SHŌJO: THE POWER OF GIRLHOOD IN 20TH CENTURY JAPAN

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Sexualized portrayals of ‘cute’ young women in Japanese cartoons and other animated media are prevalent and popular throughout both Japan and the world. Whether the women (shōjo) depicted in these cartoons serve as an embodiment of feminism or just the opposite has been debated heavily in academic communities. As the historical relationship of shōjo culture to feminism had yet to be explored in depth, this topic required research from multiple points of entry, including history, feminism, art movements, and popular culture. Considered in tandem, these perspectives illuminated the origin, evolution, and history of the shōjo as shōjo culture relates to feminism. This thesis proposes that the style and behavior of these young women originated out of a need to escape traditional gender roles, and that the efforts of the earlier women’s liberation movement made that escape possible. However, shōjo imagery and their iconic style were appropriated and popularized by mass media, significantly contributing the economic success of Japan in the 21st century, but also leading to a popularized image that no longer reflected the original intent of shōjo culture. Given the negative stigma contemporary Japanese generally give to real women acting or dressing in the shōjo culture style, it is important to understand the origin of this unique cultural phenomenon, especially with regards to the prevalence of shōjo tropes in globally enjoyed pop-culture media.
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INTRODUCTION

_Shōjo_ and _shōjo_ culture have been defined in more ways than are countable. From the literal definition (‘young woman’), to a theory that _shōjo_ is, in fact, a third gender independent of sexualization, to the assertion that _shōjo_ exists only to serve a man’s misguided and alternative sexual expression, she is hotly under debate, and for more than one reason. _Shōjo_ is simultaneously everything the Japanese expect from young women, and everything they pray their daughters never turn into. She is demure, feminine, looks toward authority, and gravitates towards ‘softer’ hobbies and interests. But she can also be dominant, brash, emotional, inadvertently or explicitly sexual, sometimes overbearing in her intellect and sometimes overbearing in her own helplessness. She can be breathtakingly self-absorbed and heavily dedicated to consumerism, and resultantly, strives to be _kawaii_ (cute). In artistic depiction, she connotes a child, with large eyes and a small mouth, a doll-like figure, and a head ill-proportioned to her ‘adult’ body. In reality, the women who aspire to the _shōjo_ stereotype may attempt to imitate some, or all, of these features. Regardless, _shōjo_, like most deeply ingrained and enduring cultural icons, is multi-faceted. And because she and her culture have been created for the consumption of native and foreign audiences alike, it seems important to understand where she came from, and precisely why she continues to survive. This information is mysteriously absent in academia.

Yet, most everyone has seen or is familiar with the repercussions of _shōjo_ culture: Japan’s reputation as the ‘country of cute’ is fairly widespread, and the international fascination with the women embodying this cuteness has yet to dissipate today. The general populace has at least heard of media starring _shōjo_: _Sailor Moon_ and _Princess Mononoke_ are two examples with
shōjo protagonists, but shōjo are present in numerous popular others, including Naruto, Pokémon, and Fruits Basket.

True to the country it hails from, shōjo is contradictory enough to make even the most experienced cultural specialist’s head spin. It is entirely possible to interpret the shōjo phenomenon as empowering to women, particularly when a large number of shōjo are main protagonists in anime and manga, and who use violence, fighting, and other traditionally masculine means of solving problems. After all, the only sort of women taking that approach in western media are typically butch and interpreted as masculine. Female characters that embrace an intensive sense of classical femininity while vanquishing villains by force may be rare in westernized media, but exist in abundance in Japan. On the other hand, shōjo are often highly sexualized, donning ‘armor’ that offers little protection but a great deal of exposure. Many interpret this as evidence that Japan has yet to kick the nasty habit of dehumanizing and objectifying women in mass media, and their concerns are valid.
Figure 2: Store employees in front of Milk, one of the stores in Harajuku, Tokyo known for setting the trend in ‘cute’ style during the 1980s. The woman in front is iconically shōjo. Source: Tiffany Godoy. “Style Deficit Disorder: Harajuku Street Fashion – Tokyo,” San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2007. 36.
The issue becomes more complex when keeping in mind that shōjo happily adopt such imagery and wear it proudly. There are numerous forums online where Japanese women express that their dress and behavior affirms their independence from the male sexual gaze and agenda. Whether their opinions are indicative of a similar patriarchal influence serving a similar function as overt sexuality in the U.S., where women are expressing themselves sexually without considering whether or not their behavior is fulfilling patriarchal hierarchies, is unclear. It is possible that ‘cuteness’ is the same monster with different claws. For these reasons, shōjo denies simple attempts at comprehension.

Even with this in mind, an examination of history indicates there is some connection between feminism and shōjo culture. Defining and fleshing out the rainbow of connections and contradictions between the two, however, would take an entire volume. The purpose of this thesis, then, is less to inform the reader of the nuanced tributaries that form shōjo’s ancestry, and more to explain the origin with regards to feminism and how that relationship has evolved in the past two and half decades.

This thesis will argue, first, that the 1960s women’s liberation (ūman ribu) movement allowed for the liberation and legitimization of shōjo culture as a uniquely Japanese means of expression, and second, that shōjo culture was then integral in fueling Japan’s economy through the late 20th century, establishing Japan as a major soft power for years to come.

To fully explore this topic, this thesis will first detail how ūman ribu enabled shōjo culture to exist as a legitimate form of expression, detail the evolution and characteristics that have defined shōjo throughout history, and finally analyze how shōjo imagery rose to economic power. This thesis will end on a discussion of cultural repercussions and controversy.
The riots of the 1960s symbolized a deep rift that had been growing between pre-war and post-war generations. This younger generation, products of an entirely new and foreign curriculum, attended higher levels of school at higher rates. By 1955, 35% of high school graduates went on to university, a rate most European countries could not rival. Thus, the riots of the 1960s are generally defined as a ‘student movement,’ which protested Japan’s form of government, involvement in war, and cultural tradition of social hierarchy.

Overall, though, the riots were driven by a generation entering adulthood amidst a new ideological climate. This generation shared a post-war educational experience emphasizing American-brand independence, and confronted an “adult culture which thinks in terms of hierarchy, authority, and place, and which emphasized familial and national duties.” It was also aware of itself as the first subculture to oppose cultural norms regarding love, sexuality, relationships, and happiness in general. Among other things, this contrast in values contributed to Japan’s radical 1960s.

The most significant movement of the 1960s for this thesis is the women’s liberation movement, better known in Japan as ūman ribu. At the time, as scholar Rebecca Copeland says, “‘Woman’ was positioned as a metaphor for all that was backward and shameful in Japan.” Femininity was symbolic of the weakness Japan had to endure under the hands of more militarily

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2 Keiji Harano. "Legacy of 1960 Protest Movement Lives on," The Japan Times, June 11, 2010. Accessed October 25, 2015.; This is particularly relevant today, as Japan recently witnessed one of its largest protests to date, in which over 120,000 people rallied in Toyko’s government district to protest security legislature being rammed through the Diet. This protest was lead in part by SEALD (Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy), the first large-scale student-run protest organization since the 1960s.
4 Ibid., 166.
and economically powerful countries.\(^5\) Femininity expressed in untraditional ways was thus undesirable and unacceptable, and women who strived for something beyond marriage, or who exhibited cultural disobedience, were publicly smeared in the media as warnings to parents to guard their daughters against any form of degeneracy.\(^6\) As a result, \(\ddot{u}\text{man ribu}\) focused highly on critiquing this negative stigma, primarily through intense criticism of the modern family system as an embodiment of Japanese national imperialism. This connection between the imperial hierarchy and the family hierarchy is not a new one—the value of filial piety has guided Japan via Confucianism for almost as long as Japan has been a nation.\(^7\) The emperor is the father of the nation and rules accordingly, just as the father is the emperor of his own home. Resultantly, women were supposed to offer up their children to the male head-of-house as an heir, but also to the emperor for use in his army. And thus, the critique of the family system also extended into a critique of the national imperial ideological hierarchy where women were at the bottom. An example of this hierarchy in action is the 1871 family registration law, which legally and materially ensured patriarchal privilege by requiring a father’s recognition of a child for the child to be considered legitimate.\(^8\) As a result, many \(\ddot{u}\text{man ribu}\) activists refused to participate in this registration system as a small effort to deconstruct this hierarchy.\(^9\)

\(\ddot{u}\text{man ribu}\) denounced the male-centered family system and the state-promoted structural violence against women, particularly the idea that there were ‘good women (wives and mothers that did not oppose the system)’ and ‘bad women (any woman rebelling against the family

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\(^7\) The Analects of Confucius, Books 1, 2, and 4.

\(^8\) Czarnecki, 52.

system intentionally or unintentionally, including prostitutes and ‘comfort women’).’ These ‘bad women’ tired of the perceived split between good wives and mothers and themselves, a split contributing to the production and subsequent violation of ‘comfort women.’ This idea was expressed most dramatically in ribu leader Tanaka Mitsu’s iconic manifesto, “Liberation from the Toilet,” where ‘toilet’ was meant to convey the spaces where women are merely receptacles for male excess sexual desire.10

Their concern over the treatment of ‘bad women’ was not unfounded: Three days after the fighting ended in the Pacific War, the Japanese government began planning for ‘comfort stations’ for use by American soldiers.11 It actively initiated recruitment for women to serve as prostitutes for American GIs on Okinawa, in order to “defend and nurture the purity of [the Japanese] race.”12 Despite the honorable way this calling was framed, these women were heavily looked down upon. To the participants of u̇man ribu, those who criticized these women were colluding with culturally inherited notions of appropriate femininity and domesticity. As a result, these critics were considered to be proponents of the imperial violence the movement opposed.13

The liberation of sex was considered a priority to the movement, as, in the mid-20th century, onna (woman) remained a negative and sexually charged word.14 The liberation of women, then, inextricably required a liberation of sex from the idea that it was negative, and needed to be controlled. This did not imply that the ribu movement felt women should have the freedom to have as many sexual partners as they desired (sexual liberation, the spreading of free sex, was actually deplored in many of their manifestos), but was rather a critique that female

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11 Gordon, 225.
12 Ibid.
13 Shigematsu, 19:00.
14 Shigematsu, xvi.
sexuality could only be expressed within the approved marriage family system without consequences. Similarly, ūman ribu critiqued the ways in which society legitimized pregnancies. If a woman was pregnant outside of marriage, she was having sex outside of marriage, which was unacceptable. Similarly, a child was only legitimate if it was recognized by the father. Women wanted the ability to bear children outside of a marriage without either of those social stigmas.

Thus, denouncement of the family system served as the body for many of ūman ribu’s critiques. Ribu proponents tried to provide escape from the family hierarchy in many ways, including the ribu center in Shinjuku Tokyo, the various women’s retreats hosted throughout the country, and the ribu social groups established in small communities. Within these groups, they actively promoted women’s rejection of the patriarchal family system, dialogued about involvement, policy and philosophy, encouraged women’s independence, and tried to practice an exclusively women-centered culture. It is important to note that the ribu movement was not trying to renounce men (they were by no means ‘man-haters’); they were protesting the fact that the economic and political structure at the time made survival without the support of a man nearly impossible. In each of these escapes, they tried to emphasize that these were legitimate alternatives to participating in the family system, that each of these options could provide satisfaction, happiness, and relative safety. The struggle was getting larger society to embrace these lifestyles as acceptable and legitimate for women.

15 Ibid, 12:15.  
16 Shigematsu, 68.  
17 Shigematsu, 21:50.  
18 Ibid, 20:02.  
19 Ibid, 10:13.
Ūman ribu activists understood that while they could embody their values and ideals within these spaces, they could not exclude themselves from the hierarchical power dynamic of society forever, nor would they want to. They were trying to change society by rejecting the gendered expectations of their time and offering up other possibilities, not removing themselves from it. Ultimately, it somewhat succeeded in removing the inherent negative connotation of the word ‘woman,’ and promoting the legitimacy of women’s self-expression and self-determination. It was this new freedom—this ability to consider more than one type of women’s expression as valid and authentic—that allowed shōjo to come to light. Prior to the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s, there were no such attempts to address the lack of variety in women’s expression.

EVOLUTION & DEVELOPMENT OF SHŌJO CULTURE

Though ūman ribu foregrounded shōjo, the terms shōjo and shōjo culture can be traced back to the beginning of the 1900s and is attributed to two phenomena: the Meiji government’s push to spread literacy among girls via the creation of female-targeted publications, and, perhaps more importantly, the tendency for middle-and upper-class families to send their daughters to boarding schools. Prior to the early 19th century, girls were generally put to domestic work around the age of twelve or thirteen. With rapid economic growth and a growing cultural awareness came the need for ‘adolescence,’ a period prior to adulthood when individuals are trained for their roles in an industry-driven culture. In Japan, adolescence developed in the

20 Shigematsu, 121.
21 Shigematsu, 20:50.
23 Wakeling, 131.
24 Treat, 280.
25 Ibid.
form of young men and women being placed in boarding schools, establishing the staunch nationalism of the pre-war generations. Young girls were shipped off to boarding schools not only to receive a knowledge-based education, but a moral-based one, and to ultimately create a government-regulated standard for female behavior. As such, young women sent to these schools were expected to embody the peak of feminine goodness; after all, they were there to learn to be the pinnacle of wives and mothers. The creation of the ‘perfect’ wife was especially important at this time, particularly in regards to chastity, as, according to common belief, the semen from previous sexual partners remained inside a woman long after intercourse and could therefore compete for paternity of any future children. In combination with the 1871 family registration law, which emphasized that only a son could inherit family property, this belief about paternity resulted in a greater demand for virginal wives. These virginal-wives-in-training were the original shōjo.

Shōjo may have started out as, as Otsuka, Ishihara, and Miyadai theorize, “a category in modernizing society, which has young women cocooned away from general society in training for their future role as good wives and wise mothers,” but it quickly became something more. The pressure of becoming a perfect wife understandably created anxiety and uncertainty about the responsibilities of adulthood. These anxieties were not publically acceptable, as āman ribu had yet to happen, and so they were channeled into a subculture in which these anxieties were literally and symbolically expressed. This would eventually mature into modern shōjo culture.

The work of novelist Yoshiya Nobuko strongly influenced and helped shape the culture of these girls at this time. An openly lesbian fiction writer born at the very end of the 19th

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26 Frederick, 68.
27 Czarnecki, 52.
28 Madge, 159.
century, she was known for her emphatic and repetitive celebration of the ultra-feminine.\textsuperscript{29} She came to fame primarily in the 1920s for her magazine serials and novels, where she stylistically distinguished herself with florid, intense descriptions, and is widely considered one of the founders of \textit{shōjo} culture.\textsuperscript{30} By celebrating the lives of girls and women, her resistance against women’s status quo was not a defamation of the family system (as \textit{ūman ribu} attempted to do later), but an emphasis of the value and virtue of Japanese femininity and emotionality, independent of the family system.\textsuperscript{31} In this way, her writing elevated and celebrated the lives and experiences of women without violating the gendered expectations of her time. Her work was so influential to \textit{shōjo} culture that her writing style and subject matter remain hallmarks of \textit{shōjo}, even to today.

Even though the government created these boarding schools for the purpose of shaping women into the pinnacle of morality, an unintended side effect was creating an amorphous space independent of the supervision of a father or husband. This was tenuous for women in a country where women were traditionally expected to be under the direct supervision of one or the other; at boarding schools, the women were under the supervision of neither, and so, without any action on the part of the women attending the schools, this new development of modern life threatened gendered expectations held for centuries.\textsuperscript{32} This is the realm of the \textit{shōjo}.

Lacked the supervision of male authority figures, women in this space were seen as dangerous, corruptible, and potentially morally bereft; in some instances, the taboo nature of their actions led them to be labelled as \textit{furyō shōjo} (不良少女), literally ‘bad girls,’ where \textit{furyō} (不良) can imply not only badness, but inferiority and delinquency. Because a \textit{shōjo} was

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{29} Frederick, 67.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Ibid, 64.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Ibid, 67.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
fundamentally unregulated, society imagined she would end up not as an inherently moral wife and mother, but one of the ‘toilet women’ Tanaka Mitsu wrote of in her manifesto.\textsuperscript{33} A \textit{shōjo} would harbor this negative stigma until she married,\textsuperscript{34} at which point the family would breathe a sigh of relief. Women who pursued advanced education, training, or jobs would endure this stigma for a longer period of time.

Girls developing their own cultural atmosphere (with an air of exclusivity and serving only the interests of the girls taking part) were not viewed positively. \textit{Shōjo} were focused on themselves and their own personal desires and thus their intentions were manifested as forms of escapism. Of Yoshiya Nobuko’s famous work, \textit{Two Virgins in the Attic}, scholar Sarah Frederick states that the protagonists seek, “an escape from the social position of wife without the denial of sexual desire,” an insightful observation not only of the characters in the book, but \textit{shōjo} culture as a whole.\textsuperscript{35} Essentially, \textit{shōjo} wanted both the agency to desire, but without being desired themselves. However, wifehood was still considered the only legitimate eventuality for these girls, and if they did not want to be a wife there existed only one other acceptable means of expression: that of a child. This infantilized visage both sidesteps the responsibilities of adulthood, and bids to escape from being sexualized. Thus we have \textit{shōjo}, the uncomfortable contrast of a young woman experiencing sexual maturity for the first time while expressing herself with the behavior and facade of a child.

As a result, ‘\textit{shōjo}’ carries the implication of a certain level of prepubescence. Though a “\textit{shōjo} may be sexually mature physically,” says author Mizuki Takahashi, “she is socially

\textsuperscript{33} The similarity between the space boarding schools evolved into and the communes \textit{āman ribu} created are interesting to compare, particularly because one was government-sanctioned and one was created to rebel against the government. Whether or not these similarities extend beyond the realm of coincidence into the realm of intention is unclear. The author encountered nothing in the literature to imply the similarities were intentional.

\textsuperscript{34} Frederick, 68.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, 77.
considered sexually immature,” taking her place almost as a third gender. This sexual immaturity makes her “identifiable as neither male nor female,” and thus, is a distinction of not only gender, but age.\textsuperscript{36} There are several implications of this distinction, the most important being that a \textit{shōjo} can only be a \textit{shōjo} for a certain period of time; she cannot escape adulthood forever. Eventually, even \textit{shōjo} must overcome their anxieties about social obligations and become responsible adults.

To retain their sexuality without being objectively sexualized or forced into traditional gender roles, these women not only emulated the physical attributes of childhood—such as a thin, frail look, with large dark eyes, emphasized with flower-like motifs and colors reminiscent of Yoshiya Nobuku’s protagonists and narrative style— but behavioral attributes as well. This style of behavior is called \textit{burikko} (鰤子; the noun which can refer to the behavior or the actor) or \textit{burikkosuru} (鰤子する; the verb),\textsuperscript{37} and typically involves an over-emphasized high pitch of the voice, but also includes feigned naiveté, stupidity, or innocence, and the use of toddler-like language.\textsuperscript{38}

While considered typical of \textit{shōjo}, \textit{burikko} evolved in recent times to become a defense mechanism of mature women put in situations that might stigmatize them sexually. In a 2004 analysis of \textit{burikko}, academic Laura Miller concluded that a \textit{burikko} performance “downplays or masks the adult sexuality of the woman doing it,” and though it is highly negatively connotated, the traits \textit{burikko} often enact, like docility, innocence, childishness, and cuteness, are still trademarks of Japanese femininity. This confounding contrast is illustrated best in an allegory.

\textsuperscript{36} Takahashi, 115.
\textsuperscript{38} Most of the time this involved simplifying the phonetics of adjectives (e.g. turning \textit{ureshii}— ’happy’—to \textit{ureppii}, a common pronunciation for young children) but occasionally constructions were a bit more troubling, such as the use of \textit{nyan nyan suru} (literally, ‘to meow meow’) as a euphemism for sex.
from Miller, recounting a situation in which her friend Naoko, an incredibly intelligent engineering student in her mid-twenties, responded to an American exchange student talking about his chest hair. When he actually showed Naoko his chest hair, she yelled,

“Iya da!” ‘How hateful!’ in a shrill voice and ran to hide behind a door…[This situation serves] to illustrate the degree to which burikko behavior may be elicited by situations that demand a public display of modesty (or legitimate revulsion) and is therefore not a persona a woman adopts or continually performs. Indeed, had Naoko openly stared at the naked male chest, she would have been the recipient of other denigrating labels. Some days later I asked Naoko her opinion of burikko. “They’re disgusting,” she told me. 39

If a woman occupies that transitional, transformative state between child and adult, she is less accountable for her behavior and can ‘get away’ with performing burikko. However, if there is reason to suspect this performance is ingenuine, such as in the case of a porn star claiming disgust at sexual innuendo or, in the above example, a college-aged woman who acts as though she has never seen a bare male chest, she is consider a ‘faker,’ and the burikko is no longer acceptable.40 41 The notion that all women are either ‘prudes’ or ‘whores,’ where any sort of redirection or withholding of sexuality is considered distasteful, is a fairly recognizable phenomenon to western women.

This type of performance, then, is a transformative bid of Japanese women to control the way they are sexualized at the price of being labelled inappropriately ‘immature.’ A western comparison is tomboyism. As Judith Halberstam explains, tomboyism is tolerated in the west so

40 A more accepted option for grown women to explore the “shōjo fantasy space” were things like Takarazuka, an all-female theatre founded by the Takarazuka Revue Company. Like shōjo youth culture, Takarazuka allows Japanese women “to revert to a prepubescent stage of tomboyism, thus escaping the immanence of their bodies and their sexuality” (emphasis added; Matsuo 149). Like feminism, fans and participants in Takarazuka escape the “responsibilities that their bodies and gender roles restrict them to within Japanese society” (Matsuo 148). In this way, Takarazuka is an adult form of entertainment performing the same function as shōjo culture.
41 Miller, 161.
long as it is expressed by a child. However, “as soon as puberty begins… the full force of gender conformity descends on the girl” until they are “remodeled into compliant forms of femininity.”

Shōjo culture is a form of resistance against these ‘complaint forms of femininity.’ It is, as John Whittier Treat writes, a redirection of sexual energy toward “stuffed animals, pink notebooks, strawberry crepes and Hello Kitty novelties,” not unlike the way feminism empowers women to redirect their sexual energy at a target of their choosing, or not at all. More importantly, shōjo fulfills a goal of the ūman ribu movement: escaping traditionally imposed gender roles while embracing women’s-only spaces.

Shōjo culture, style, and performance peaked in the mid-eighties. In fact, it became so popular that anthropologist Eiji Otsuka equated shōjo with jōmin (literally, “common people”), who were the creators and preservers of folk knowledge representing the most common sort of person in Japanese society. However, due to laws passed by the government and a general rise in the cost of living, the late 80s and 90s brought more opportunities for women to enter the workplace. Even though their positions at work generally held less opportunity than the same position might for a man, and remained negatively stigmatized, they still represented a viable alternative to marriage. Thus, the frequency and acceptability of shōjo culture decreased. Shōjo culture in the media, however, continued to expand and explode, and maintains a solid presence today.

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SHŌJO, CONSUMERISM, AND POPULARIZATION

With the rise of the ūman ribu movement in the 1970s, expressions of shōjo culture as escapism became tolerated, if not legitimized; after it was highly commercialized, it was even celebrated. Shōjo infamously broke into the public consciousness in 1972, when young women began receiving attention for their very stylized handwriting. This handwritten style was known for its rounded characters, a westernized lateral composition rather a vertical one (as was traditional), accents with hearts, character cartoons, and English words like ‘love’ or ‘friend.’ This ‘cute’ writing was universally loathed by educators and older generations alike. It was difficult to read, dismissive of tradition, and immediately adopted by popular media. The rise of western pop culture during this time in Japan not only influenced stylistic aspects of this writing, but ensured its rise to popularity.

Most importantly, Sanrio, Japan’s version of Hallmark, began experimentally using this style of script on stationary. Naturally, shōjo snapped it up. Sanrio’s success with this ‘cute’ stationary led it to market the style with other goods, and then to begin popularizing cartoon characters on their products. Today, Sanrio is best known as the creator and owner of the iconic ‘Hello Kitty’ franchise worth over 7 billion dollars per year. These ‘fancy goods,’ as they became known, all shared certain attributes such as roundness, innocence, pastel coloring, and smiling cartoon characters.

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47 Kinsella, 225-226.
This style became known as *kawaii* (cute), one the most universally known Japanese-origin words. It is important to distinguish between *kawaii* and *shōjo*, which are often hopelessly intertwined. Simply, the word to describe the style of *shōjo* is ‘*kawaii,*’ just as you might use the word ‘grunge’ or ‘conservative’ to describe a type of clothing. Simultaneously, while *shōjo* buy and dress in *kawaii* objects, they are *kawaii* objects. *Shōjo* work hard to be *kawaii* by buying *kawaii* items. Being *kawaii* is an integral part of being a *shōjo*, but it is also possible to be *kawaii* and own *kawaii* items without being a *shōjo* (just as one can wear punk clothes without being socially classified as a punk). In this way, the sort of *kawaii* objects purchased also becomes a vehicle for projecting one's identity to the public, which fosters the divergence of *kawaii* from *shōjo*.
The shōjo’s obsession with remaining kawaii by purchasing large troves of kawaii items led them to become inextricably associated with consumerism, where critics sometimes went so far as to define them as signifying “sheer consumption,” and “a uniquely unproductive culture.”\textsuperscript{49} They were the inspiration and primary consumers of this new kawaii culture, where buying into these ‘fancy goods’—both literally and figuratively—only allowed these women an even greater degree of escapism through American-style consumerism. But it wasn’t just shōjo anymore: the popularity of cute things began to rise amongst all demographics of society.

As most cultural milieu generated by young women, shōjo was, and still is, highly criticized. The kawaii shōjo intent on frivolities is interpreted as a cutesy way of saying, ‘I’ll do what I want,’ to larger societal responsibilities.\textsuperscript{50} In a culture where the embodiment of morality can only be achieved by addressing larger societal needs and duties, attending only to the needs of the self is a grave statement about the perceived usefulness of traditionally-held Japanese values. Shōjo and other consumers of cute culture are essentially damned, referred to as “essentially narcissistic in that it is self-referential, and self-referential as long as the shōjo is not employed productively in the sexual and capitalist economies.” \textsuperscript{51} Cute culture and the people enacting it are deemed juvenile, feminine, and tasteless, where each of those words are considered veritably synonymous to the other. Women are criticized for ‘feminizing’ the culture of Japan, which is ironic given the intentional distance between traditional Japanese femininity and shōjo culture.\textsuperscript{52} Shōjo are deemed selfish not only because of the consumptionist nature of kawaii consumerism, but also because they offer no hint of cooperation to social decorum. As a

\textsuperscript{49} Treat, 281.
\textsuperscript{50} Kinsella, 247.
\textsuperscript{51} Treat, 283.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid, 249.
result, sheerly because of this harsh criticism, *shōjo* tend to emphasize their *kawaii*, indulgent ways even further.  

*Shōjo* typically emphasize their *kawaiii* by festooning themselves with kawaii clothing, makeup or useless accessories, which is a statement of independence from society. Take the fashion magazine *Cutie*, for example, which sported the tagline ‘*For Independent Girls.*’ This is not to equate independence with individualism, and should not be interpreted as Japanese youth suddenly shrugging off years of cultural conditioning which favored a group-oriented mindset. Rather, it is a refocusing of which groups they feel are important in the first place, where broader, traditional society is no longer one of them. Indulgence in *kawaii*, like *shōjo*, represents a desire to be genderless out of “an ambivalence about having to grow up and, as a woman, assume a very distinct and confining role. This sexual ambivalence is related to the portrayal of themselves as children insofar as both reflect a desire not to assume one’s gendered role,” which largely involves taking on larger amounts of social responsibility. Because anxiety over assuming gendered roles was and is not unique to young women, the popularity of *kawaii* goods was not unique to young women, nor did it escape sexualized consumption at the hands of male viewers.

Indeed, Japan’s economic growth led not only to the production of physical goods, but a media industry that picked up *kawaii* and *shōjo* tropes to market them to large audiences. Remember, while *shōjo* buy and dress in *kawaii* objects, they are also *kawaii* objects. This creates a subtle distinction between the *shōjo* who consume *kawaii* objects—whose image and

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53 Ibid; In reality, though, society’s problem was really about women defecting from traditional femininity, not *shōjo* specifically. *Shōjo* and *kawaii* were just the biggest targets. When single women began entering the workplace in the 1980s, they were deemed selfish for taking away marriage and employment opportunities away from their male peers.

54 Madge, 163.

55 Ibid, 164.
purpose is governed by the young women themselves—and the shōjo who are consumed as kawai objects—whose image and purpose is governed by the dominant media audience, in this case, men. For the purpose of this thesis, the first will continue to be referred to as ‘shōjo,’ while the second will be referred to as ‘pop-shōjo.’ This distinction is important. Sharon Kinsella, arguably the most dominant English voice in the field of shōjo and kawaii culture, even argues that the expansion of media in the late 20th century is completely inseparable from the proliferation of kawaii and pop-shōjo imagery. This does not necessarily mean more and more women are identifying as shōjo—in fact, women identifying as shōjo are in the decline. This suggests the media depiction of shōjo, pop-shōjo, is actually driving this expansion.

The general discomfort over the implications of what pop-shōjo and pop-shōjo culture stands for is accompanied in equal measure by fascination and fetishization from Japanese and foreign audiences alike. As mentioned above, popularity of kawaii imagery is not exclusive to

women, and one of the more popular locations men engaged with kawaii imagery and the pop-shōjo is in the sex industry. Consequently, many of the pop-shōjo appearing in media are overtly sexualized. This is not to claim that the pop-shōjo was portrayed as a sexual actor. Part of her attraction lies in her sexual naivety in the first place. She was being sexualized on top of and because of her naiveté, cuteness, and juvenile nature. The contrast between young women adopting shōjo culture as a way to escape sexualization and the imagery of that resulting culture being highly sexualized is precisely what makes this topic confusing. Shōjo culture grew out of a feminist need to escape confining gender roles, and was thus empowering for women. The imagery these women employed was appropriated and warped into pop-shōjo, who is dehumanized and manipulated to fulfill sexual fantasy and enforce behavior.

While the pop-shōjo character still lives on in the media, and the industry for kawaii products has only grown, real women expressing shōjo culture have become less common in recent years, now more of a token oddity of the fashion district Harajuku and the nerdy haven of Akihabara. This could be a reflection of the growing breadth of opportunities for women in Japan, but could also be interpreted as a fad simply falling out of fashion. There are new ways to escape with the proliferation of the internet, or perhaps it is because of a lessened need to escape in the first place.

The enduring presence of kawaii as opposed to its partial progenitor shōjo calls into question their relative timeline. Whether shōjo emerged before kawaii or vice-versa is difficult to determine. The term shōjo originated far earlier than the term kawaii, with the modern definition arising in the early 1970s and meaning, roughly, ‘cute.’ Prior it held a closer meaning to ‘pitiable,’ ‘shy,’ or ‘embarrassed.’ There are certainly kawaii elements to shōjo literature (such

57 Madge, 164.
58 Kinsella, “Cuties…”, 221-222.
as the aforementioned work of Yoshiya Nobuko), but it is also undeniable that aspects of kawaii culture predate the shōjo entirely. As author Avella points out in Graphic Japan, samurai traditionally carried amulets for protection and expression of identity, and as recently as the Pacific War, women made dolls that soldiers wore around their neck or hips as charms.\textsuperscript{59}

Despite its many historical precedents, kawaii as a form of escapism accessible to women seems to only appear after the advent of shōjo. Prior to kawaii as escapism, Tokugawa-era men escaped responsibility by retreating to ‘the floating world,’ a hyper-sexualized fantasy world considered both an afterlife, and a place physically accessible via brothels surrounded by moats and high walls.\textsuperscript{60} Women, however, were banned from this world as actors; as they were only there as objects of eroticization and entertainment, this was not equal-opportunity escapism.\textsuperscript{61}

Analogous female retreats appeared only after the advent of boarding schools, and shōjo culture.

REPERCUSSIONS AND CONTROVERSY

The explosive growth of pop-shōjo in the media and the near national adoption of kawaii culture has resulted in multiple longstanding consequences. Firstly, because pop-shōjo moved from a characterization driven by women themselves, to a characterization taken by the mass media and warped to suit a masculine audience, much of the feminist significance was lost. Pop-shōjo in the media do not adopt infantilization and kawaii as means of escape; instead, their childish femininity is an inherent part of their character that is often derided, ogled, or sexualized.

\textsuperscript{59} Avella, 213.
\textsuperscript{60} William Brecher, “Medieval life and Buddhist Influence” (Lecture, Japanese Civilization, Pullman, WA, September 5, 2015).
\textsuperscript{61} William Puck Brecher, e-mail message to author, October 18\textsuperscript{th}, 2015.
Today, pop-shōjo is seen most often in the subset called bishōjo (beautiful fighting girl), a powerful female heroine prevalent in the Japanese media to the extreme. Originally, bishōjo were meant to be icons that young teenage girls could identify with, but the intended audience was quickly outnumbered by male consumers, typically called otaku.62 Otaku, obsessive consumers of manga and anime culture often put to blame for the sexualization of pop-shōjo, have been analyzed to such a voluminous and diverse degree that a full explanation will not be attempted here. While many otaku find enjoyment in the stories of bishōjo without the need of any sexual embellishment, there are many anime in which bishōjo are intentionally sexualized for the enjoyment of their otaku audience. In particular subsets of manga and anime, the bishōjo often finds herself humiliated and attacked, "reducing them from erotic heroines to absurd, infantilized effigies or humiliated, weeping girls, displayed 'tied up, pinned down, and with naked buttocks exposed.'" 63

The allure of both bishōjo and her subsequent degradation has informed intense speculation by Japanese and foreign scholars alike, but most agree that pathologizing an entire nation with some sort of perversity is inherently fallacious. The real reason for the bishōjo’s popularity has been discussed at length in articles and books without definitive conclusions. Psychiatrist Saito Tamaki argues, that besides the obvious appeal of sex and violence in a single package, bishōjo exist in a fictional reality that makes no attempt to imitate the rules or boundaries of our own world. As a girl, she has yet to hold the authority of a woman or motherly figure while, through her fighting, retaining the power a motherly figure might symbolize.64 She is desirable because of her separation from reality and her possession of power sans authority.

63 Kinsella, “Minstrelized…”, 77.
64 Tamaki Saitō, “Beautiful…”; It should be noted that this is a vast summarization and simplification of an argument that spanned a roughly 200-page book.
Sharon Kinsella, on the other hand, argues that the sheer volume “of material about girls [tending] towards fantasies of disablement through terror, bondage and dismemberment,” is actually designed so male viewers can empathize with the bishōjo during her rape, particularly because a large portion of the aggressors in these scenes are not human, but phallic objects, machines, or fantastical creatures. One example can be seen in Figure 5, but others have been including in Appendix A. Kinsella’s point is further emphasized by the Japanese artistic fascination with men impersonating women not as a form of deception or satire, but as a way of genuinely experiencing womanhood (one could also speak to the fetishization and popularity of gender bending, gender fluidity, and gender ambiguity in anime and manga here, though this is a discussion deserving of a paper in its own right).

The problem, I would argue, is less the production of the media itself, but its interpretation by foreign audiences. The proliferation of these images has led foreign audiences to believe this material to be an accurate representation of real girls, and, frankly, has contributed to the stereotype of Asian women as demure, sexually naive, and submissive. Essentially, Asian women are being seen through the masculine lens of pop-shōjo, which is taken out of its escapist and empowering context. While this is still a problem to some degree in Japan, the violence against women in media manifests itself in reality far less frequently than in America; data taken in 2010 indicates that Japan ranks 105th (in terms of numbers of rapes per 100,000 citizens), while America ranks 14th.

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65 Kinsella, “Minstrelized…”, 79.
66 Ibid, 77.
Figure 5: Battle champion Shei is ravaged by her clan’s mortal enemies, the Gigas. Not two pages prior she was preparing her village for battle. Source: Okayado, “12 Beast, Volume 0,” (Tokyo: Fujimi Shobo, 2013), 19.
The reality is that most women neither actively create nor consume pop-culture *shōjo* imagery. Most of this media is generated by male writers, directors and artists.\(^{68}\) This has resulted in women creating *manga*, *anime*, and other media with depictions of women they find more suitable, ultimately furthering the gendered divide in media, which has been long present in Japan.\(^{69}\)

While pop-*shōjo* were being objectified in anime and other media, their *kawaii* style came to dominate the imagery in Japan. Used in advertisements, on products of all varieties including food and even condoms, *kawaii* dominates. Police stations, political parties, and even prefectures all have cute mascots. Washington’s sister-prefecture in Japan, Hyogo, proudly sports Habatan (はばタン) as their mascot, and one can find him on everything from PowerPoints to construction signs.

![Figure 6 & 7: Habatan at work in Japan. Above: Habatan flying high on his government profile. Source: “「はばタン」のプロフィール [Habatan's Profile].” 兵庫県 [Hyogo Prefecture]. Left: Habatan watering flowers on a construction sign. Source: “Da country: Shiso City,” posting to blog The Kansai Gal Salaryman, June 14, 2012.](image)

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\(^{68}\) Kinsella, “Minstrelized…”, 68.

\(^{69}\) Wakeling, 131, 141.
These characters, unlike those in America, they have no backstory, associated movie, show, or narrative origin. They are created and used by major governmental and corporate entities to create positive feelings and impressions. Miko Kato, founder of the design studio Momoco, adds that “wearing a cute mascot in public is a way to communicate with others like yourself. There is a consensus that a person who likes cute things is good. If you show a funny mascot, people assume that you are an easy-going and open-minded person. Your mascot makes people around you believe you are more approachable.”  

Again, it illustrates how kawaii objects are intended to make statements about how one is perceived. As a result, as of 2004, the character licensing industry was worth over 3 trillion yen (24.7 billion dollars), and it is reasonable to assume this figure has since grown.

Kawaii and pop-shōjo came under fire in the 1990s by artists arguing that they were essentially commercial exploitation of women and girls. Japanese art critic Midori Matsui argues that the artistic intervention of the 90s took four forms, though only three are important for this thesis: First, artists began portraying the commercialization of kawaii to expose the narcissism and inherent imperialism governing Japanese consumer culture. This acted as the first effective critique of Japanese postmodern culture. Secondly, Murakami Takashi developed his “Superflat” theory, which characterized Japan’s pop culture as originating out of the collective national trauma from the atomic bombs, for the first time acknowledging and celebrating this uniquely Japanese artistic expression. Finally, female artists began adopting the language of genre-fiction

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70 Avella, 214.
71 The Japanese tendency to use visual markers as an indication of identity is not new: Japanese were requiring displays of visual markers to indicate class as early as Prince Shotoku’s reign in the 7th century.
72 Avella, 215.
anime to portray and create their own female utopia, subverting traditionally *otaku*-dominated
genres.  

Murakami argues that Japan’s obsession with cuteness in the form of *kawaii* is actually a
symptom of ongoing trauma from the atomic bombs. He argues that the American occupation
placed Japan in a dependent, submissive position that encouraged senseless consumerism, and
thus, the Japanese reverted to a state of childishness. “And as pampered children,” Murakami
argues, “we throw constant tantrums while enthralled by our own cuteness. It’s the denouement
of a culture, nourished by trauma, snugly raised in the incubator of a society gone slack.”  
As popular and groundbreaking as Murakami’s theory and art were, some aspects of his work are
deserving of criticism. First, Murakami’s atomic trauma theory largely ignores the female
creators of *kawaii* and *shōjo* culture. Additionally, its theoretical foundation is a nation-wide
psychoanalysis of the Japanese people, which is both unscientific and highly problematic;

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73 Matsui, 213.
attributing a single psychological framework to an entire people implies there is only one reaction to the trauma, when in reality expressions of grief, frustration, and mourning come in many forms. Still, his work is the most public and popular theory explaining the ‘cute’ culture of Japan.

Additionally problematic is the relative lack of recognition for shōjo and ūman ribu activists in the origin of kawaii style. This is likely for two reasons: first, shōjo was not an organized movement intending to make an overt point.\textsuperscript{75} It was a guerilla, creative gender subversion whose power was derived from effectively ignoring its critics. As Honda explains in \textit{Girl Reading Girl in Japan}, “girls...never assert themselves against those who deride them. Neither do they declare a clear ‘No’ against the everyday order. Instead, they remain self-sufficiently in a corner, where they merely lithely continue to protect their own being.”\textsuperscript{76} So even if shōjo felt they truly had a stake in the ‘cute’ culture of Japan as opposed to just being a symptom of it, they likely would not have spoken up. Secondly, many of the ūman ribu activists who lived to see the advent of kawaii likely wanted nothing to do with it. There are many concerned women in Japan who believe this tendency for shōjo to remain ‘self-sufficiently in a corner’ is actually indicative of a system designed to continually sexually commodify while denying them a voice.\textsuperscript{77} Given that belief, it is not difficult to understand why many women try to separate themselves from the notion of kawaii as much as possible.

There are other more serious consequences of shōjo being isolationist, namely that it ignores the problems of women outside the shōjo community. It ignores the fact that many

\textsuperscript{75} Wakeling, 141.
women who do become wives and mothers were once *shōjo*, who desired to escape for many of the same reasons. This lack of structured effort and dismissal for cultural predecessors reinforces the notion that it was never an organized movement in the first place. *Shōjo* and the phenomena it produced, like *kawaii*, are more like cultural accidents. *Shōjo* was the side-effect of women finally being allowed to express themselves outside of wifedom, which would have never happened without *ūman ribu*.

CONCLUSION

Japan is considered one of the dominant soft powers of the world, meaning that while they possess very little military force, their cultural influence is a force to be reckoned with.\(^\text{78}\) Japan is responsible for some of the most popular franchises of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, including Pokemon, Mario, and the works of Hayao Miyazaki. Many of the franchises popular outside of Japan, and nearly all of them within, contain portrayals of pop-*shōjo* that are interpreted as undermining the agency of women. While this is true, this is not the original purpose or intention of *shōjo*, which developed as a means for women to escape the gender roles imposed on them and to vent their anxieties about adult responsibility. All of this was made possible by the *ūman ribu* movement, whose participants revolutionized the positivity around femininity and altered the need for strict adherence to traditional gender roles.

As the treatment of women becomes a subject weighing more and more on the public consciousness, it becomes necessary to understand the reasons for some of the more inflammatory and provocative depictions of women. Understanding both the origins and

\(^{78}\)“Soft Power…”
evolutions of these depictions allows observers and consumers of these images to form a sophisticated and intentional response that, each time, will inevitably empower or erode women.

With *shōjo* and *shōjo* culture in particular, it is important that consumers of pop culture separate the pop-*shōjo* imagery from the behavior of women and girls identifying as *shōjo* themselves. Because Japan remains a dominant global soft-power, and especially because the treatment of women in Japan continues to be scrutinized by foreigners, keeping this separation in mind will be crucial in understanding future evolutions in East-Asian feminism and depictions of women in Japanese media. It is too easy to decry *shōjo* as ‘wrong,’ and also too easy to claim *shōjo* as ‘feminist.’ As globalization continues to wed differing notions of empowerment and degradation, this is will only become more complex.
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APPENDIX A: Historical Timeline

1910  Girls begin going to private boarding schools away from home.

1920  Works of Yoshiya Nobuko and other artists further influence developing shōjo culture.

1930

1940  End of the Pacific War.

1950

1960  Beginning of Japanese student riots and ūman ribu movement.

1970  Emergence of ‘cute’ handwriting used by adolescent girls and young women.

1980  Height of shōjo culture and the rise of pop-shōjo dominance.

1990  Beginning of artistic critique against pop-shōjo.

2000
APPENDIX B: Additional examples of pop-shōjo in manga.

*Figure 8:* Okayado, “Monster Musume no Iru Nichijou Volume 19,” (Tokyo: Tokuma Shoten, 2012), 24. The following page is in the next figure.
Figure 9: Okayado, “Monster Musume no Iru Nichijou Volume 19,” (Tokyo: Tokuma Shoten, 2012), 25.
Figure 10: Nakagaki Tomoe, “Virgin Hotel Volume 6,” (Tokyo: Akita Shoten, 2007), 39. This is the beginning of a sex scene which lasts for a multitude of pages and ends with the characters in a bath topped with rose petals.
Figure 11: Kyousuke Motomi, “Dengeki Daisy Volume 50,” (Kyoto: Shogakukan, 2010), 11. In a less sexual depiction, our main character Teru is displaying naïveté and ignorance for comic relief. See the following page in the next figure.
Figure 12: Kyousuke Motomi, “Dengeki Daisy Volume 50,” (Kyoto: Shogakukan, 2010), 12. Tasuke, Teru’s boss, is less than impressed with her fighting skills. On the following pages, he tells her not to get her hopes up about becoming a very good fighter, emphasizing her ineptitude and unnecessary enthusiasm.