



Barbara Sato

## The New Japanese Woman: Modernity, Media, and Women in Interwar Japan

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review by [Sandra Wilson](#)

The 'modern girl' [*moga*] has long been associated with the period of 'Taishō democracy' and the emergence of mass culture in Japan. With her short hair, Western clothes, love of pleasure and apparent disregard for convention, she has seemed to epitomise the 1920s and the new atmosphere that permeated large Japanese cities, especially Tokyo. Yet, as Barbara Sato convincingly shows, the 'modern girl' was not the only new prototype of Japanese women in the interwar period. The growth of the middle class and of opportunities for suitable employment, together with the great expansion of the mass media, produced or highlighted two less spectacular but numerically much more significant figures—the middle-class housewife, interested in personal fulfilment rather than solely in her role as 'good wife and wise mother', and the professional working woman. None of Sato's three representative figures conformed with older stereotypes of the meek and docile Japanese woman, and hence all of them challenged ideas about gender in interwar Japan.

Barbara Sato's beautifully illustrated book explores these three cultural types, focussing on their treatment in the media and their relation to broader social developments in the 1920s. In doing so, *The New Japanese Woman* goes further than any other English-language work to set the 'modern girl' in context, rather than treating her as a discrete phenomenon or as a straightforward reflection of Western trends. Simply placing the 'modern girl' alongside two major alternative images of Japanese women in the 1920s does much to show the complex impact on women of social and economic change. More importantly, though, Sato's book situates the 'modern girl', the housewife and the middle-class working-woman firmly within the social and cultural history of the decade, within the prevailing intellectual debates and within the history of technological change. Particular attention is paid to the intertwining of the three images of women with consumerism and industrialisation. Gender, instead of being 'tacked on' as it sometimes is, thus becomes an integral part of mainstream history, and, conversely, changes in gender imagery become markers of the broader developments that characterise the period.

The theme of consumerism runs throughout the book. Consumerism meant not only buying goods in the new department stores, but frequenting cafés and dance-halls, listening to jazz and reading popular magazines. On the one hand, women were 'icons of the new consumerism'; so

much so that for Sato, there was a public link between 'mass' culture and 'female', partly because of the role of women's magazines in promoting such a link. On the other hand, women also 'sought to appropriate the new consumer culture for their own ends' (p. 43). The fact that women, especially 'modern girls', were so thoroughly implicated in consumerism was applauded by a few intellectuals, but regretted by many others. Complaints by conservatives that the 'modern girl' represented a new social and moral decadence are familiar, but Sato shows that progressive intellectuals, as well, were often disappointed with the 'new' women, because they were apparently so frivolous and refused to interest themselves in serious political and social issues.

At any rate, 'the *moga* sensation' was seriously debated in the media by a wide range of commentators. In fact, the appearance of all three figures—the modern girl, the middle-class housewife and the professional working woman—is inseparable from the 'explosive expansion' of women's magazines in the 1920s (p. 78). The core of Sato's book consists of an examination of images of the feminine in these magazines, and her excellent discussion of their role and significance constitutes a notable contribution to understandings of the 1920s. Though magazines were not new, there were now many more of them, and the increasing competition for circulation and the targeting of women as readers and consumers changed their tone and content. No longer restricting themselves to the upper class, women's magazines now aimed at the middle class, at young women, at housewives. Ultimately, Sato believes, 'women and consumption defined each other through the dominance of women's magazines over the mass cultural landscape' (p. 95).

Far from being content to reinforce state ideologies, the new magazines played an important role in diffusing information about 'modern' lifestyles, in providing entertainment and even in discussing alternative lifestyles and love affairs. Women's magazines gave advice to housewives, and provided a forum for discussion of issues of interest to working women as well. Such issues ranged from problems that women faced at work, including sexual harassment and physical fatigue, to endorsement of the notion of self-cultivation or personal fulfilment [*shûyô*], the pursuit of which led some middle-class women to seek work in the first place. A number of magazines published contributions from readers, in the form of letters and of confessional articles. For Sato, these magazines were offering women 'a shared consciousness, a public forum, and an identity that was not limited by class' (p. 82).

Here, Sato makes an important shift towards a focus on what women's magazines were doing in the interwar period, rather than what they were not. As she points out, women's magazines have regularly been castigated, at the time and since, for their role in reinforcing older orthodoxies and for their failure to challenge the ideologies associated with imperialism, militarism and nationalism. Sato encourages us instead to appreciate what was new about them, and in what ways they constituted a response to changing conditions. We should recognise, too, according to Sato, that women's magazines encouraged women 'to assume agency over their own lives and to pursue their own goals' (p. 102). The readers they were targeting did not belong to organised movements or take part in radical political action. Nevertheless, she maintains, their actions amount to 'small-scale resistance' in the private realm (p. 155), especially in their engagement with 'the ideals of work, love, and the marriage of one's choice' (p. 163).

In a concluding chapter, Sato argues that such private struggles played their part in 'map[ping] out new possibilities for self-fulfilment', as well as demonstrating 'the role consumerism played as an agent of change' (p. 155). She briefly sketches the major trends of the 1930s and beyond in relation to her main themes: numbers of working women increased, the state cracked down on the consumerism symbolised by dance-halls, Western dress and movies, and women's magazines placed less emphasis on love marriages. The alacrity with which changes to the status of women were accepted in the post-war period is partly attributable, for Sato, to the changes that

began for women in the 1920s, with the emergence of the modern girl, the middle-class housewife and the professional working woman.

The *New Japanese Woman* performs a number of valuable tasks. It brings the world of interwar women's magazines alive, challenges any idea that there were fixed notions of femininity in Japan in the 1920s, and undermines suggestions that Japanese women did not seek control over their own lives, even if they did not choose consciously to engage in political or social movements. More analytical comment on the broader implications of Sato's material would certainly have been welcome: in what ways, ultimately, did the new media images of women make a difference, and how much of a threat did they pose in the end to prevailing orthodoxies about gender and about nation? Undoubtedly, however, the book as it stands adds greatly to understandings of the social and cultural history of Japan in the 1920s and the relationship of women to that history. In particular, it will be difficult for any researcher in the future to focus on mass culture in Japan without a careful examination of the ways in which women shaped mass culture, as well as the ways that popular culture changed the lives of women.

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