

Transnational Cities

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Hanako Magazine and the Internationalised Women of the Japanese Bubble Economy

What was the Bubble Economy?

The late 1980s was a time of Japan's 'Bubble Economy', defined by a significant international trade surplus, an artificially inflated yen, newly liberalised financial system, soaring stock and property market, and an adjacent consumer spending spree.

Who was the OL?

At the forefront of the Bubble were two figures: the salaryman, and his office counterpart, the office lady, or OL, the latter forming the core demographic of the new lifestyle magazine, *Hanako*.

Positioned outside of the duality of salaryman and the housewife, these unmarried office ladies started to gain more prominence in the Bubble of the 1980s, through their visibility in the new business and consumer environments of the Bubble.

What was the OLs work?

Typically, in their 20s to early 30s, office ladies were young female office administrative staff, whose roles included clerical work, cleaning desks, answering phones, making tea and greeting clients. Also known as 'office flowers' their role was to 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, OLs took advantage of their short tenure to have fun before settling down, and enjoying both the consumer and employment boom, were viewed as main beneficiaries in the 1980s.

What is *Hanako* Magazine?

Founded in 1988 at the Bubble's height, *Hanako*, part of a lifestyle magazine uplift, focused not on previous models of fashion or housekeeping, but other aspects of consumer culture, especially urban leisure and travel.

Escape to the West

In particular, travel, and specifically international travel, makes up a significant portion. Featuring items of pure consumerism such as restaurants and shops, *Hanako* readers appear to be the ultimate consumer-tourists, the superficial shoppers and enjoyers of holidaying leisure and branded goods.

Crowded with detail about goods, shops and eateries, the travel is both superabundant and hollow, obscuring the place observed, flattening out difference until it becomes just one of many in the playground of the international.

Nevertheless, despite its superficiality, in the context of Japanese femininity this is also an opportunity for escape, seeking self-discovery and fulfilment. In this, space, rather than place becomes the locus, the wide-open spaces of the West representing both limitless possibilities and the universalist emancipation of the international.

Thus, while travel in *Hanako* may be read as a promotion of enjoyment and leisure, a stop-gap opportunity before the responsibilities of Japanese housewifery, 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

This engagement with the international can also be seen moving into that of the local, through articles on food, clothing, domestic travel in Japan, and on Tokyo as international city. In this, the international becomes adopted as an aesthetic in visual language, similar to the blending of foreign loanwords in Japanese language. This not only allows Tokyo to become reinvigorated and repackaged for a more sophisticated audience, but through a self-exoticising othering process, creates welcoming spaces for otherness to coexist.

Colonisation of public space

For marginalised young women, public consumer spaces become their place, co-opted for internationalist living in a discourse learned from magazines. Flattened out and 'culturally odourless', Tokyo conveniently becomes displaced from Japan and Kanto to that of the pan-cultural and global.

Moreover, while appearing to occupy the spaces leftover by cultural hegemony, young women were also becoming more prominent and visible in public life, at work and leisure. With disposable income and time, the apparent freedoms of the OL seemed to challenge the ideology of hegemony itself, demonstrating alternative lifestyles other than that of the salaryman / housewife. While young women were still subject to great inequalities, OL lifestyles in the Bubble nevertheless contribute to the uncertainty of roles that happen in the Lost Decades after the Bubble.

Urban sport and leisure places

This challenge to the status quo can be felt most keenly in the urban leisure of sport and after-hours pursuits. Alongside the property and consumer bubble was a boom in exercise leisure. Abundant in products, facilities and memberships, this was an entire lifestyle sold as an emancipatory activity, and for which young women, with their disposable income, time and focus on beauty, were an ideal new market. Drinking and night-time leisure were also on the rise, with bars, restaurants and discos such as the Maharaja featuring frequently in *Hanako* and other lifestyle magazines. In this, young women were becoming not only more visible, but also transgressive, engaging in more risky behaviours that these new international spaces allowed.

The Body as contested site

Fundamental to these transgressions was a tension between modern and traditional Japanese femininity. Faced with the realities of increasing international engagement, single working Japanese women were at the forefront of a shifting negotiation of what constituted appropriate working Japanese identity in a new globalised environment. This is something played out in the dress and etiquette of the office, and the increasingly sexualised and physically liberated body of night-time leisure and sport.

Once the Bubble ended, the seeming advancements in female emancipation appear to dissolve along with the other promises of the boom. However, in the careful and shifting negotiation of identity, tradition and modernity by OLs, we see not only a replication in the other sub-cultural forms of the later 1990s and 2000s, but also a drive towards a unique kind of East Asian femininity, distinct from the West, but also modern and international.