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The Well-Travelled Woman: *Hanako* Magazine and the Internationalised Women of the Japanese Bubble Economy

What was the Bubble Economy?

In the late 1980s, Japan experienced an economic bubble of such proportions that it was later called the 'Bubble Economy', defining a significant period in Japanese history. Building on its economic and industrial ambitions in the 1960s and 1970s, by the 1980s, Japan had amassed a significant international trade surplus to become the second largest economy in the world, and soon speculated to overtake the US, who by comparison was feeling the effects of a trade deficit with Japan. Following international trade tensions with the US and other countries to whom it exported, in 1986 Japan signed the Plaza Accord, agreeing to address its trade surplus by artificially raising the value of the yen, and liberalising its financial system. As a result, flooding its system with cheap globalised money, it set off a chain of events that saw its stock market inflate, property balloon, and speculation become rife. Meanwhile, encouraged by their rising assets and the international value of the yen, Japanese consumers went on a spending spree, creating an adjacent consumer bubble not experienced before or since in Japan. It is this consumer culture of the economic bubble that I address in my presentation today.

Who was the OL?

At the forefront of the culture of the Bubble were two figures: that of the salaryman, and his office counterpart, the office lady, or OL, both experiencing the professional and consumer changes wrought by the over-inflated economy. In this presentation, I'll be focusing on the figure of the OL, and her changing position within the Bubble as depicted through the women's magazine, *Hanako* (Magazine House Ltd.).

In the 1980s, office ladies constituted a significant if rather undervalued part of the workforce. The predominant female figure in Japanese society is that of the *sengyo shufu* housewife, who as wife and mother, is central to the narrative of family and Japanese domestic identity, and a natural cultural counterpart to that of Japanese salaryman, husband and father. As young, unmarried women, office ladies by comparison, have commonly been peripheral to this narrative, grown or growing out from under the dominion of the Japanese household, and yet to start families of their own and contribute to Japanese society through its prescribed role for adult women. However, in the Japanese Bubble, young office ladies suddenly became more prominent, as a newly targeted consumer market with the potential to offset the decline in Japanese exports that the more expensive yen affected, as well as appease international trade tensions by buying imported luxury goods. This was part of a larger pattern in which domestic consumption was being encouraged as a way to develop an internal tertiary economy and pacify international criticisms of trade imbalances.

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What is Hanako Magazine?

As a result of this emphasis on consumerism, new lifestyle magazines sprang up in the 1980s, of which *Hanako* Magazine was part of. First published in 1988 at the height of the Bubble, *Hanako* Magazine catered almost exclusively to young women living in the Tokyo / Kanto region, and almost certainly for the most part, office ladies. However, rather than the fashion of other women's magazines, *Hanako* focused on other aspects of consumer culture, such as urban leisure and with a specific focus on travel. This is something that can be seen in its front covers, painted by the Sydney-based artist, Ken Donne, whose free-flowing style of abstracted outdoor leisure and still life encapsulated the breezy colourful consumer culture of its young female readership.

What was the OLs work?

Typically, in their 20s to early 30s, office ladies were young female office administrative staff, whose roles, in addition to clerical work, included cleaning the desks, answering phones, making tea and greeting clients. In the 1980s only about 1 percent of women were streamed to the managerial-track positions, while the majority were automatically placed on the clerical-track roles. Colloquially known as 'office flowers' their role was to primarily brighten up the office with their presence and support the predominantly male managerial-track staff with day-to-day tasks. Seen as a way-station on route to marriage, maternity, and the culturally dominant status of housewife, the OL role was un-invested both by management and their young female inhabitants, expected and encouraged to leave their positions as they married, making way for younger and cheaper new recruits. OLs meanwhile took full advantage of the leeway implicit in their unsecure roles, taking liberties with time, workload and disposable income to have fun before settling down, often using their subordinate status and youthful charms to win favours from the men working around them. Meanwhile the recently passed EEOL highlighted official policies that encouraged women to enter work, which in addition to the focus on young women as a new consumer group, ensured that OLs were viewed as benefitting from many different policies and social norms during Japan's 1980s, at the forefront of a consumer and employment boom.

Escape to the West

However, OLs' enjoyment of the new consumer opportunities was multi-faceted, epitomised in the travel articles of *Hanako*. Exploring the magazine issues of the late 1980s, travel, and specifically international travel makes up a significant portion, especially to those destinations of the West. Primarily featuring items of pure consumerism such as restaurants and shops, *Hanako* readers appear at first glance to be the ultimate consumer-tourists, engaging not with culture, but as superficial shoppers and enjoyers of holidaying leisure and branded goods.

In some ways, this was a double-sided agenda. While catering to the enjoyment narrative of young women before taking on the responsibilities of matrimony, it also could be seen as a way in which young women's un-investable capital could be used to make up for the trade surplus of Japanese industry and economy with the West. While not wishing to concede core economic or industrial targets, utilising the disposable income of tourists and encouraging domestic consumerism was part of an agenda that could be seen in the MOT plan to double overseas tourism from 5 to 10 million Japanese between 1987 to 1992, much like 5 and 10 year economic plans of previous decades.

However, in the portrayal of these international spaces *Hanako* magazine actually betrays another attitude – that of a levelling or hollowing out of place itself, the abundance of detail about goods, shops and eateries actually obscuring the place it observes until it becomes just one of many, flattened out of difference in the playground of the international. Here we see the tourist gaze looking only for the resources that are of interest to its needs, irrespective of its inhabitants; a gaze that colonises as much as it travels, displaying a confidence and power that was manifesting in even its female citizens of more marginalised status.

Yet, while colonisation implies a taking over, in the context of female travel in Japan, *Hanako's* travel articles can be seen as an escape as much enjoyment or declaration of power. Ivy (1995) has noted how from 1970s JR advertising campaigns, modern tourism in Japan has utilised the suggestive power of young women seeking self-discovery and fulfilment to promote travel and tourism as a locus for this. In Kelsky's (Blake Willis & Murphy-Shigematsu, 2008, pp. 86-105) work she too notes how Japanese women often align themselves with the West, seeing in the wide-open spaces limitless possibility and the universalist project of international emancipation and equality. Thus, while travel in *Hanako* may be read as a promotion of enjoyment and leisure, a stop-gap opportunity before the demands and responsibilities of becoming a Japanese housewife, equally it signals a voicing of unconscious desire for escape from the marginalised work and status of being a young unmarried Japanese woman.

Bringing back the international

However, enjoyment of the international isn't something that is only enjoyed abroad, and in *Hanako*, we also see a significant amount of internationalist aesthetic appearing in the local as well. From the enjoyment of international goods such as food and clothing, to increasing features on Japan, and specifically Tokyo as an international travel destination in itself. While some of this may be seen under the general promotion of leisure, domestic consumption and development of a tertiary economy, it is this adoption of an international aesthetic as visual language in the domestic that is of particular interest. Just as the incorporation of the foreign in Japanese language through the use of katakana loanwords has been explored by researchers such as Stanlaw (2004), so the use of foreign items and styles can be seen as a signalling of cultural capital that is distinctly Japanese in its intentions. It is in this blending of foreign and local, or use of foreign in the agenda of the local, that we see Tokyo become reinvigorated, repackaged for a more sophisticated and demanding audience of internationally aware young women. In this way, it develops the self-exoticisation observed about Japanese rediscovery of its own traditional practices around the same period, yet in this 'othering' process, something else is happening whereby in becoming Other, so spaces in Tokyo become more welcoming, accepting places for otherness to coexist.

Colonisation of public space

Thus, for young women, marginalised both at work and at home, often living under their parents' roofs and in the shadow of the men at work, public space outside of both becomes their newly colonised place; their language of colonisation learnt from that of internationalist aesthetic discourse used in magazines such as *Hanako*. Bars, restaurants, cafes, shops – these all become co-opted for international living recreated and reclaimed in the nooks and crannies leftover from the hegemony of the salaryman and housewife roles and spaces. Here the flattening out of difference works, creating the 'culturally odourless' (Allen & Sakamoto, 2014,

p. 26) characteristic seen in the portrayal of other international cities, and which helps to conveniently relocate its position from Japan and Kanto, to that of the pan-cultural and the global.

Furthermore, while arguably happening in the 'leftover' places of cultural hegemony (i.e.: the in-between spaces of non-work and non-home), with new emphasis on young women's importance in bolstering up the workforce (through the EEOL) and in the consumer economy, it could be argued that this increased prominence of young women in the open spaces of commerce and leisure was a challenge to the legitimacy and hegemonic status of both the salaryman and the housewife. With disposable income and yet free from the responsibilities of work and home, OLs appeared to straddle the best of both worlds, which through their marginal status, were challenging the very ideology that hegemonic roles were the best route to a fulfilling life. While this of course masks the inequalities young unmarried women were subject to (such as lack of fulfilling career, status and denial of meaningful investment of their capital, energies and time), nevertheless, this is something that becomes more significant as the bursting of the Bubble is more keenly felt in the 1990s onwards, and roles become questioned in the face of uncertainty.

Urban sport and leisure places

While consumption as shopping, eating and drinking all fall within the remit of acceptable female cultural practice, where this challenge to the status quo in public space can be most keenly observed is in the newly developed spaces of urbanised sports and night-time leisure. Just as work and home, the exterior and interior, were gendered, so cultural practices of outdoor sports and after-hours leisure such as drinking were predominantly the province of men and their legitimate access to patriarchal-sanctioned leisure. Yet in the 1980s we see accompanying the bubble in property speculation and consumerism, a correspondent boom in exercise as leisure facilities (i.e.: gyms, dance studios, golfing ranges), filled not necessarily with men, but also with women. During this period, aerobics exercise boomed as a craze, accompanied not only by the custom-built facilities, but also the accessories, gym-wear, health-food and music that mark an entire sub-genre/sub-culture. Young women, with their investment into beauty, free time and disposable income were the natural market for this new activity, imported as it was from the modernity and emancipation of the West, and in *Hanako* we can see how even male-dominated activities such as golf were being presented to women as possibilities in an imagined emancipatory activity (even if in reality this was much less likely, with the high costs and status-derived exclusion implicit in 1980s Japanese golf during the Bubble).

Drinking and after-hours leisure too becomes a point of consumerism for *Hanako* readers, with regular articles on the best bars and restaurants in Tokyo. At this time the famous discotheque, the Maharaja (and just as the Bubble burst, Juliana's), was a place for young people to go and party all night. Young women were seen openly and very publicly having a good time drinking, flirting and dancing, engaging in internationalised modern behaviours that these new spaces opened up, and which went directly against that of 'good' prescribed Japanese feminine behaviour.

The Body as contested site

For what was at stake here was Japanese femininity itself. While historically Japanese women have been characterised by the ideal feminine traits of modesty, beauty, and prescribed choreographed behaviour, in the late 1980s young women as OLs were at the forefront of a significant shift in Japanese female identity.

Butting up against the realities of a booming economy and increasing international engagement, Japanese identity was having to reconcile itself as both Japanese and global citizen, and while the salaryman and housewife motif was too hegemonic and dominant for drastic alteration, the peripheral nature of the OL meant that she was in a perfect position to experiment with her interpretation of Japanese femininity.

Moreover, in their unique position as working women within internationalist business, OLs perfectly bordered the line between Japanese feminine interiority and internationalist exteriority, and had to accommodate their behaviour accordingly. This was encapsulated in their appearance and behaviour both inside and outside work, where for work OLs were required to wear uniforms, make-up, hairstyles, and conduct their behaviour according to company requirements. For the OLs of Panasonic, this even involved a 12-month long etiquette course on how to speak, sit, dress, walk, serve tea, and address clients appropriately, with the best and most beautiful recruits assigned to the most lucrative and important departments.

However, while this mode of appearance and conduct fits nicely within acceptable Japanese feminine behaviour, within the context of international business, we also see a development of this to include other feminine qualities not normally associated with Japanese traditional femininity, such as brightness, cheerfulness, intelligence and sophistication (McVeigh, 1997). In many cases this might be seen as going directly against that of feminine modesty and shyness, and yet co-opted for the requirements of business and internationalist expansion, Japanese feminine identity was having to undergo a change to help service Japanese ambitions that encouraged women to become more outgoing and robust.

It is this outgoingness and interaction with international culture that can be seen in the sporting and exercise leisure of the Bubble, with its emphasis on physical fitness and Lycra-clad body, Japanese femininity became more focused on a new kind of physicality that had overtly sexual overtones. While seen on the one hand as a kind of mimicking the sexualisation of the West, as replicated in the body-conscious dresses and flirtatious behaviour of the discos and bars, positioned against the context of traditional Japanese femininity, in another sense this can be seen as an emancipatory move away from repressive norms to that of a more liberated progressive alliance with universalist values.

This heightened environment of liberated sexuality can be seen in the increasingly sexualised forms of subcultural expression through the 1980s, from manga and pornography to advertising, while behaviour among women and girls also changed to include greater exploration of their own bodies and alternative lifestyles, from Japanese women observed picking up Western men abroad for sexual encounters (dubbed ‘yellow cabs’ by critics who first observed it in New York), while schoolgirls were said to participate in the sexual economy through phone sex, prostitution (‘compensated dating’) and selling their school uniforms and underwear, in their desire for designer goods (Tipton & Clark, 2000). Meanwhile in the media was a moral panic that reflected the tensions created by the changing dynamic of young women’s positioning and prominence in the new work-consumer spaces of the Japanese Bubble. Negotiating the requirements of traditional Japanese femininity with the new international zeitgeist meant that women’s sexuality often came under attack, conflated with hysteria over AIDS and the contracting of sexually-transmitted diseases. However, countering this was also a heightened awareness of sexual discrimination and inequality, with protest and pressure groups and actions that targeted the practice of overseas prostitution by Japanese businessmen, the use of women’s bodies in advertising, and sexual discrimination in the workplace.

Significance for East Asian female modernity

At the end of 1989, as interest rates were finally raised, signalling the end of the Bubble Economy, the first half of the 1990s was marked by a dawning realisation that the party could not continue. Parties of course did continue, with the disco Juliana Tokyo opening in 1991 just as the Bubble had popped, young men and women still flocking to participate in the international party scene. However, just as this partying was in essence a futile and empty gesture in light of the rapidly deflating economy, so the advances in young women's internationalist gains also appeared to be based on similarly flimsy foundations. Socially locked out of long-term professional careers, OLs were still primarily dependant on marriage as their plan for long-term security, that in a time of corporate freezes and restructuring, seemed less hopeful and secure than before. As opportunities at work dried up and company expenses were tightened, so the ability to travel abroad and participate in the internationalist spirit was also increasingly curtailed. While internationalised leisure at home was still undoubtedly happening, with a Japan that was turning gradually inward as its global expansion was halted by a stalling economy, this would have seemed mockingly hollow in light of the crisis of confidence affecting companies and communities alike. Women's bodies too, under sustained attack for being too liberal, would have felt the pressure of having to conform to reinvigorated Japanese ideals about tradition and identity, encapsulated in the nationalistic *nihonjinron* rhetoric that built speed through the 1980s to flourish in the decades after.

However, this does not mean that all the internationalist developments evaporated with the money of the Bubble, and it is precisely in the shifting nature of the OL that we see parallels in other shifts in identity and subcultures that occur in the decades after the Bubble. The claiming of sexuality in *shōjo* ladies' manga for female readers, the high individual investment in women's fashion subcultures, and even in the denial of women to settle down and compromise with Japanese men; these all can be linked to the opening up of an internationalist zeitgeist present in the possibilities of the 1980s.

Furthermore, while not all may have had beneficial consequences for Japanese society and economy, importantly what was being negotiated by these young women, in their leisure practices and performance of appearance and behaviour, was a different kind of feminine identity that was modern and resolutely Japanese. While at times subject to compromise and criticism, the opportunities in the Bubble enabled young women to explore possibilities that became a template not only for other Japanese identities to follow, but contributed to a thoroughly unique East Asian modernity as reclaimed from the West that could be carried forward into the 21st century.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how specific conditions of work, social expectations, and consumer policies of the Bubble Economy contributed to office ladies becoming a significant consumer market for leisure in Japan's 1980s. Looking to enjoy themselves before eventual marriage, OLs consumption could be seen as enjoyment, escape from their marginal status as unmarried women, and cynical co-opting of their disposable income for economic and political aims. However, in experiencing and recreating the internationalist aesthetic and its expression through foreign and domestic travel, OLs were fundamentally aligning themselves with a universalist alliance of emancipation that had them pushing at their marginal status in Japanese society through the occupation and colonisation of public spaces. This was particularly true of those leisure pursuits that focused on previously male-dominated practices such as sport and after-hours leisure, and it was

especially in the developing of the body through physical fitness and sexualised dress that we see a rebellion against a Japanese femininity based on modesty and sexual denial. However as focus on emancipated sexualisation and behaviour spread, so there was a backlash against this through fear of disease and transgression of Japanese identity and morality. Nevertheless, the opening up of cultural dialogue meant that there was a heightened awareness of sexual inequality and desire to address this according to international norms on gender equality. Finally, although the end of the Bubble revealed the flimsiness of internationalist gains made by young women, their significance can be felt in the years after the Bubble ended, reflected in the tangents created by other Japanese feminine protests of socialisation and identity, as well as the example set for other types of East Asian modernity to emulate, also looking to come out from under the shadow of the West.

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