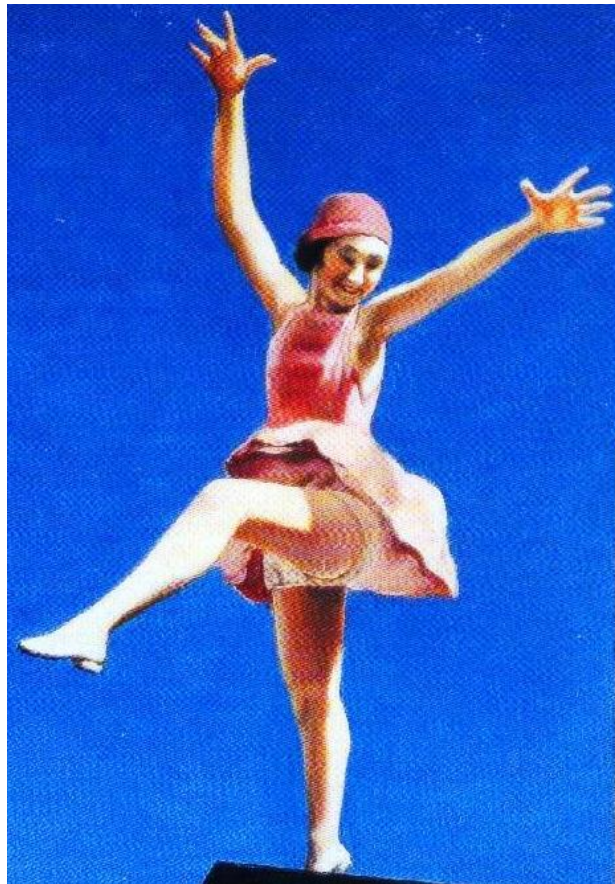


Girls Just Want To Have Fun:
American and Japanese
Evaluations of the Japanese *Moga*
During the Interwar Years



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The Japanese modern girl, a playful, exuberant burst of modernity that unabashedly flaunted her sexuality, bare skin and affinity for conspicuous consumption on the downtown streets of the Ginza and in the small cafés of the city, swept through Tokyo and the country of Japan like an unruly whirlwind during the interwar years. She stirred up controversy and anxiety everywhere she went, leaving in her wake a set of confused, frustrated and often times ambivalent onlookers. The modern girl, a cross-cultural phenomenon that came into being in the 1920s, was known for her innovative use of Western fashion and her audacious exploits of men, money and Marlboros. In Japan, she was called the *modan garu* [modern girl], or *moga* for short, and was often referred to as the Japanese version of the American flapper.¹ While it would seem that young women concerned with superficial things as fashion and consumption might be ignored by “serious” intellectuals, history shows us that quite the opposite is true. The *moga* was carefully studied by literary critics and intellectual elites in both Japan and the United States—often with a pronounced concern, or even anxiety, given the threat that emancipated, pleasure seeking women were considered to pose to the moral, gender-based underpinnings of Japanese society. As such, the *moga* was defined, discussed, and criticized by Japanese and American intellectuals, academic and writers during her entire transitory, yet magnitudinous, existence in interwar Japanese society.

¹ Note, however, that some academics like Miriam Silverberg make a conscious effort to disaffiliate the American flapper with the Japanese *moga* because, “by merely equating the Japanese Modern Girl with the flapper we do her a disservice, for the Modern Girl was not on a Western trajectory.” In addition, Silverberg refuses to call the Japanese modern girl by her “nickname” (*moga*) because “to do so would be to deny her the full respect that is her due. It would also depart from the practice of her time, when most commentators spelled her name out in full, as *modan gaaru*.” See Miriam Silverberg, “The Modern Girl as Militant.” In Gail Bernstein, Ed. *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, 239-240. I have chosen to consistently refer to her as the *moga*, however, because, in fact, several writers referred to the *moga* as such: “The term modern girl is only a few months old... but it has become so popular that [she] is now known generally as *moga* for short.” See Setsuo Uenoda, “The ‘Moga’ and the ‘Mobo’: A Study and Defense of Japan’s Modern Girls and Modern Boys.” *Trans-Pacific*, September 17, 1927, 4.

When assessing writings from the interwar years that center on the evaluation of the *moga* phenomenon, the discourse on the Japanese *moga* among American academics and Japanese intellectuals alike is similar in its overall criticism and disdain for the development of a modern girl in Japan, specifically concerning the *moga*'s clothing and attire, the *moga*'s actions and behavior, and the *moga*'s prevalence within society. However, American authors, writing articles for magazines and journals published in the United States, criticized the *moga* much more severely on all aspects of her identity, and the significance of this disparity is multifold. American intellectuals critiqued the *moga* more harshly because of a desire to retain a picturesque image of Japan as quaint and old-fashioned that resulted in a condemnation of the very modern *moga*, because of current socio-political tensions existing between America and Japan that resulted from a fifteen-year history of elevating hostility between the two countries that effected an attack on the *moga* because she was an easy, passive target for criticism directed at Japan, and because of America's deep-seated concern of Asian "Otherness," "Orientalism" and the "yellow peril" which elicited racist fears and resentments. On the flip side, Japanese intellectuals were less harsh in their critique of the *moga* because first, they were threatened mainly by the *moga*'s promiscuity and thus actually endorsed her economic independence, and second because of their ambivalence towards modernization, whereby the academics were both attracted to and revolted by Westernization, which was projected onto the *moga*.

How and Why Did the *Moga* Emerge?

Fittingly, one interwar Japanese writer questioned, "Who is the modern girl and what is she, then, that has been gaining so much notoriety in newspaper columns and social gossip?"² To understand who the *moga* was and where she came from, the *moga* must first be made a part of

² Uenoda, 4.

the political and socio-cultural transformations of her time. The emergence and presence of the *moga* can generally be associated with the 1910-1935 time range, in itself a “turbulent time in Japanese history.”³ Spanning the three imperial eras of Meiji, Taishō and Shōwa, Japan underwent a great change: industrialization progressed rapidly after the Russo-Japanese war (1904-1905), the agricultural population poured into the cities, and Tokyo and Osaka transformed themselves into modern metropolises.⁴ Ajioka Chiaki points out that, in these two cities, “new ideas such as individualism, democracy and proletarianism were accepted. At the same time, there was an upsurge in mass culture: young men and women enjoyed the freedom of the city and adopted a Western lifestyle— they were called ‘modern boys’ and ‘modern girls.’”⁵ Most historians agree that the *moga*’s inception was more specifically due in large part to the rise of consumerism and literary consumption that was stimulated by a socially tumultuous period following the end of World War One in 1918 and the Great Kantō Earthquake in 1923.

While many historians have contended that World War I, the event that changed almost everything in European and American history, left Japan little touched, Frederick R. Dickinson makes a convincing argument that stands many of these accepted truths on their heads by suggesting that WWI actually had an enormous effect on the small cluster of islands.⁶ With the end of WWI, Japan found itself on the brink of veritable economic, military and imperial success. Despite its small role in aiding the Allied powers to victory, Japan emerged as a major actor in international politics at the close of the war. The war had permitted Japan to expand its

³ Chiaki Ajioka, *Modern Boy, Modern Girl: Modernity in Japanese Art, 1910-1935*. Sydney, Australia: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1998, 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶ By focusing on an ongoing discussion of national identity by Japanese elites, Dickinson reveals in *War and National Reinvention: Japan in the Great War, 1914-1919* how the Great War played a large role in shaping how Japanese individuals reconsidered modernity and the value of its place in their country and culture. Frederick R. Dickinson, *War and National Reinvention: Japan in the Great War, 1914-1919*. Cambridge: Harvard East Asian Monographs, 2001, 4.

influence in Asia and its German territorial holdings in the Pacific, and in 1919 Japan was awarded a position among the “Big Five” powers at the Versailles Peace Conference as well as a permanent seat on the Council of the League of Nations. Japan thus entered into the globally respectable era of “Shidehara Diplomacy,” a term named after the Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, Shidehara Kijuro who served from 1915 to 1924, that described Japan’s liberal foreign policy during the 1920s. This policy adhered to a non-interventionist strategy toward China and, more importantly, attempted to stabilize relations with the Western nations. As Dickinson argues, Japan realized after WWI that, in modeling itself on imperial Germany since the nineteenth century, it had perhaps been imitating the wrong national example and consequently reoriented itself toward embracing Westernization. In an attempt to keep up with the times and strengthen relations with the Western nations, Japan thus visibly began to join the modern liberal world and Japan’s attraction to cultural modernism flourished as a result.⁷ However, not all intellectuals and citizens were convinced of the appeal of modernity; it remained to be seen whether Taishō liberalism or Meiji era authoritarianism would “win the day.”⁸

In addition to the rise in modernism that sprang forth from the end of WWI, Barbara Hamill Sato, author of the groundbreaking 2003 book *The New Japanese Woman: Modernity, Media and Women in Interwar Japan* [see figure 1], argued that the postwar economic growth and rise in urbanization that occurred with Japan’s indirect involvement in World War One led to an increase in the nation’s standard of living, which in turn effected the growth of the

⁷ It is likely that Japan tentatively welcomed certain aspects of modernity in order to appear modish, because, for a while, in the Wilsonian world to be culturally modern was the “official” model. For instance, Raymond Weaver, an ethnographer writing in 1919, commented, “In those [post WWI] days, ‘civilized’ was naively supposed to be synonymous with ‘Westernized.’” See Raymond M. Weaver, “Japanese Women.” *Columbia University Quarterly*, April 1919, 159.

⁸ For the majority of the background history on Japan and WWI, I thank Dr. Eric Cunningham, esteemed professor of Japanese history at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington. See Eric Cunningham, “Re: Moga Movie.” Sent 4 May 2006, personal email (Accessed 5 May 2006), 1.



moga.⁹ Japanese cities thus grew in size to produce an urban space increasingly defined by new forms of mass transportation¹⁰ [see figure 2], new jobs, and consumption spending.¹¹ Furthermore, as a result of the burgeoning urbanization boom and explosion of consumerism, the middle class progressively found itself with extra money to purchase consumer goods.¹² This growth in consumption helped to shape the new modern girl that was emerging in Japan. The products made available for purchase “titillated” women’s imagination, as women browsing the aisles of department stores identified the consumption of household and vanity

products as a form of escape from the state’s rhetoric of frugality and practicality that was forced upon them.¹³ No doubt, the sweeping consumerism also signified empowerment for women. The idea that they could be autonomous actors capable of making important decisions regarding the furnishing of their homes and the adornment of their own bodies would have been a very powerful concept. Furthermore, the rise of urbanization in Japanese cities (which is invariably connected to consumerism) also facilitated a sense of individualism and empowerment because the larger urban concentration of the population broke down the rural extended family, which

⁹ Japan’s augmented prosperity occurred because, during the First World War, Japan had supplied goods that were no longer obtainable to many nations in need. These goods were not being manufactured at that time because of Europe’s concentration on war production.

¹⁰ Ajioka, 16.

¹¹ For a complete list of the sources of all figures that appear in the body of this paper, see appendix 1.

¹² Barbara Sato, *The New Japanese Woman: Modernity, Media and Women in Interwar Japan*. London: Duke University Press, 2003, 30.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 16.

fostered a sense of anonymity and hence increased personal freedom. Thus, consumption in the aftermath of WWI spurred the formation of the *moga*, because, for many women in interwar Japan, “consumerism created a new set of images by which they could better understand who they were, or at least who they might be,” as Sato pointedly articulates.¹⁴

Likewise, to many Japanese citizens the Great Kantō Earthquake also symbolized a distinct transformation of cultural and social life. Only four years after the end of WWI, on the first day of September in 1923, Tokyo, the capital city and cultural center of the country, was demolished by the six minute 8.1 Richter scale tremors, a neighboring typhoon off the coast of the Noto Peninsula in Northern Japan and the subsequent firestorms that swept the small port city of Yokohama.¹⁵ Over 570,000 homes were destroyed, leaving an estimated 1.9 million homeless, and the total death toll was estimated at 140,000 Japanese people.¹⁶ This monumental event had three important ramifications that affected the birth and growth of the *moga*.

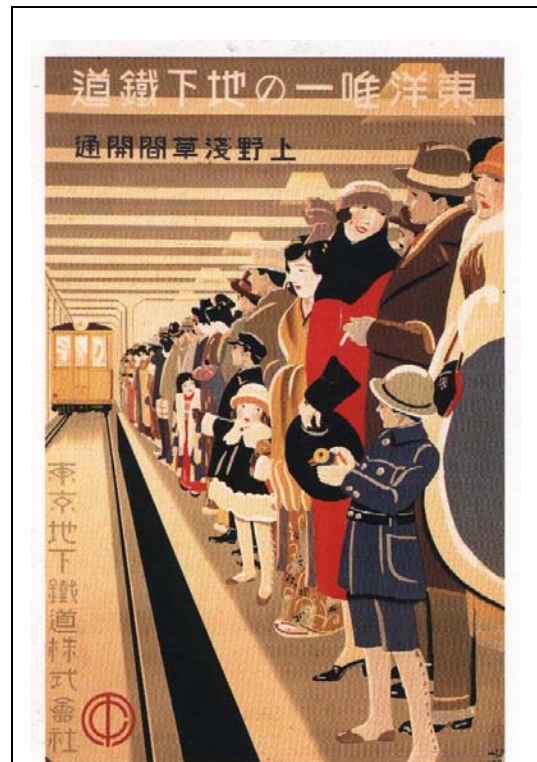


Figure 2

Painting by Sugiura Hitsui Depicting Japanese Travelers Waiting for the Subway. Note the majority of figures dressed in Western clothing like fur coats, brimmed hats, stylish pumps and hems that end before the knee for the children. This abundance of modern fashion is contrasted against the woman to the right of the lady in red who is dressed in traditional Japanese kimono and sandals. She is the sole passenger garbed in traditional dress and looks notably lonely and sad as the space around her is engulfed by Westernization.

¹⁴ Ibid., 19.

¹⁵ Ibid., 33.

¹⁶ Kerry Smith and Lee Stewart, “The Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923: Materials from the Dana and Vera Reynolds Collection.” <http://dl.lib.brown.edu/kanto/> (accessed May 4, 2006), 3.

First, women increasingly were forced to enter the labor market directly after graduation from high school rather than get married. This occurred not only because there was a need for extra income to remake the homes that were destroyed, but also because a large percentage of the male population perished in the catastrophe, leaving the market of potential mates scant for women. An author who goes by the pseudonym “K” noted in 1926,

Whereas in the past girls in the higher schools often wished to marry even before they were graduated, the tendency is now completely reverse and most of the graduates sidestep matrimony, preferring to seek further employment which may enable them to become economically independent. The teachers ascribe this to the effects of the earthquake, which deprived many women of those on whom they had theretofore depended and thus demonstrated the importance of woman’s being able to shift for herself.¹⁷

One of the most popular sites of employment for younger women was in the café as a waitress. Consequently, a so-called “café civilization,” as some writers dubbed the phenomenon, sprang forth with *moga* as workers permeating the labor scene. Dr. S. Washio, a contributing writer to the *Trans-Pacific*, wrote the aptly titled article “The ‘Modern Girl’ of Japan: A Post-Earthquake Creature Sprung from Tokyo’s ‘Café Civilization’ and Exalted by Present Day Novelists” in 1925. Of the *moga*, he said,

The disaster of September 1923 may have helped to develop such a type of women. The conception of the ‘modern girl’ is closely associated with the café prosperity that was a phenomenal sight after the disaster. Young women separated from their fathers and husbands and cast on the street only on their own resources eagerly sought employment as waitresses in these cafés.¹⁸

Kashiwaga Yoko also observed the connection between the earthquake and the rise of female employment, especially in cafés, in his article “Tokyo Café Girls: The Precarious Life of Eight is stimulating the development of more [*moga*]

¹⁷ “K,” “Japan of the Present: The ‘New Women’ Rise to Startle the Country.” *Trans-Pacific*, March 13, 1926, 5.

¹⁸ S. Washio, “The ‘Modern Girl’ of Japan: A Post-Earthquake Creature Sprung from Tokyo’s ‘Café Civilization’ and Exalted by Present Day Novelists,” *Trans-Pacific*, October 10, 1925, 5.

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APPENDIX 1

- Title Page: Ajioka, Chiaki. *Modern Boy, Modern Girl: Modernity in Japanese Art, 1910-1935*. Sydney, Australia: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1998, 147.
- Figure 1: Sato, Barbara Hamill, *The New Japanese Woman: Modernity, Media and Women in Interwar Japan*. London: Duke University Press, 2003, front cover.
- Figure 2: Ajioka, 16.
- Figure 3: Sato, 50.
- Figure 4: Ajioka, 37.
- Figure 5: Birnbaum, Phyllis. *Modern Girl, Shining Stars, The Skies of Tokyo: 5 Japanese Women*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, 165.
- Figure 6: Sato, 95.
- Figure 7: Ajioka, 8.
- Figure 8: Ajioka, 49.
- Figures 9: Natori, D.G. "Japanese Moga." *Travel*. New York: Giralomo Press, 1933, 13.
- Figure 10: Natori, 13.
- Figure 11: Ajioka, 16.
- Figure 12: May, Stella Burke. "Honoring a New Godden in Japan: The Modern Cult of Fashion, At the Beauty Parlor and Style Show, and A New Life for Japanese Women." *Travel*, August 1933, 19.
- Figure 13: Tanizaki, Junichiro. *Naomi*. Translated by Anthony H. Chambers. New York: Vintage International, 1924, front cover.
- Figure 14: Mizoguchi, Kenji. *Naniwa Ereji/ Osaka Elegy*. Video recording. Janus Films, 1936, front cover.
- Figure 15: Ajioka, 28.
- Figure 16: Ajioka, 110.
- Figure 17: Natori 16.

- Figure 18: Harry A. Franck, "Why You Will Linger, Enchanted, in Japan." The Condé Nast Travel Service: Dollar Steamship Line and American Mail Line. Magazine Advertisement. *Vanity Fair*, March 1929, 31.
- Figure 19: *Trans-Pacific*, "Wielding the Japanese Exclusion Axe," Political Cartoon. August 9, 1924, 6.
- Figure 20: Ajioka, 35.
- Figure 21: Natori, 14.