

# A Literature Study on Japanese Modern Girl

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**Abstract:** The outbreak of First World War, along with the development of technology, industry, and urbanization, brought about the changes to the daily practices in Japan. These social changes contributed to the rise of a new female image, the modern girl or *moga*. This article aims to analyze the changes of modern girls and the reasons underlying the changes.

**Keywords:** Modern Girl; *Moga*; Japan

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## 1. Introduction

Japanese modern girls or *moga* represent a special group in Japan. From the social and cultural points of view, they share the similarities with other modern girls, and at the same time, embody the uniqueness of cultural environment of Japanese society. To better understand who the *moga* are, it is essential to describe some of their characteristics. The article “The Modern Girl as Militant” argues that modern girls were identified by their bodies and most specifically by their short hair and long, straight legs <sup>[1]</sup>. A *moga* is different from the traditional Japanese girls for the difference in their fashion and hairstyle. A *moga* is a young woman who wears brightly colored dresses which cover the body part above the knees. A *moga* likes high heels and clear stockings to show off her legs <sup>[2]</sup>. Besides the changes on their appearances, the modern girls pursue new lifestyles, e.g., they aspire to succeed at their jobs. In the past, most of the women were just housewives. Some of the highly educated housewives tend to matters unrelated to their expertise like designing menus and assisting in their children’s education <sup>[2]</sup>. However, after the First World War, urban women started to go out and work in the office.

Economically, the *moga* were in the era when consumerism was on the rise in Japan and cosmetics companies were making efforts to attract female consumers. In Shiseido’s advertising and marketing, women occupied a major position. Not only is *moga* the target consumer group, but Shiseido also used various female images, especially Modern Girl, to promote the beauty image of the brand at the same time.

Culturally, “as an important tool for shaping popular culture,” <sup>[2]</sup> many women’s magazines like the publication of *Fujin sekai* (Woman’s World, 1906), later followed by *Fujokai* (Woman’s Sphere, 1910), *Fujin kōron* (Woman’s Review, 1916) constituted a channel for women at that time to learn about new ideas since the magazines published discussions on “women’s responsibilities in family, society and themselves.” <sup>[2]</sup>

## 2. Historical significance of the modern girl

As Silverberg stated in “The Modern Girl as Militant”, modern girl is a part of political economy and socio-cultural transformations. For instance, the cosmetics company also tried to use modern girl image to propagate imperialism to other countries. The tactic involved the employment of Japanese star, Ri Koran

(Li Xianglan or Yoshiko Yamaguchi), as its image spokesperson. Although she is Japanese, she was styled as a modern Chinese girl, who impacted the consumption behavior of Chinese women. In one of the soap advertisement, Ri appeared as a young Chinese modern girl with a feather fan in her hand, suggesting that her skin would become soft after using the product. Besides the appearance, the advertising images still contained some noticeable features of Japanese culture. For example, “in another face cream advertisement, Ri is wearing Hanfu and holding chrysanthemums in her hands.”<sup>[1]</sup> Chrysanthemums are a flower traditionally associated with the Japanese royal family; the uses of Chrysanthemums flowers indicated the imperialism feature in advertising since the flower was closely related to the Japanese royal family. The customers could easily notice the Japanese imperialism feature in the advertisements. Ri’s makeup, clothes, and figure precisely fit into the scope of what modern Chinese women would have at the time. This image is a means of assimilation of the imperialist nation. Ri’s image characteristics were reminiscent of the image of Chinese women. At the same time, the presence of camellia highlights the company’s Japanese characteristics. Ri’s dual identity embodied the power of cosmetics in terms of ethnicity, conveying the culture to Manchukuo, and at the same time promoting exotic mainland aesthetics to the Japanese market.

### 3. External changes

This article focuses on both external and internal changes of the *moga*. The external changes mainly occurred in the dresses of Japanese women. For example, *The New Japanese Woman* argued that modern girls’ hairstyles and dresses have changed and gradually become westernized after First World War and the Great Earthquake in 1923. The changes were also promoted by some people who returned from Europe or the U.S to Japan. Sato claimed that, “although only a few young women at the time were brave enough to cut off their hair in defiance of the criticism and outright rejection that followed, this modern girl hairstyle entered Japan from Europe via the United States after the war.”<sup>[2]</sup> This group of people felt that some traditional Japanese cultural elements were out of fashion. For example, the latest hairstyle in the United States at that time was the bob head hairstyle. The aspiring young novelist named Mochizuki Yuriko mentioned in the book’s second chapter, “The long kimono was beautiful, but it was out of season. Long Japanese hair is also beautiful, but that too is out of fashion. This is how I felt when I decided to cut my hair.”<sup>[2]</sup> Mochizuki returned to Japan from Europe shortly after the war, and recalled the experience of herself getting bob head hairstyle.

Although there were not many modern girls like Mochizuki at that time, modern girls like her set up a role model for more young Japanese girls to learn and follow suit. Moreover, the modern girls started to make changes on their dresses. As we can see in the website of Selling Shiseido II, the website presents a large number of visual images of modern girl, like in 1907. From the selected covers from Shiseido Graph magazine, we can see the modern girls in the picture wearing fashionable polka-dot dresses. Some of them even wore swimsuits and ski suits, such dress is impossible to see on Japanese women in the past since most of them only wear traditional Japanese clothing like kimono.

### 4. Internal changes

Past and present observers of the modern girls have gradually recognized that their impact was not only on the dresses, but modern girls also influenced the personal pursuits of Japanese women. In the book *The New Japanese Woman*, the essayist Kitazawa Shuichi mentioned that “Two characteristics are inherent in modern English girls. First, they exude a new sense of self, a desire for self-expression and personal achievement. Second, their openness is not the result of a conscious effort to achieve intellectual awakening. This attribute naturally came to them.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Such a description was also in line with Japanese modern girl at the time of 1920s. Sato quoted some scholars’ discussions in the second chapter of *The New Japanese Woman* on the definition of modern girls.

One specific feature is that Japanese girls were gradually becoming accustomed to the ideology to seek their own professions and for successes outside of families. The scholar Chiba Kameo equated the modern girl with the professional working woman. He claimed that, “by seeking employment and ensuring a degree of economic independence, women, including modern girls, will gain the know-how to express and meet their needs. In addition, they will learn to define themselves outside of their family and family relationships.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Speaking of modern girls’ struggle against traditional family structures, it is necessary to mention their new perspectives on love and marriage. In this process, the mass media like gossip magazines contributed a lot to help propagate the new views on love and marriage. It could be seen on the articles on magazines during 1920s, “Newspapers and magazines at that time often published gossip about the marriage of movie and TV Stars. Gossip columns about celebrity relationships and marital difficulties were popular. The use of sex and pornography attracted female readers and provided a rich resource for their fantasies.”<sup>[2]</sup> Thus, the ideas and stories about free love and marriage propagated and shared in the magazine pushed women to pursue more freedom.

### **5. Factors underlying the changes: Cultural factors**

The first thing that contributed to the formation of the new image of female were the changes in media. As we mentioned above, there were many women’s magazines in 1920s. These magazines had garnered a reputation and widespread popularity among the modern women at that time. In the 1920s, with the extensive publications of women’s magazines, modern women emerged, mainly because the literacy rate of the female population increased and women became the main readers of the magazines. The literacy is not the only reason for the popularity of women’s magazines because the improved economic power of women was also an important factor. “In fact, in the early days, girls who subscribed to women’s magazines were mostly young women from the upper classes of the Meiji era who were able to go to higher schools.”<sup>[2]</sup> However, since the 1920s, women’s magazines have undergone drastic changes. These magazines started to attract more readers besides the middle-class women. Particularly, these magazines began to cater to immature readers and housewives, e.g., young women without reading habits and rural homemakers. The popular women’s magazines have created a new culture – female culture.

The magazines encouraged female readers to write letters which would be published on the magazines. For example, “In 1923, Shufu no tomo added a suggestion column to provide answers to everyday problems, from marital difficulties to worries, in keeping with the complicated Japanese-style network of relationships.”<sup>[2]</sup> These new adjustments not only attract more readers for the magazines, but also provide a platform for women to confront their own anxieties, learn about other women’s issues, and document a range of attitudes toward love, marriage, divorce and work, empowering women to make changes. The fact that female readers contributed to the new wisdom provided by the magazine’s forum suggests that women themselves set their own paths in terms of family ethics, rather than following the path set for them by others<sup>[2]</sup>. Compared with men who can communicate with colleagues or friends at workplaces, women in 1920s could finally have their own platforms to express and learn.

### **6. Factors underlying the changes: Economic factors**

After analyzing the impact of culture on modern girl, it is necessary to analyze economic factors that have a major impact on the modern girl. First of all, due to the rise of consumerism, and the modern girl were the icon of consumerism since they appeared in the same periods. “Since the early 1920s, with the construction and reconstruction of the image of modern women, the rudiments of consumer culture are accompanied by corresponding values.”<sup>[2]</sup> Meanwhile, stores began to adopt advertising tools and ways to improve their sales. For example, “In a department store, modern girls appeared in the guise of a floor

model. Known as the ‘Mannequin Girl’ in Japan, they captivated customers with their stylish outfits. On the poster, they are young women with short hair who advertise Sapporo Beer, Suntory wine and a soft drink called Calpis, which prides itself on its healthy supplement of calcium.”<sup>[2]</sup> Such utilization of modern girl images in advertisements were quite common and useful during 1920s.

The modern girl was a symbol of the social unrest that Japan’s continued industrialization is bound to cause. The modernists saw only superficial changes in the appearance of modern girls, and accused them of sentimentality. Japanese modernists are still as sentimental as medieval lyric poets. The modernity reflected in their eyes is reflected in their hairstyles, dresses, film actresses, department store model girls, and modern girls strolling in Ginza and frequenting the cinema. It is nothing more than a brisk modernism. Modernization is based on modern industry, financial capital, large-scale factories and stock exchanges<sup>[2]</sup>. The modern girls’ connections with consumerism were much deeper than they appeared to be.

With the rise of consumerism, women’s economic power as bourgeois consumers has increased, and they have become the target of advertisers such as Shiseido. The history of Shiseido shows the heyday of Japan’s modernization – the changes in feminine beauty, the emergence of consumer culture, the forefront of advertising and packaging trends. Based on the marketing of modern beauty concepts from 1920 to 1943, it could be seen how various marketing methods affect the consumption behavior and external image of the modern girl.

According to the website of Selling Shiseido I, Shiseido’s design philosophy and marketing methods were largely influenced by the second chairman, Shinzo Fukuhara. Due to Fukuhara’s overseas experience, Shiseido’s products and publicity styles were strongly westernized. The author of *The New Japanese Woman* pointed out that from an economic point of view, visual promotion was an effective marketing ploy in stimulating a desire for new fashions and other products in the process<sup>[2]</sup>. A chapter of *Rich Rewards: Images of Transnational Beauty* expounded that Shiseido built an international and elegant lifestyle through their visual media. In the perfume packaging, luxurious colors such as red and purple were used, and the lines of the bottle were also exquisite and smooth<sup>[3]</sup>. The article also illustrates the importance of the product to the image of women, such as “beauty depends on the skin.” The advertisement pictures showed a gorgeous and exaggerated image of a beautiful woman – an image of a local beauty from the Heian period. The font of the text also reflects the advanced style<sup>[4]</sup>. These propaganda methods attracted consumers and make them willing to bear the brand premium.

## 7. Conclusion

The changes on the surface of modern girls have deeper meanings. The author of *The New Japanese Woman* claimed that the symbol that makes modern girls so powerful is not because she represents a small part of “real women,” but because they represent the possibility of who all women can become. Modern girl also symbolizes consumption and popular culture, which is a phenomenon of women after the war<sup>[2]</sup>. Modern girl is actually an undefined concept. Even at that time, many people from different positions put forward their understanding of modern girls for different purposes. If there was more information about the modern girl, the definition of modern girl could be clearer. and a deeper understanding of the image of modern girls can be provided.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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