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Fashion, Feminine Identity, and Japan's Interwar Period

Shelby Wright

Introduction

The turn of the twentieth century ushered in a global push for modernization, leading to drastic cultural and social changes in many countries. Japan, after years of adapting and recreating itself in order to fit this drive for westernization began to take its place as an imperial power near the opening of the twentieth century. The significant changes it underwent in such a short span of time created new dynamics that Japanese society had to integrate within this new framework. One of these, in particular, was the normalizing of western culture and dress into a vastly different society with intricate gender roles.

The introduction of new fashion added additional pressure on Japanese society, resulting in two presentations of women—that of the modern girl and that of the traditional woman. Each had their own symbols and significance, but the main superficial dividing factor was how each woman dressed. Numerous forms of media attempted to use their portrayal to set an overarching identity for women, however, the modern girl was the most prominent figure and the subject of paradoxical representations. This paper attempts to create a broad societal picture of her controversial image in art, women's magazines, advertisements, and literature during the interwar period while comparing it against the portrait of the new traditional woman and literature written by women. The overarching image of the modern girl represented both a fear of the

West and an ideal projected onto a particular gender.

Before 1853, Japan had existed almost completely isolated from foreign nations because of its surrounding natural ocean barrier. However, as countries began industrializing and building empires for themselves during the early nineteenth century, Japan's isolation transformed from a major protective force which kept them out of conflict to one that left them open to rapidly expanding Western colonization. Though Japan appeared to be blocked off from the rest of the world, government officials were not blind to major events that hinted at potential Western appearances at their shores.

Japan's turning point arrived in 1853 with the appearance of Commodore Matthew Perry and his Black Ships. The American Commodore informed the Japanese government that the United States was interested in establishing a treaty with them, though if they refused when he returned the next year, he was under orders to use force to open up Japan's ports. The transition from closed- to open-door policy was a turning point for Japanese rule, as it started an intensive modernization process beginning with the Meiji Restoration. Among changes during its modernization was the switch from traditional Japanese clothing to Western clothing within the upper-class elite.

The active decision to promote Western fashion would eventually trickle down into all classes of Japanese society and this link between clothing and western culture would play an important role for women in the upper and middle classes during Japan's interwar period. Japanese women encountered changing societal norms and concepts of female

identity throughout the Meiji period and into the interwar era and this evolution was strongly associated with the wearing of Western fashions. Following the 1923 Kanto Earthquake and the heavy promotion of western clothing for women over the traditional kimono, a term was developed for these flapper-esque, independent women. "Modern Girl" or *moga* was the title that became synonymous with a specific lifestyle and appearance taken on by young women during the interwar period.

In order to achieve an in-depth look into these historical problems, a number of both primary and secondary sources have been assembled that focus on the *moga* and Western fashion in interwar Japan. "The Modern Girl as Militant" by Miriam Silverberg,¹ *Turning Pages: Reading and Writing Women's Magazines in Interwar Japan* by Sarah Frederick,² and *Taishō Chic: Japanese Modernity, Nostalgia, and Deco* by Kendall Brown and Sharon Minichiello³ were three of the most influential sources.

Each of the authors of their respective works takes a different collection of media representing the modern girl, and analyzes it within its historical and social context to create an overall picture of the *moga* and how she was perceived at the time.

¹ Miriam Silverberg, "The Modern Girl as Militant," in *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

² Sarah Frederick, *Turning pages reading and writing women's magazines in interwar Japan*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006).

³ Kendall H. Brown and Sharon Minichiello, *Taisho chic: Japanese modernity, nostalgia, and deco*. (Honolulu: Honolulu Academy of Arts, 2001).

Miriam Silverberg considers the *moga* to be an image of what the ideal Western woman would be and contends that though she was portrayed as “apolitical,” the modern girl was a political figure used by the media to depict the West as undermining traditional Japanese society. Silverberg creates this image through the use of women's magazine articles, novels, and writings of a number of Japanese feminists.

Sarah Frederick does not directly examine the modern girl, though she recreates one of the many important media outlets in which she was debated, discussed, and portrayed to the public. Her main focus is the creation of women's magazines and how they influenced and were influenced by society during the interwar period, and this includes a number of male and female scholars examining a woman's changing identity and role in society.

Kendall Brown and Sharon Minichiello's catalog contains a wide variety of primary sources in the form of art pieces produced during this time period. The introduction essay and examination of interwar pieces through an artistic lens was vital in assembling the more visual side of the media and offered quotes from newspapers and magazines written by artists.

Outside of these secondary sources, there are a number of primary sources, ranging from primary written documents, literature, and translated accounts of people who lived during the interwar period, to images originating from the Taishō Era. Some of these sources include *To Live and to Write*, a collection of stories by Japanese women writers during the interwar period; *The Brittle Decade*, which contains a number of images originating from around the 1930s; and *Bad Girls of Japan*, a collection of short essays, one of

which pertains to the subversion of the *moga* image.

With the primary and secondary sources that have been collected, the conclusion appears to be a contradictory acceptance of Western fashion during the interwar period. The Japanese media presented the image of the fashionable and scandalous *moga* in her western attire, but at the same time, there was notable backlash against the Modern Girl because she was presented as a potential threat to the stability of society. With the additional layer that the Western fashion she wore she reflected a polished and modernized woman, the *moga*'s various forms expressed the contradicting and paradoxical female identity Japanese society was creating.

History of the Kimono

The kimono, and the stereotypical image of the kimono-clad woman, evolved over Japan's development into a global power. During the Edo period, starting in the early 17th century, the *kosode*, a traditional top that had changed into the prototypical ankle-length kimono around the 14th century, had not only become adapted into women's fashion, but also became typical menswear as well. Wider access to money through the rise of the merchant class and foreign cloth from China also contributed to a number of alterations in color, design, and texture from the original styles adopted during the previous Muromachi era (1333-1600). Sleeve length and *obi* (sash) width, in particular, underwent a variety of changes and denoted developments in Japanese clothing that were not directly tied to functionality, but a created public

identity.⁴

Kosode fashion became such an important aspect of everyday life that sumptuary regulations were promulgated concerning ornateness for clothing based on social class. Samurai, who sat at the top of system, were allowed a wide berth of lavishness, while merchants and commoners had heavy restrictions placed on the clothing they wore. However, a person's position on the social ladder did not prevent those who had money from spending large sums to buy the most elaborate *kosode*.

The concept of “kimono” did not become a Japanese term until the Meiji period (1868-1912).⁵ A specific distinction for clothing had no need to be defined previously, because even though there were a number of different styles and clothing worn, all of them were within the spectrum of Japanese culture. As Japan opened its gates to Westerners, an awakening occurred among the Japanese public: it was necessary to define their national identity against foreign cultures. This was most recognizable with the appearance of Western clothing – the *kosode* had little similarity to the foreigners' dress. Although there were a number of nuances within the Japanese clothing like sleeve length, cuts, color, and robe height which displayed societal markers publicly, the minute distinctions made it difficult to accurately translate without context.⁶ The solution was to create an umbrella term, “kimono,” which, although it simply meant

⁴ Liza Crihfield Dalby, *Kimono: Fashioning Culture* (Conn: Yale University Press, 1993), 41.

⁵ Ibid, 59.

⁶ Ibid, 62.

“object of wear,” globally linked Japanese outfits to those worn by the urban upper class.⁷

At the same time, Western clothing began to appear with increasing frequency during the Meiji era. The reason for its entrance into the public and media was linked to the political situation Japan faced during the late nineteenth century. After Japan was coerced into opening its boundaries, the nation entered into a number of unfavorable trade treaties with Western powers. The disadvantageous situation, the damaging Opium Wars between Britain and China, and Japan's weak military showing made the new Meiji government hyper-sensitive to the precarious position where colonization and extortion by western powers appeared to be realistic dangers. Modernization of Japan's entire society and culture became the most available and productive method to protect the nation. If world powers, like Britain, France, and the United States saw Japan as an equivalent in Western terms, their country would not only avoid subjugation, but might be able to take a place among subjugating nations.

One of the first steps Japan took in outwardly presenting a modernizing society in 1872 was to publicly clothe the Meiji Emperor in Western military dress. These images, including photos and paintings in later years, were intentionally shown abroad to foreign nations to differentiate the modern Japan from the nation that they had been in 1868. The government's move to shape the Meiji Emperor as a beacon of Western modernity through dress soon spread to the upper society and from there trickled down to the other classes. This movement was initially targeted at

⁷ Ibid, 63.

men, though eventually the Empress, officials' wives, and working women began to dress in Western styles. The stark difference between the encouraged modernization of men's and women's clothing was tied to the concept of the "ideal Meiji woman" who "served as a 'repository of the past,' [and stood] for tradition."⁸

In a society rife with rapidly changing values and appearances, women dressed in their traditional kimono were a reminder of Japan's culture before Western contact and a protection against forgetting what it meant to be "truly Japanese" within a modernizing society. The "repository" role for women would ultimately contribute to the formation and acceptance of the modern girl image and influence how women who did show their modernity through dress and activity were viewed during the interwar period.

1912 ushered in a new ruler to replace the Meiji Emperor as a symbol for the start of a new century. The Taishō Emperor ruled Japan through 1926, witnessing the postwar boom of the middle class. This newly developed "leisure class" made it possible for more men and women to access affordable Western clothing at increasing speeds.

The *Moga* Enters

In 1924 the term *moga* was introduced to the general public through an article written by Kitazawa Shuuchi for the women's magazine *Josei*.⁹ Kitazawa

⁸ Silverberg, 264.

⁹ Kendall H. Brown "Paintings and Prints" in *Taishō Chic: Japanese Modernity, Nostalgia, and Deco*. ed. Kendall H. Brown and Sharon Minichiello, *Taisho chic: Japanese modernity, nostalgia, and deco*. (Honolulu: Honolulu Academy of Arts, 2001), 32.

described the modern girl as both a figure unconnected to politics and a self-independent being standing on equal footing with men through her embracing of a modern image and “newfound animation.”¹⁰ The *moga* image, though not acknowledged verbally by the author, was subconsciously linked with the nouveau riche and middle class that had risen during the First World War as, unlike most other people during this time, they had considerable money to spend on newer fashions and leisure activities.

The original presentation of the *moga* in Kitazawa's article did not entirely fit the later perceptions and definitions of the modern girl, because though it implied a self-confident woman breaking away from traditional roles, it did not present her as a sexual being. This aspect was expanded in with Nii Itaru's definition and coining of the term *modan gaaru* or modern girl, in his article, “Contours of the Modern Girl,” published in 1925.¹¹ Similar to Kitazawa's description of the *moga*, Nii explained that the modern girl was animated and exuded freedom, but with an additional note that she had a flirtatious and palpably erotic personality.

These images of an active, mobile, and sexual modern girl were enhanced by the styles of Western clothing making their way into the Japanese mainstream. The “newfound animation” emphasized by both Shuuichi and Nii found its manifestation in the rising appeal of sports and, therefore, outfits that focused on ease of movement. Clothing associated with this type of image were “flowing fabrics [that] envel-

¹⁰ Silverberg, 241.

¹¹ Ibid.

oped the extremely stylized female figure...jerseys and knits, wide-legged pants, fringed dance dresses, long chains or strings of pearls,” and bathing suits.¹² Even books on fashion like the 1927 *Bijingaku (The Study of Beautiful Women)* had chapters on the link between sports and beauty.¹³ Not only did a focus on the revealing and skin tight clothing add a layer of sexuality to the woman's figure, but the concept of a well-shaped physique underneath the thin layers of cloth brought forth an erotic image not previously presented by the traditional image of a woman clad in a kimono (fig. 1).

Leisure activities also played into the image of the erotic and fashionable modern girl with the rise of dance halls, night clubs, and cafes. The same flapper-esque clothing found in sportswear made its appearances in the *moga* on the dance floor. The women dressed in 1920s-style dresses and skirts were either taxi dancers who, if paid enough, would dance with a male partner, or women going to a night club together with men “intent on hearing the latest jazz tunes, showing off their dance steps, and displaying their fashionable clothes.”¹⁴

Cafes, on the other hand, were everyday places where men and women socialized outside the home and could potentially hook up with one another. They were considered one of the ideal job locations for the working *moga* as they were places most associated with modernity, fashion, and the discussion of new

¹² Toby Slade, *Japanese Fashion: A Culture History* (Oxford: Berg, 2009), 110.

¹³ *Ibid*, 113.

¹⁴ Brown, 20.

Western ideas. The 1932 article, "The Younger Generation," made note of the cafe culture by describing the women working there as "waitresses who hold themselves ready to sit down at the table or on laps and eat and drink and laugh and talk inanely about anything from ages to literature and social theories with all the customers."¹⁵ Night clubs and cafes factored into the Western aspect of the modern girl, but, at the same time, each activity also played up the idea of thinly veiled promiscuity.

In comparison, the image of the traditional, kimono clad "good wife, wise mother" and protector of the Japanese culture was also being pushed by those who found the *moga* to be a dangerous addition to Japanese society. Those who supported the traditional image of women often focused on the balance of Western and Japanese ideals, though more so on the latter. This hybridization of the female figure was typically created by mixing the traditional Japanese kimono with a new Westernized hairstyle (fig. 2). Many of the articles for newspapers and journals supporting this point were written by Japanese artists who were believed by the more conservative community to have a greater understanding of feminine ideals based on their work with the female body.¹⁶

Those who disagreed with the created image of the modern women focused on the importance of the kimono, noting that women "when dressed in Japa-

¹⁵ Anonymous, "The Younger Generation," in *The Asashi English Supplement, Present Day Japan No. 8*. pg 26, ed. Kendall H. Brown and Sharon Minichiello, *Taisho chic: Japanese modernity, nostalgia, and deco*. (Honolulu: Honolulu Academy of Arts, 2001), 19.

¹⁶ Brown, 21.

nese costume, must behave according to Japanese custom of modesty and quiet, and it is wrong for them to imitate American movie actresses.”¹⁷ In this sense the kimono and therefore the kimono clad woman, was an extension of Meiji ideals in a modern context. Such women, it was believed, would remain mostly outside of the Western sphere in relations to new cultural and political changes, but would be included in modernization when it came to beauty or a more hidden form of sexuality.

The Modern Girl in Interwar Art

Images of the *moga* and the traditional woman created during this time period were seen in a variety of popular media including art, literature, and journal articles. Popular culture created the identity of the modern girl and the traditional woman and perpetuated these identities throughout the interwar period through fictional and manipulative representations.

Yamamura Kouka's woodblock print *New Carleton Dancers, Shanghai*, created in 1924, is a standard representation of the *moga* concept, though it appears more restrained in comparison to later depictions of the modern girl (fig. 3). The scene presented by the artist is a famous dance hall or a night club in Shanghai, and two women sit behind a table in the foreground watching four pairs of dancers in the background. All the figures present are dressed in a modern fashion, though it is particularly noticeable on the

¹⁷ Fujita Tsuguji, “Nihon no josei,” in *Bungei shunjuu* 15:9, September 1937, ed. Kendall H. Brown and Sharon Minichiello, *Taisho chic: Japanese modernity, nostalgia, and deco*. (Honolulu: Honolulu Academy of Arts, 2001), 21.

women sitting at the table.

The woman on the left is the more risqué and Western looking of the two, with a backless western dress, bobbed haircut, and exaggerated makeup around the eyes and on the lips. Yamamura draws particular attention to this figure's sexual appeal by emphasizing the curve of her bare back with a light line that continues on to draw attention to her unadorned and uncovered pale neck. Furthermore, the bright red of her lips, her jacket, and the hat on the woman sitting next to her makes the pair stand out in almost a gaudy, extravagant fashion, even though they are not the primary focus of the woodblock. The modern girl on the right has her face turned away from the view, giving her a sense of "anonymity that underscores the fierce physicality of the scene" compared to the dancers behind them.¹⁸

Though the shapes of the dancers behind them suggest frenzied movement, what stands out most is the female figures participating in the wild dancing. Unlike the somewhat bulky appearance of the kimono which completely hides the feminine body, these women have their arms bare and dresses tapered at the waist, suggesting a curvy figure with little left to the imagination. The men's hands placed on women's hips also create a very intimate image that appears to be acceptable in this new environment.

The "Western" space of 1924 Shanghai with modern participants is brought together with the two empty looking martini glasses sitting on the table, hinting at pleasure and relaxation through nontraditional and risqué means. In comparison to later prints

¹⁸ Brown, 32.

and paintings of this era, the sexual nature of the *moga* in *New Carleton Dancers, Shanghai* is relatively tame; however, when it was released to the public, Yamamura's publisher refused to print this woodblock.¹⁹ The refusal to do so appears to hint at the relative newness of the *moga* and Japan's wariness at spreading such an image.

In comparison, the 1932 painting *Midsummer Harbor* by Yamada Kisaku shows a much more risqué image of a *moga* outside of the dance hall (fig. 4). The modern girl in this picture is sitting on the railing of a Western-styled porch overlooking a small town with the ocean in the distance. She is turned away from the viewer, possibly looking towards the sea or at something off to the left. Unlike Yamamura's woodblock, this image is stationary with the only implied movement being the flags and the small veil encircling the woman's hat blowing slightly in the sea breeze. Though this seems to suggest there is less of the *moga* element, the actual figure itself in tandem with a closer examination of the scene offers a different perspective.

The woman seems to be overlooking a harbor from an unknown location, but the table to the left with what appears to be a cup of coffee as well as the bright pink and yellow awning suggest that this painting is set at one of the popular modern cafes around Tokyo. Items perched on the chair—the umbrella and the wallet—imply that the woman reclining against the railing is of the middle- to upper-class, and that she seems relatively unconcerned with protecting them, all fitting into the typical modern girl image. Also, unlike the dance hall woodblock print which depicts a con-

¹⁹ Ibid.

lined space intended for modern men and women to meet, the *moga* in this image is out on public display in the middle of the day.

The most important aspect of this painting is the woman's figure itself and her clothing. The modern girl is sitting in a relaxed position, her arms keeping her balance on the railing. Her hair is cut into a bob with a Western style hat, and it is easy to tell that she is wearing makeup, though not as heavily applied as the *moga* in Yamamura's work. However, what identifies her as a modern girl of the 1930s is the rest of her clothing. The bottom of her dress is pulled up much higher than typically presented in older works, though this is attributed to the fact that she is consciously sitting and, therefore, knowledgeable of the fact that the cloth has risen to near the top of her shins. The dress is also see-through, letting the viewer peek underneath to see the start of her chemise around her knees. Similarly, the undergarment is again showing near the low cut neckline of the dress, and the cloth of the outfit is clinging to her body, displaying her figure. All of these aspects play into the idea of the modern girl's sexuality—though she is not looking directly ahead of her, she is still flirting with little shows of skin and flaunting her appearance.

When this painting was displayed at an art gallery and given to critics to judge, this and other paintings which displayed the *moga*, caused one to remark, "It was gratifying to see that artists have turned more and more to modern social conditions for their themes," showing that reservations in displaying the modern girl in art in 1924 were almost non-existent in other

portrayals a few years later.²⁰

The Modern Girl and Women's Magazines

The comparison between the images of the modern girl and the modernized good wife, wise mother were not just explored in the visual arts which, to many women, might have been inaccessible within their daily routine. They were addressed in more accessible formats as well. The largest and most available forms of representation were women's magazines (*fujin zasshi*), which claimed a large readership of both women and men during the interwar period. Magazines like *Josei*, *Japanese Business Girls*, *Housewife's Friend*, and *Ladies' Review* catered to the growing populations of "modern girls" and middle class housewives who moved to the cities for economic and social reasons.²¹ By 1927, the total circulation of women's magazines was around the one million mark, establishing their centrality within popular culture and adding creditability to their skill in spreading ideals and offering a place to articulate opinions about their modernizing society.²²

Three factors of these women's magazines contributed to the persistent image of the modern girl: the public discourse between prominent intellectuals, stories published in the magazines and later serialized, and advertisements aimed at selling products to the evolving consumerist reader base. The debates among scholars that found their way into the limelight

²⁰ Matsuoka Eikyuu, "Imperial Art Show Commences Today," *The Japanese Advisor*, October 16, 1933, ed. John Dower, *The Brittle Decade*, (Boston: MFA Publications; 2012.), 66.

²¹ Frederick, *Turning pages*, 14-16.

²² *Ibid*, 6.

through their display in *fujin zasshi* often centered on defining women's roles in Japanese society, including the concepts of citizenship, marriage, suffrage, and modernization. Notable exchanges in *Ladies' Review* discussed redefining the modern woman while attempting, in passing, to erase the "rampant" and dangerous image of the *moga*.

One discussion was held by nine prominent intellectuals writing in *Ladies' Review* who offered a contribution to the restructuring of the neo-Confucian *Greater Learning for Women* (*onna daigaku*) written by Kaibara Ekiken in the late Edo period.²³ *Onna daigaku*, along with other Confucian texts used as a means to teach young girls how to read, had firmly established the "good wife, wise mother" (*ryōsai kenbo*) ideal and later influenced the formation of the "repository" role for women within Japanese society. The public analysis and reconstruction of this text in *Ladies' Review* by leading experts suggested a distinct shift in the understanding of a woman's place based on modernization within societal philosophy. The dialogue among the scholars concluded that *ryōsai kenbo* education had been overturned and replaced by a woman's conscious decision to formally educate herself and identify where she fit in the new modern framework.²⁴

The image of the modern girl and her mother, the new woman, contributed to the limitations the scholars placed on this altered role. Stereotypical views of the sexual *moga* and the political new woman were cited as a threat to the functionality of society as their free-spirited, temperamental, and flippant attitudes

²³ Ibid, 39.

²⁴ Ibid, 40.

would bring about constant unrest. The solution, similar to the answer posited by the artists, was to hybridize modernization with traditional values by cultivating womanly, and by that same account domestic, “virtue” alongside the guiding hand of education.²⁵ With this conclusion, the debate participants validated a formal modernization, but removed the “riskier” and more individualistic side to a woman's changing societal role. Essentially, scholars wished to promote a form of intellectual motherhood, but deny any connection to the *moga*.

The *Moga* in Advertising

Outside of *fujin zasshi*, the image of the *moga* was seen in almost every department store in a variety of forms. Advertising businesses extended into manipulating the image of the modern girl to sell products and magazines. The most prominent of these were the mannequin girls, or groups of young women that stood in the store windows, dressed in the latest fashions, acting as living dolls for the passerby.²⁶ These women took the advertisements in the magazines and brought them to life so that other women could see what Western clothing would look on their form, and how their bodies should look to “correctly” wear the newer fashion. Mannequin girls, therefore, were a deliberate attempt by the clothing and cosmetic companies to play on the concept of imitation and the “new attractiveness” of the modern girl to sell their products.

Additionally, cosmetic companies evolved during the interwar period to better capture the ideal image of

²⁵ Ibid, 41.

²⁶ Silverberg, 247.

the modern girl. For example, the three advertisements for hair oil by the Shiseido company, the top from 1914 and the bottom two from 1916, show both an increasing understanding of the changing needs of the culture and its ability to respond quickly to new fashion. The top image displays a very flat, simple image of a Heian period woman holding what looks to be a bottle of hair oil on top of her fan. Instead of playing into the more recent changes of Japan's modernization, the ad calls back to the classical era of Japanese history, almost as if attempting to regain a piece of that culture through pressing the particular beauty ideals of before the West arrived in Japan.²⁷

The first 1916 image follows the same pattern, though this time the bottle is at the front of the image, sliding down bright, black hair. The use of color also helps make the hair oil pop out against the other darker colors. Though the first two images try to call up a classical Japan, the third images approaches the ad from a modern perspective in the form of the traditional, kimono clad woman. This shows a rapid change in the target demographic between the first and second 1916 advertisements. By 1932, Shiseido had a marked understanding of their target audience, as seen with the advertising fan depicting a *moga* wearing a cloche hat and Western dress (fig. 6). What really creates the full modern girl style, however, isn't the woman standing at the forefront of the picture, but the background behind her. By placing her in her "element," in the nightlife of a crowded street mostly

²⁷ "Cosmopolitan Glamour," *Selling Shiseido*
http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/shiseido_01/sh_essay02.html

populated by men, the advertisement suggests sex, fashion, and freedom which are all obtainable if the owner of the fan purchases Shiseido's products.

Fujin zasshi also contained a large number of modern girl advertisements aimed at all different classes of women. Most of these ads dealt with the idea of beauty and focused on promoting new products which would make everyday women appear just as fashion-forward as the modern girl at home and abroad. Though these images were promoted and enforced by the media and advertisements, many people continued to state that *moga* were only focused on feeding into the vapid consumerism that was rapidly becoming a part of Japanese culture. Because society had attributed consumerist tendencies to the idea of the modern girl, the media representation of her responded accordingly and continued to remain part of the advertisement art seen in women's magazines.

Literature

The image of the *moga* was further reinforced in written works by authors who published in a variety of women's magazines. Unlike the debates, which were politically and philosophically weighty, literature could similarly popularize the image of the modern girl without overwhelming the reader. In this way, the *moga* entered mainstream culture and settled herself firmly in the public's mind in a form of media easily accessible to and understandable by a wider audience.

One of the most prominent images of the modern girl in literature was Tanizaki Junichiro's Naomi from his 1924 to 1925 serialization *A Fool's Love*. Originally published in the *Osaka Asahi* newspaper until its

content made it too scandalous to continue in that venue, it was later picked up by the woman's magazine *Josei*. *A Fool's Love* is centered on a story of obsessive love between a male narrator and a young girl whom he removes from her job as a cafe waitress to become his wife.²⁸ Unlike the typical image of the Japanese woman, Naomi represents the extreme modern girl, intent on being as Western in appearance and manner as possible.

Not only is Naomi heavily sexualized within the novel, but she also plays the role of an active "consumer whose appetite for moving pictures and carefully chosen foreign and domestic order-in delicacies is matched only by her desire for a large assortment of male companions" while "producing goods, services, and new habits."²⁹ This depiction of the *moga* as a non-conforming, sexual, consumption-oriented woman who destabilizes the happy balance offered by society plays into a fear of the West and the danger of modernization to a stable, traditional society. Naomi's actions continue to feed into this fear when she begins to clad herself both in female and male clothing as well as adopt the use of masculine pronouns.

Her decision to embrace both genders through Western fashion and personality throws into question how the modern girl fits into the culture. By having Naomi cross-dress and speak in a masculine way, Tanizaki brings into play the *moga*'s inherent denial of complementary gender roles. Naomi's actions show her directly taking over parts of the masculine sphere while denying aspects of the domestic female one. By

²⁸ Frederick, *Turning pages*, 70.

²⁹ Silverberg, 247.

the end of the novel Naomi's actions intimidate the narrator, ultimately causing him to flee and return to Japanese "normalcy." The conclusion of the book establishes the modern girl and the West as something to be feared, as Western clothes and ideas make her unable to fit into either gender role entirely and eventually lead her to becoming a dangerous and influential outcast with a potential to corrupt others.

Women Writers on the Modern Woman

Though much of the mainstream media portrayed the *moga* as a widespread societal image and overall the modern girl was a strikingly prominent fixture in the selling of feminine products like cosmetics, Japanese women living in interwar society were never fully drawn into the representation of the overtly-sexual, Western dressing young woman. This is most prominently seen in semi-autobiographical literature produced by women and in female intellectuals who, though did have a number of modern girl traits, contested the association between Western clothing and defying gender roles.

Not all authors took a similar approach to the West or Western-styled dress, instead using them as a way to express freedom within a confining society. Yoshiya Nobuko, one of the founders of the *shōjo* genre, used the West as a symbol for escape in her 1920 novel *Two Virgins in the Attic* that undermined the typical interpretation of a modern girl.³⁰ *Two Virgins* revolves

³⁰ Shōjo means "girl"; most shōjo usually have the main character(s) as innocent and extremely feminine. The setting is usually a school or place that can be isolated from society. Often very pure and sweet.

around the romantic relationship of two women, the shy Takimoto Akiko and the outgoing Miss Akitsu, which starts after the latter rescues Akiko from a fire in her room, an attic in the YWCA where she is staying.³¹ The two then spend the rest of the story finding freedom from societal pressures and problems in the attic as it allows them to break away from the “proper” behavior expected of young Japanese women. In these bits of escape, the image of the attic, along with other Western images like nightgowns, balconies, Catholic schools, and pianos among other things, are made exotic and fantasy-like, adding another layer of detachment from society through a pseudo-foreign isolation.³²

Unlike the typical association with Western fashion, the two main characters do not share any traits comparable to those demonstrated by Naomi in *A Fool's Love*. Instead, Western clothes are shown to be part of the gently intimate setting of the attic while, at the same time, displayed as hyper-feminine. In one of the most romantic scenes in the novel, in which Akiko and Miss Akitsu share a bed, their Western pajamas are referenced in very delicate terms. “Miss Akitsu's linen pajamas have the soft scent of magnolias.....and unnoticed that scent of the magnolia flower was transferred to the flannel sleeves of Akiko's own sleepwear.....”³³ Even though the scene could be read

³¹ Sarah Frederick, “Not That Innocent: Yoshiya Nobuko's Good Girls” in *Bad Girls of Japan*; ed. Sarah Frederick and Jan Bardsley (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.), 69.

³² *Ibid.*, 72.

³³ Yoshiya Nobuko, *Two Virgins in the Attic* excerpt in *Not That Innocent: Yoshiya Nobuko's Good Girls*, ed. Sarah Frederick and Jan Bardsley (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire:

as sexual, and indeed defies a number of sexual boundaries, the transfer of the magnolia scent between bedclothes is pure and untainted. This imagery and others like it in *Two Virgins* share many similarities with the general idea of the *moga*. These include the defiance of domestic gender roles, Western attitudes and clothing, the acknowledgment of some intimacies between the characters, and friendships between those who could be defined as both modern girls and new women. However, Akiko and Miss Akitsu are comparatively not modern girls themselves.

What makes Akiko and Miss Akitsu different from *moga* is the *shōjo* genre with its femininity and manipulation of the gender situation within Japanese society. Though they did share a number of characteristics, the *shōjo* had a wider berth of freedom than the modern girl, that is, she had an “associat[i]on with purity and warmth” and “was often defined in literature and art by qualities associated with femininity at the time—sentimentality, interest in flowers, clothing, dolls, and dreamy thoughts of the moon and stars.”³⁴ Additionally, Akiko and Miss Akitsu remain together at the end of the novel, deciding to leave the attic and, essentially, “become adults.” At the same time, Akiko goes through the transition from girlhood to adulthood while still maintaining her purity and honesty. Because her growth did not force her to lose those qualities and allowed her to “rebel against natural imperatives to marry and reproduce” it established her as a “more civilized human.”³⁵ Therefore, because their

Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.), 74.

³⁴ Frederick, “Not that Innocent,” 68.

³⁵ Ibid, 76.

relationship was a rebellion and not an attempt to take down society, Akiko and Miss Akitsu were “acceptable.”

The image of the *moga* was heavily discussed and criticized by society, but shades of the modern girl could be portrayed in an acceptable, even traditionally acceptable, light if certain qualities were altered to fit within a certain framework, as seen in the case of Yoshiya's *Two Virgins in the Attic*.

Hayashi Fumiko's novel *Diary of a Vagabond*, on the other hand, shows what it was like for women living on the edge of a modernizing society, removed from the *shōjo* setting.³⁶ *Vagabond* is written in diary format and tells the story of a young woman writer trying to make ends meet in a southern town, and shares a number of similarities with the author's own life. The protagonist takes on a number of jobs, from peddler to waitress at a local cafe, in order to establish some financial security for herself and her mother. By putting her right into the heart of the typical “modern” setting, it is not unexpected to see links between the main character and a *moga*, like Naomi. However, though there are a couple cafe scenes, the author does not romanticize nor emphasize any hidden sexuality about them, instead focusing on the conditions, the mundane work, and the waitresses. Those women who work in a cafe are also not painted as “modern girls” as the main character notes that she is the youngest, around her mid-twenties, and that one of the other

³⁶ “Vagabond Song” is a translated excerpt from Hayashi's full novel *Diary of a Vagabond* released in Japan as a novel in 1930.

workers has two children.³⁷ These statements offer a realistic, humanizing look at the supposed *moga* of the cafe scene in contrast to the dominant forms of media portraying a very different image.

Outside of the cafe, the protagonist still dresses in the “traditional” kimono, even mentioning the luxury of affording *tabi* socks when she secures the job and trading her kimono top to afford a bath. At the same time, she includes a wide variety of Western figures and movements in her recollections including Dadaist poetry, Maillol sculptures, and Eugene O’Neill, and this is especially notable in one scene where she has enough money to purchase a collection of Chekhov and Tolstoy memoirs and makes references to them throughout the story. The image of an everyday woman presented by the author seems to contradict both the image of the *moga* and that of the updated traditional woman. There is no visible distinction based on clothing or even action that rightly defines the protagonist as either. This reflects that though the modern girl existed and may have been a part of literature and discourse, many women did not fully see themselves in such strict or structured identity terms.

These two pieces of literature fit into real women intellectuals debating a variety of topics from love, to independence, to politics, to womanhood, to what it meant to be modern in the public sphere. Many of them were those that could be identified in some terms as a “modern girl,” but did not see themselves as such in the context of the media’s image of the *moga*. At the

³⁷ Hayashi Fumiko “Vagabond Song” in *To live and to write: selections by Japanese women writers, 1913-1938*. (Seattle, Wash.: Seal Press, 1987)

same time, these women also lacked an overarching dress code—it was a matter of personal choice whether or not they chose to wear kimono or western outfits. Hiratsuka Raichō, a prominent feminist who left lasting effects on the movement for women's rights, even denied the connection between western clothing and the “real Modern Girl,” concluded that it was not fashion which identified modernity, but “social conscience.”³⁸ Hiratsuka's essay reflected a wider social attempt to locate the true modern girl outside of superficial appearance and apolitical identity.

Conclusion

What can be seen in these overarching portrayals of the modern girl and the new traditional woman is a series of contradictory images of how women were expected to act within a modernizing Japan. Though the traditional kimono-clad woman was the ideal that intellectuals claimed was the next step for female identity, *moga* images were equally, if not more so, presented in the media with varying contextual shades. Her representation in political discussion and literature as a Western clothed, athletic woman suggested a dangerous, subversion to societal gender roles in that it redressed the physical body with masculine aspects. The modern girl was expected to be sporty and in shape, capable of a wild night of dancing in low-cut dresses or tanning on the beach, while at the same time exuding an independent, high-spirited energy not traditionally attributed to the preferred female personality and body. These actions placed her outside of the expected societal roles and made her dangerous to the

³⁸ Silverberg, 249.

stability and functionality of a changing Japanese world.

At the same time, art and advertisements contributed to the popularization and spread of the Western appearance. Oil paintings, wood blocks, and other art pieces that made their way into public view often showed the overlapping of Japan and the West, especially when it came to attempts to hybridize the different cultures into one defining image. Art of the *moga*, in see-through dresses or in places associated with modernity, became popular as they entered galleries of the wealthy, upper classes. The sexualized, modern woman in art had a particular appeal, even if it still kept the subject in the traditional, but altered kimono. To the lower and middle classes, their experiences of the modern girl came through the advertisements in magazines and display shop windows at local department stores. These images sold them an ideal of what they could be—the attractive, seductive woman in the new, modern sense—with a little bit of makeup or a new outfit. Though the political significance of the *moga* was treated with nervousness and a wide distance, the actual wearing of Western clothing and the changed appearance was pushed for in the media. It became an important selling point, even if a woman decided to only partially play into the consumerist nature of modernization.

Even though the modern girl and Western clothing were presented in a paradoxical, yet idealized manner, prominent women at the time subverted the multilayered, but strict duality promoted in popular culture. This was seen especially in works by female authors who suggested an incredibly nuanced and complex relation to the West and Western culture in their own

lives. Though clothing had been a defining characteristic of the modern girl in interwar women's literature, whether the characters wore a kimono or dress, whether they submerged themselves completely in the fashion or only explored it in passing, it did not define or identify who they were as a person in their society.

Essentially the *moga* represented both a fear of the West and the modern ideal projected onto a particular gender. During the transition between old and new ways women were expected to both modernize, yet remain a reminder of the past. The modern girl was the created physical representation of the extreme, dangerous modern woman. What lay behind this image was that the *moga* had parts of what real women were like during this time period, and many fed into certain aspects of the appearance seen through advertisements, but clothing and looks were not an outward definition of a "true" *moga* or even the everyday woman. Many women did not make the complete transfer, nor did they remain the perfect definition of the new traditional woman.

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FIGURE 1

Kobayakawa Kiyoshi, *Tipsy* (1930), woodblock print; ink and color on paper, 1930, in *Taishō Chic: Japanese Modernity, Nostalgia, and Deco*, Kendall H. Brown and Sharon Minichiello, (Honolulu: Honolulu Academy of Arts, 2001), 35.



FIGURE 2

Takabatake Kashō, a young homemaker from *Girls' Illustrated*, 1930, in "Performing the Nation: Magazine Images of Women and Girls in the Illustrations of Takabatake Kashō, 1925-1937," *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 16, Barbara Hartley, <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue16/hartley.htm>



FIGURE 3

Yamamura Kōka, *New Carleton Dancers, Shanghai, 1924*; woodblock print; ink and color on paper, 1924, in *Taishō Chic: Japanese Modernity, Nostalgia, and Deco*, Kendall H. Brown and Sharon Minichiello, (Honolulu: Honolulu: Honolulu Academy of Arts, 2001), 32.

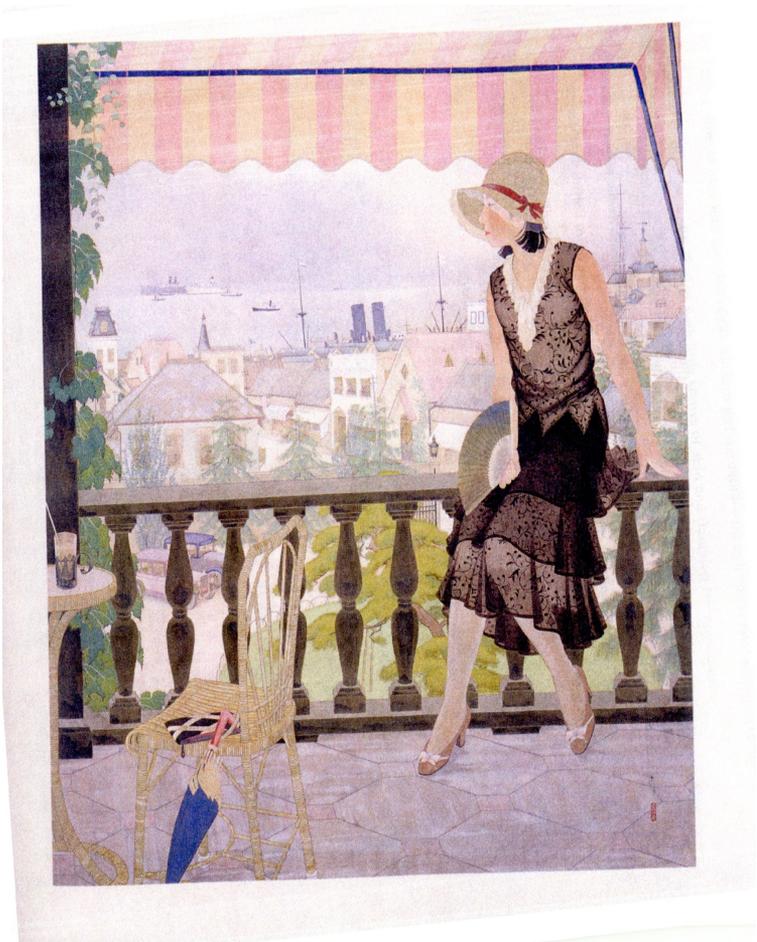


FIGURE 4

Yamada Kisaku, *Midsummer Harbor*, 1932 in *The Brittle Decade: Visualizing Japan in the 1930s*, John Dower, Anne Nishimura Morse, Jacqueline Atkins and Frederic Shart (Boston: MFA Publications; 2012), 64-65.

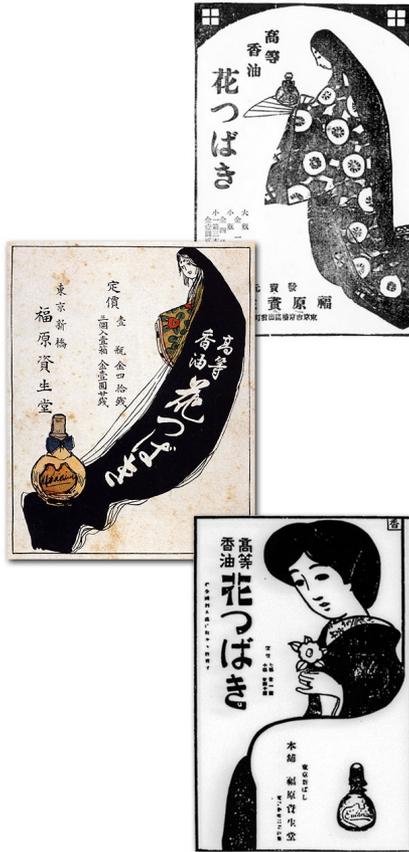


FIGURE 5

“Hanasubaki Hair Oil”ads (1915-1916 in
"Cosmopolitan Glamour." *Selling Shiseido*,
John Dower,
[http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/
/shiseido_01/sh_essay02.html](http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/shiseido_01/sh_essay02.html)



FIGURE 6

Shiseido, *Uchiwa Fan*, 1932 in "Marketing Beauty." *Selling Shiseido*, John Dower, http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/shiseido_01/sh_essay03.html