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From Office Flowers to Gym Bunnies: How women used sporting leisure to redefine themselves in the Japanese Bubble Economy

In 1992, Fuji Television aired an early 5am morning exercise show called, *Eikaiwa taisō Zuiikin Ingurisshu*. Roughly translating as ‘English conversation, gymnastic exercise voluntary muscles English’, the show aimed to facilitate English-learning using synchronised exercises while also parodying the established NHK 6am gymnastic exercise program. As part of an experimental low-budget program called JOCX-TV2 that ran from 1987 – 1995, this show aired for 24 episodes over one season, and while passing unnoticed by most Japanese, gained an international cult following from 2005 onwards when the series was re-aired.

When I stumbled across this video during my research, it simultaneously fascinated, amused and confused me. While undoubtedly funny, it also was saying something about women, exercise and Bubble Japan that was hidden under the humour. Through this paper I will explore what sport meant to young women in Japan, of the kind being parodied here, and who may have even been watching at 5am.

What was the Bubble Economy?

In 1986, Japan experienced its own ‘Big Bang’ moment when it set into motion the agreements of the 1985 Plaza Accord, that included the liberalisation of its financial system and the artificial value-raising of the yen. While this was done to counteract international tensions created by its significant trade surplus with other states, it also had the unintended consequences of creating conditions that would see its stock market inflate, property balloon, and with intense speculation rife, enable the largest economic bubble in its history. Meanwhile, encouraged by rising assets, low interest rates, and the high international value of the yen, ordinary Japanese consumers went on a massive consumer spending spree, seeing in Japanese economic dominance a narrative of national ascendancy and new era of positivist international standing. However, despite the self-belief in Japanese destiny, this state of affairs would only last for a few years before the first signs of bursting made themselves felt at the end of 1989, becoming full-blown in the early 1990s, and from which Japan would pay for in the decade and a half of recession afterwards, called the Lost Decade.

Lifestyle magazines in the Bubble

Stepping into this heady arena of financial and consumer boom were lifestyle magazines. While magazines have a long and celebrated history in modern Japanese culture, the 1980s saw the creation of many titles that focused on new lifestyle and consumer opportunities that Japanese citizens were expected to enjoy, as part of an international rising superpower. Instead of being merely instructional (as in women’s magazines), or educational (as in current events and politics), these lifestyle magazines showed their gendered demographics that lifestyle could be experienced through a combination of cultural means, from fashion to food, music to

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movies, parties and travel, and of course, sport. In 1988, we see the first edition of *Hanako* magazine issued, at the height of the Bubble Economy, reflecting the new, more liberated expectations of young women on the consumer landscape, while *Mono* magazine submitted to changes that promoted a more gender-neutral, consumer-lifestyle focus, abandoning its former more masculine, hobbyist image.

Who were the new consumers?

Targeted by these new magazines, and prominent in this new culture of the Bubble were two main figures: that of the salaryman and his office counterpart, the office lady, or OL. At the forefront of both business and leisure, these young, working Japanese had in differing amounts, both the money (men) and time (women) to enjoy the benefits the Bubble Economy promised. However, by being white-collar office workers, they were also in some ways odd targets for consumer sport that demanded physical fitness, access to the outdoors or out-of-work facilities, and leisured free-time. Yet it is in the very denial of access to these things that we see sport becoming a fetishized commodity, epitomised in the lifestyle boom of the 1980s and reflected in its magazines. In particular, for women, sport would come to represent more than leisure and athleticism, but also stand-in for other more defining qualities formerly prohibited to Japanese women, as can be seen through the lens of Japanese lifestyle magazines, *Mono* and *Hanako*, and the focus of my presentation today.

What was sport in the Bubble?

Alongside the various economic and consumer booms at this time, was also a sport and fitness boom. Against the context of political consensus to reform Japanese society in the 1980s, sport became increasingly seen as another consumer activity to be developed in accordance with other international trends, benefitting from privatised investment. In particular, previously undeveloped sports in Japan were a focus of this investment, leading to a nearly ten-fold increase in the number of sports clubs from 1981 and 1991, at a rate of over 30 established per year in 1982 to over 200 per year by 1991, and with an increase in market scale from \$2 billion to over \$30 billion between 1982 and 1991. (Yamashita, 2006)

Why was sport so important in the Bubble?

However, although sport undeniably had great lucrative opportunities for investors in the Bubble, the question remains, why sport? In a country so dominated throughout the second-half of the twentieth century by an ideology of industrial and technological advancement and foreign exports, encouraging sporting leisure appears to be at best a side-line rather than focus for government and industry policy. This is something (Leheny, 2003) explores in his research into Japanese policies of the 1970s, in which he posits that leisured activity is equated by ministers to cultural advancement and international parity with other developed countries. While this may be so, examining the specific sports promoted, other aspects come to the fore with regards to the specific context of the Bubble.

With money a byword for the late 1980s, sport had within its very practice the potential for not just the making but also the conspicuous display of money that was so important to participants of the Bubble. In many magazine articles and advertisements, sporting leisure is not just shown as a practice or discipline, but as entire lifestyle, accompanied by a variety of accessories and accretions, from footwear and fashion to equipment and even food. Applied to many new activities which utilise the latest in modern equipment and facilities, modern sport becomes the perfect vehicle for promoting consumption and new avenue for lifestyle trends.

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Furthermore, following Bordieu, we can see how sport becomes another way for capital (both cultural and financial) to be acquired and displayed, not just in the acquisition of goods and their demonstration of taste, but also in which the exercising and honing of the body indicates the self-discipline and effort put into aesthetic athleticism. Distinguishing one from the ordinary, the toned unbulky body, implication of practice time through skill, leisure time, access to grounds, membership, and equipment, indicate real monetary privilege.

Finally, sport epitomises not only access to facilities, equipment and skill, but also that of fresh air, wide-open spaces, and most importantly, time – all of which were in short supply in the hectic lifestyles and cities of Bubble Japan. In this sport thus becomes not just privileged, but enters the fantastical realm, of being successful enough to leave one's desk to find leisured activity outside the confines of the office and the home.

It is these aspects of lifestyle and social and financial privilege that made sport such an attractive prospect for Japanese consumers. Coupled with the potential for developing high-value commercial land in an overheated property market, this made it the ideal investment opportunity for Japanese investors, leading to the development of sporting facilities, golfing ranges, resorts, and sporting holidays, not only in Japan, but as far as Hawaii and Australia by Japanese companies. During this time, we see increasing participation rates for both men and women in the increasingly popularised modern sports of tennis, skiing/snowboarding, and golf (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications), and golf in particular becomes the sport of choice; its expansive and expensively developed and maintained grounds, caddies, equipment, club memberships and networking potential all giving it significant barriers to entry and high cultural value. As such, aided by Japan's Resort Law of 1987 that opened up land for leisure developments, golf club memberships were being traded on the stock market, and by 1994 after the bursting of the Bubble, there were 2000 golf courses with dedicated resorts taking up 1680 square kilometres (McCormack, 2001) with around 13 million players (Lockyer, 2012).

Sport and women

However, although the sporting boom in the Bubble has usually been identified as the golfing craze that swept Japan in the 1980s and 1990s, privatised sport for the most part was aimed at women who had little access to golf. Thus, while men and their practice of golf (or indeed attempts at gaining access to golf) grabbed headlines, it was other sports, such as skiing, tennis, and aerobics, that were activities in which women were the new frontier and main consumer market, and who were the main customers of the boom in sports clubs and facilities of this time.

At this point it must be contextualised that Japanese women as consumers have a complex and undervalued history within Japanese society. Prior to the Bubble, the importance of the Japanese female consumer had been assigned to that of the Japanese housewife – the *sengyo shufu*, who as wife to the hegemonic salaryman and organiser of the household, was seen as a pillar of Japanese society and main consumer of household goods. Younger unmarried women, notably that of the OL, did not fit within this role, and until the 1980s, were discounted of much economic or cultural influence. Instead their position was seen as a temporary one, a waystation on route to matrimonial security and coming into society. However, by the Bubble, their position as young working women with both disposable time and money enabled them to be identified as a significant new consumer market, to be tapped for leisure activities that included sport.

In this the privileges and elitism of sport, as well as its emphasis on the body come to be perfectly positioned for young Japanese women. Not only utilising their disposable income and time, as well as desire for leisure, sport at this point also becomes unlinked from masculinity, adopting a feminine strategy that linked beauty and travel with fitness and enjoyment, building on trends for individuality and spiritual richness that can be traced to strategies in Japanese travel and tourism from the 1970s.

Women's work

For although young women in the Bubble appear to be at the forefront of leisure and enjoyment, embodying the fun and frivolity of the Bubble, their very visible participation was in fact foregrounded on their very lack of opportunities and access to other more concrete privileges. With the majority of young female graduates side-lined into clerical-track roles in anticipation of their eventual departure for marriage and maternity, many office duties of these young women included turning on lights, cleaning desks and clearing ashtrays, greeting clients, and serving their male counterparts tea. This exclusion from meaningful work, which in any case was accepted to be short-lived, meant that many women used their largely disposable income to have fun before settling down as housewives, and which in fact was one of the only things they could do with their limited earning potential.

Furthermore, with no real place in the office, and still living at home where their mothers held the symbolic position of dominance, young women were an entirely receptive audience for a third space in which to go. While young women did participate in much night-time leisure, on the whole bars and clubs were still risky for young women looking for respectable marriages. Thus, alongside shopping, eating and tourism, sports clubs, gyms, tennis courts and ski resorts became new acceptable places in which young unmarried women could both spend their money and enjoy themselves, outside the office and home where their lack of privilege was only too apparent. In this, the wide-open spaces of sport not only come to signify the antithesis of the city and cramped living of Japanese life, but for the women the opening up of self-discovery, possibility, and through the travel and modernity in sport, alignment with the universalist principles of the international.

The sporting body

It is this turn away from the hegemonic order, reclaiming space and becoming visible in public that we see in young women accessing sport, and nowhere is this more visible than in the very physicality of participation. Linked to beauty and health as a feminising strategy to appeal to female consumers, the body becomes emphasised and repackaged through accessories, fashion and advertising. Epitomised through the aerobics boom, women and their own bodies are sold to themselves through the new medium of sport. While this is nothing new, fashion and beauty being a longstanding feature of control and consumer commodification, it is this new medium of sporting athleticism that proves significant for this period.

For alongside restrictions in work roles and duties, young women also faced more immediate controls over their appearance and presentation of manner at work. Expected to provide forward-facing services of the company, OLs were required to wear a company uniform, extending to hair, make-up and accessories, and in the case of many large companies, pass an etiquette course from which the best and most presentable (beautiful) would be handpicked to serve in the most lucrative departments. In this, young women's skills and bodies were not only tightly controlled, but also exploited for literal commercial gain.

Sport in this sense thus provides not only a relief from the official demands of social control on young women's bodies, but also engenders a type of liberation, claiming back, and to a certain extent, rebellion from everyday expectations of modesty and propriety. For while on the one hand, honing the body through sport and cladding it in tight or skimpy sportswear may seem both an exploitative commodification and sexualisation of women's bodies, positioned against the context of traditional Japanese demands of feminine modesty, shyness and virginity, women's deliberate engagement with sport as leisure can be seen as an act of agency, redefining themselves as liberated bodies in the international sphere of modern sport.

Sport as rebellion

It is this act of agency and liberation of the body that makes sport both significant and contentious when applied to Japanese women. From the outside, it may be easy to critique Japanese women as coming under the Western exploitative influence of a commercialisation, over-sexualisation and objectification of their bodies through revealing outfits. However, positioned against another trend of the time, the body-conscious dress, we can see how sports such as aerobics were part of a greater move towards liberating the female body and the rebellion of Japanese women from the confinements of their company uniforms and social restrictions on their freedoms through cultural expectations of modesty.

Furthermore, through the very act of being outside and participating in the consumer-leisure boom, whether in the sports clubs, resorts, or the bars, discos and restaurants, young women's very visibility in public spaces and financial independence enabled them to transgress specific Japanese social and cultural boundaries and colonise a new space for themselves where before they had little ground.

Women as carriers of new East Asian modernity

However, it must be remembered that although Japanese young women may be posited as liberating pioneers and beneficiaries of the leisure boom in the Bubble Economy, these conditions were predicated on their very lack of participation and agency in the wider economy. Shut-out from managerial track work, their disposable income and time were the result of being excluded from meaningful economic participation, both in employment and investment. Instead, what they were left with was a short-term urgency to enjoy while they were single and working, and this was exploited to fuel the sport and leisure industries that were in turn fuelling the consumer economic bubble. Thus, like the sexualisation of women's bodies where Japanese women were both claiming liberation from Japanese conformity whilst also buying into Western norms of female objectification, so women's leisure was both being claimed and enjoyed by Japanese women whilst also being used to fund national and predominantly male economic prosperity.

Nevertheless, this period marks a real sea-change in the way in which young Japanese women presented themselves and were perceived. By giving the opportunity to participate in open public space and be visible in self-determined action and dress, sport enabled young women to self-determine and negotiate additional socially acceptable ground that was both international and Japanese. In this, Japanese women in the 1980s were at the forefront of a new kind of East Asian identity, articulating a new wave of femininity that was both modern and culturally grounded. Creating a language of liberation, they appropriated selected international elements for local purposes, retranslating Western concepts to create a negotiated East Asian femininity suitable for a postmodern age. While not perfect, it is these legacies of modernity played out on the female body that continued after the Bubble burst, to create conditions for subversions and subcultural style that make up the vibrancy of Japanese modern culture in the 1990s onwards.

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