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Ayako Kano
University of Pennsylvania, akano@sas.upenn.edu

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(Book review). Jennifer Robertson's Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan

Abstract

Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan. By Jennifer Robertson. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998. xvi, 278 pages. \$40.00, cloth; \$15.95, paper.

Comments

Ayako Kano. Review of Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan by Jennifer Robertson. *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Summer, 1999), pp. 473-478

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One lesson I draw from this is that cultural embedding of Japanese leisure—the emic side of it all—remains obscure, despite the good offices of the Vienna conference. This is a challenge to our analytical smarts. It also has political implications: those sniveling editorials about how the Japanese are failing to consume leisure in the right types and amounts proper in an advanced nation are redefining the concept of the level playing field.

This brings us to my major complaint about the book. (A reviewer has to find fault or lose credibility.) The authors look *through* Japanese leisure, and their view then opens out over broad landscapes of Japanese culture. Their view *of* Japanese leisure, however, is narrow. (Insert, please, the standard caveat: we are talking about 18 colleagues, each possessed by a differing vocabulary and *mondai ishiki*; one size generalization does not fit all.) They approach leisure as a type of human conduct: as unpaid activity or unobligated time. However, they do not examine it as a quality of action that may inform any type of conduct—hedonism, the power of play.

The result is a missed opportunity. Perhaps it was unintended, but the default position taken on most of these pages is that human conduct is propelled by the play of power far more often than it is impelled by the power of play. For all that we congratulate ourselves these days for having executed a paradigm shift from a structural view of the human condition to a performative one—a view that is supposed to valorize individual creativity over cultural constraint—we still don't seem to grasp the difference between spontaneity and resistance.

Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan. By Jennifer Robertson. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998. xvi, 278 pages. \$40.00, cloth; \$15.95, paper.

Reviewed by
AYAKO KANO
University of Pennsylvania

Jennifer Robertson's long-awaited study of Takarazuka, the all-female revue theater established in 1913 and still enormously popular today, is a remarkable achievement. It is much more than the expected anthropological portrait of a theater troupe; it even goes beyond contributing to our understanding of gender and modern Japanese theater by illuminating the nexus between sexual politics, nationalism, imperialism, modernity, and popular culture. As the jacket quote by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg declares, this book's relevance "travels east and west far beyond" Japan.

This is arguably the first serious study of Takarazuka in any language. With the exception of a few conscientious writers¹ and recent muckrakers,² most who discuss this theater troupe tend to replicate the official image carefully disseminated and controlled by the management. As encapsulated by the slogan “Purely, Righteously, and Beautifully,” the troupe management likes to present an image of Takarazuka as nonsexual family entertainment while at the same time shrewdly capitalizing on the sexual appeal of its performers. The *otokoyaku*, or women impersonating men, are the focus of particularly intense fan worship, which the management has both exploited and sought to control.

It is the lesbian “subtext” of the Takarazuka performances and of the fan culture that Robertson seeks to uncover, while avoiding the imposition of contemporary Western values that might assume an all-female theater to be automatically a “lesbian theater.” Robertson astutely navigates between the two poles of denying and assuming the presence of lesbianism in Takarazuka by capturing the fluidity of desire in subtle formulations such as the following: “Two of the most tenacious of the mistaken assumptions that need to be dismantled if any progress is to be made in understanding sexuality and its theories are the willful elision of ‘unaligned’ sexual relations by persons not already discounted as unconventional—or worse, as ‘deviant’—and the easy equation of marriage with sexuality and heterosexuality in particular” (p. 145). Robertson notes that, contrary to stereotype, a substantial portion of the fans of Takarazuka are married women. Robertson thus challenges the conventional wisdom that the passionate attachment to *otokoyaku* expressed by fans is merely a symptom of young girls’ immature and asexual longing that will eventually be resolved in heterosexual marriage. Neither denying that the *otokoyaku*-fan relationship is lesbianism nor assuming that it is so, Robertson devotes two chapters to describing the fascinating subculture of fandom, a “space off” (p. 175) in which fans can experiment with different alignments of gender, sex, and theatricality.

Robertson chooses not to repeat certain personal information she obtained while conducting her research, though she seems to have had access to inside information about the performers and their various liaisons: “Out of respect for Takarazuka fans and actors, I have opted not to repeat in detail all of what I learned from those conversations. With several pseudonymous and diluted exceptions, I have limited my comments on these matters to accounts published in newspapers and magazines (and thus part of the public domain)” (p. 178). The decision is perhaps a pragmatic one, but one can

1. Umehara Riko, *For Beginners: Takarazuka* (Tokyo: Gendai Shokan, 1994); Kawasaki Kenko, *Takarazuka: shōhi shakai no supekutakuru* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1999).

2. Takarazuka Kageki Kenkyūkai, ed., *Takarazuka yogoreta hanazono: yokubō to kyoshoku ni moteasobareta otome tachi* (Nishinomiyā: Rokusaisha, 1996), and others.

also read it as an ethical and political choice: Robertson is refusing to “out” Takarazuka actors and refusing to replicate the kind of scandalous reporting that characterized the tone of the popular press in the early twentieth century.

It is then slightly ironic that the study focuses much attention on scandalized responses of the popular press as a way of showing how “unlike the muzzled scholarship of today, various types of lesbian practice, including double suicide, were widely and openly high-lighted, discussed, sensationalized, and analyzed in the scholarly and popular media of the early twentieth century” (p. 46). The evidence Robertson produces is compelling, yet one may be tempted to ask if the old, sensationalized scholarship was really that much better than the new muzzled scholarship. Just as the lack of lesbian scandal in recent years is due more to management’s tighter public relations control than to the greater tolerance of lesbianism, might not the open discussion of lesbian scandals in the early twentieth century have been more a symptom of the operations of disciplinary power than a sign of freedom from it? As Michel Foucault would remind us, talking about (homo)sexuality is just another way to produce and control it, rather than to liberate it.

Robertson’s discussion of Takarazuka’s lesbian subtext is part of a larger theory about the “androgyny” of Japanese modernity. And here Robertson makes several large claims that are spectacular and elegant yet raise some doubts as to how far they can be taken. For example, Robertson follows Donald Roden in seeing Japanese modernity since the Taisho era as characterized by gender ambiguity and androgyny.³ While she is careful to correct Roden’s assumption of gender asymmetry—for example, by pointing out that the male romantic lead (*nimaimé*) should not be seen as the structural homologue of the Takarazuka *otokoyaku*, and that the *otokoyaku* inspired far more commentary about androgyny and sexual deviance than did the sensitive male *nimaimé* (p. 56)—Robertson agrees with Roden in seeing the “androgynous ambivalence of Japanese modernity.”

The potential problem with this model is suggested by Robertson’s own formulation of the ambivalence of androgyny itself: “Androgyny, as a theory of body politics, continues to interrogate the naturalized dualities of male and female, masculine and feminine. At the same time, androgyny, as an embodied practice, also has been used to exaggerate, essentialize, and mystify those same dualities” (p. 88). So androgyny is caught between gender interrogation and gender exaggeration, between gender troubling and gender polarizing. Clarity and ambivalence become so intertwined in the

3. Donald Roden, “Taisho Culture and the Problem of Gender Ambivalence,” in J. Thomas Rimer, ed., *Culture and Identity: Japanese Intellectuals during the Interwar Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 37–55.

master trope of androgyny that it is sometimes hard to see what exactly the term is meant to elucidate.

It seems, for example, from the evidence presented by Robertson, that Takarazuka as we know it today was shaped in the 1930s rather than in the decades immediately following its founding in 1913. In the 1930s, the content of the shows changed from children's stories and folktales to musical dramas and revues (p. 7), the word "girl" (*shōjo*) was dropped from the troupe name to signify this shift to more adult-oriented entertainment (p. 63), makeup shifted from traditional whiteface to modern greasepaint (p. 12), the first official fan club was created (p. 161), "revue fandom . . . was identified in the press as an illness symptomatic of social disorder" (p. 146), and sexologists blamed the *otokoyaku* for provoking the increased incidence of lesbian practices (p. 147). One might argue, then, that even if the 1930s could be said to be characterized by androgynous ambivalence, the Taisho era of the 1910s and early 1920s was characterized more by establishing and policing a strict gender dichotomy. Such a dichotomy was manifested sometimes by anxiety over androgyny, but equally often by expressions strongly grounded in a discourse of naturalized and biologized gender, such as the debates over motherhood, romantic love, abortion, and prostitution. Indeed, even the feminist expressions of journals such as *Seitō* seem to attest to the strength of gender dichotomy, rather than of androgynous ambivalence, in the Taisho era.

Similarly, it seems that Robertson's contrasting of Takarazuka with *kabuki* could be gainfully complicated by a consideration of the genres of *shinpa* and *shingeki*, modern theater genres developed in the 1890s to 1910s that also had to negotiate tortured relations to *kabuki* and to gender impersonation. For instance, Robertson takes at face value the Edo-period discourse about how *kabuki onnagata* "metamorphose" (*henshin*) themselves into idealized womanhood and contrasts this with the Takarazuka *otokoyaku*'s putting on of markers of masculinity (*kata*) (p. 93). Yet, by the 1910s, the discourse about *kabuki* seems to have shifted considerably from the Edo period, focusing on the *onnagata* performer's artifice and refinement in putting on external markers of femininity, i.e., *kata*. This was contrasted with the ability of the actress to express internal femininity, that is, for women acting as women to express a kind of essential womanhood now understood to be grounded in the biological body. (Interested readers may see my book manuscript "Acting Like a Woman in Modern Japan.")

The 1930 shift in Takarazuka make-up practice from whiteface to greasepaint is important for Robertson's argument because it signifies the transition from a practice that involves "an erasure, or a whitening out, of an actor's facial features and the substitution of inscribed signs of ideal masculinity or femininity," to a practice in which the actor's inherited facial features are much more central and visible (pp. 190–91). There is, however, a

conceptual step between whiteface and greasepaint: the “discovery of the naked face” elucidated by Karatani Kōjin in *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*.⁴ The naked face, contrasted with the painted face of *kabuki*, and associated with Ichikawa Danjūrō’s reforms of *kabuki* as well as with Tsu-bouchi Shōyō’s *shingeki* experiments, emerges as something that conveys interior meaning.

The emergence of interiority as something to be expressed in theatrical performance parallels the movement toward “unification of speech and writing” (*genbun itchi*) and would seem to have interesting implications for Robertson’s discussion of fanzines in her last chapter. Entitled “Writing Fans,” that chapter contains the insight that Takarazuka fan letters “might productively be regarded as monologues, or exercises in self-subjectivity and self-representation: voices from the space-off, from the margins and interstices of the dominant discourse of gender” (p. 191). It may be that these “interior monologues made public and visible” (p. 191) are called forth by the particular mode of theatrical expression of interiority first institutionalized in *shingeki* and then taken up by Takarazuka.

In the 1930s, on the other hand, factors other than gender and sexuality begin to complicate the dynamics of Takarazuka representation. What takes center stage here is “cross-ethnicking,” the performance of ethnically diverse populations in the Japanese empire, homologous with “cross-gendering.” Here, Robertson unveils an elegant theory that ties together theater and colonial policy, hinging on the concept of *dōka*. This term is translated as “identification” in the realm of theater and “assimilation” in the realm of colonial policy. Just as there is ambiguity between an actor internally transforming herself into a character on the one hand, and externally taking on gestures and behaviors to mimic a character on the other hand, there is an ambiguity between a colonial subject actually becoming a Japanese on the one hand and merely taking on the external markers of Japaneseness on the other hand.

Hybridity, like androgyny, becomes the metaphor that captures this ambiguity: “By strategically assuming a protean or hybrid character itself, the Japanese nation neutralized the anxiety about hybridity that can accompany colonialism” (p. 93). And theater played an important role in this process: “The montage-like Takarazuka Revue, with its allegorical concatenations of meaning and oscillations between text and subtext, both epitomized and extended a dominant Japanese national cultural identity that was premised, ambivalently, on a protean ability to assimilate difference and absorb otherness” (p. 137). Robertson’s argument here opens up new areas for academic inquiry, because, as she rightly notes, “the affective, aesthetic, and cultural

4. Karatani Kōjin, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, trans. Brett de Bary et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 55–57.

dimensions of Japanese imperialism have been much more neglected than the bureaucratic, military, and political-economic dimensions” (p. 90). One hopes that this study will be followed by many more that will flesh out and elaborate on the theory of colonial and theatrical *dōka* proposed by Robertson.

In focusing on a topic that invites comparison ranging from the all-male performances of Elizabethan England to the butch-femme relations of contemporary America, Robertson makes some wise decisions: she declares that she is most interested in making available archival documents and materials difficult to access for readers of English. Cross-cultural comparisons are kept to a minimum, as are self-reflexive analyses of how Robertson as an anthropologist and long-time resident of Japan experienced her research and involvement with Takarazuka culture. This abstention from reflexivity (used extensively in our field by scholars such as Anne Allison and Dorinne Kondo) is understandable; nonetheless one might wistfully wish for an account (perhaps a future memoir!) that would give us a fuller sense of Robertson’s own involvement with the object of her scholarship. Since it is one of her fundamental insights that spectatorship and fandom are creative and productive aspects that make up Takarazuka, and that the troupe operates by interpellating spectators in a powerful way, one hopes that such a dimension need not be forever edited out of the picture of Takarazuka presented to us so compellingly by Robertson’s book.

Overall, this book offers a fascinating and lucid account of the Takarazuka Revue, as well as a cogent and thoughtful discussion of the imbrication of gender, sexuality, imperialism, and popular culture. It ought to find a wide and appreciative audience both within the field of Japan Studies and outside it.

Japanese Childrearing: Two Generations of Scholarship. Edited by David W. Shwalb and Barbara J. Shwalb. The Guilford Press, New York, 1996. xxiv, 323 pages. \$45.00.

Reviewed by

JUDITH S. MODEL

Carnegie Mellon University

Japanese Childrearing is an interesting and ambitious collection of essays. Its main goal, to present the work of “older generation” researchers with responses by younger-generation researchers, includes a number of other important agendas. Chapter by chapter the book compares the “wisdom” of the ancestors with the “innovations” of their (intellectual) descendants. Si-