sensibility, and enlightenment philosophy, as a kind of ethos that’s important in relationship to compassion. What’s important to understand about sentimentality is that it’s a particular kind of intellectual tradition, but it also has a popular meaning that’s often not unpacked. Part of what I try to do in that book is trace the history early on and unpack the differences or similarities between the popular and the scholarly understandings of the term. ■

—Alice Evans interviewed Rebecca Wanzo in October 2009.