

## **Takarazuka Theatre: Cultural formation and its urban poetics in 1930s Tokyo**

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Takarazuka Revue Company is the all-female Japanese theatre reaching its centenary this year in 2014. It can be said that there are two reasons for the century-long success and popularity. The first is the fact that the small entertainment which began in a suburban spa town of Takarazuka was to obtain its own theatre in the most glamorous Hibiya-Ginza district of Tokyo in 1934 – the crucial time of the urban development and ‘modern’ trends in the central metropolis. The second is the fact that all the performers are the graduates of the Takarazuka Music School (abbreviated as T.M.S.) directly affiliated to the company: they convey a certain healthy aura of youth and girlhood nurtured in a rural environment, which, in the 1930s, became a vital appeal when performing for an urban audience.

In response to the IAJS conference theme, my discussion aims at contextualizing ‘urban modernity’ reflected on and by Takarazuka, while being aware that both ‘kindaisei (近代性:modernity)’ and ‘tokaisei (都会性:urbanity)’ are much-discussed concepts. In order to look at how Takarazuka contributed, or inevitably committed itself to the urban cultural formation, this paper will discuss Takarazuka from three perspectives: firstly, historical background of Takarazuka, secondly socio-cultural context of its debut in Tokyo, thirdly its theatrical genre ‘revue’ as a sign of urbanity. In the course of argument, theoretical interpretations including the urban dramaturgy by Yoshimi Shunya will be taken into account to evaluate the ‘urban poetics’. By ‘urban poetics’, I mean physical as well as imaginative experience of the city in a dynamically shifting epoch, approximately a decade after the devastating Great Kantō Earthquake in 1923.

Firstly and briefly for the sake of the following argument, it is necessary to understand Takarazuka’s unique history. The all-female theatre was founded in Takarazuka by Kobayashi Ichizo (小林一三 : 1873-1957). Kobayashi was a pioneering industrialist who started the Hankyu Railway, and made a significant commitment in the field of leisure industry including department stores, baseball teams, amusement parks and theatres.

‘Takarazuka shōjo kageki’ (寶塚少女歌劇: Takarazuka Girls Opera), as it was called when first performed in 1914, was initially meant to be an additional attraction for the spa guests in the suburban resort. Takarazuka town was in Kobayashi’s word ‘fabricated new city’ artificially made in favor of ‘modern life’<sup>1</sup>, providing recreations for family-based customers including women and children. Modern life here would stand for the high degree of hybridity emerging in people’s everyday life in the developing consumer-oriented mass consumption, which was particularly obvious in leisure industry and socializing spheres. That hybridity would evoke complex yet dynamic images of an unprecedented urban life backed up by science and technology. Modernity here thus signifies something new to the senses, challenging conventions and traditional values at a metaphysical level, and creating the feeling of the exotic in adopting things and ideas from foreign lands at a physically perceivable level. All of these modern aspects were uniquely concentrated in this old spa town at the furthest end of Hankyu line linking Osaka and Kobe to the rustic leisure land. During the 1920s, Takarazuka became acclaimed as one of the most ‘modern’ towns where visitors would stay in the European style Takarazuka Hotel, enjoy the night at a dance hall, eat western food and indulge in healthy spa facilities equipped with dressing rooms and cafes. There were also a popular zoo with exotic animals, electric rides, botanical gardens with a wrought iron conservatory, and then the Grand Theatre accommodating more than 3000 people.<sup>2</sup> It is important to remember that, two decades before obtaining its own theatre in Tokyo in 1934, the Takarazuka revue was nurtured in this peculiarly rural environment abounding with clean water and clean air along the Muko River and gently-sloping mountains, away from the hustle and bustle of neighboring big cities.

Born in such surroundings, Takarazuka Girls’ Opera paved its way not really as ‘opera’ as in the existing western high culture context, but more as ‘revue’ which was a new genre not only in the history of Japanese theatre, but also in the realm of popular theatre through an urban context across the world. They were *Mon Paris* (1927) and *Parisette* (1930) which had a resounding success and established the permanent image of ‘Takarazuka

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<sup>1</sup> Kobayashi I. (1980), p.5

<sup>2</sup> See Kitao R. (1929), pp.202-203

Revue'. The theme song of Parisette, *Oh Takarazuka!*, shows that the popularity of Takarazuka theatre made the provincial town famous all over Japan:

小さな湯の街宝塚に 生まれたその昔は	In the small spa town of Takarazuka,
知る人もなき少女歌劇	Once upon a time when it was born,
それが今では 青い袴とともに誰でもみんな知ってる	Then no-one knew the Girls' Opera-Revue
おゝ宝塚 T・A・K・A・R・A・Z・U・K・A	But today, Everyone knows it, and the blue-green hakama,
おゝ 宝塚 わがあこがれの美の郷 幼き日のあわき夢の国	Oh, Takarazuka T.A.K.A.R.A.Z.U.K.A
歌のおもいでもなつかしき	Oh, Takarazuka, my longed-for home of beauty The sweet dream
おゝ宝塚 T・A・K・A・R・A・Z・U・K・A	land of innocent childhood Nostalgic memories of songs
	Oh, Takarazuka T.A.K.A.R.A.Z.U.K.A

Indeed by this time, Takarazuka had laid a solid ground for its debut in Tokyo. Kobayashi bought the land from then Tokyo Electricity Ltd. where he was appointed as a vice president, founded the Toho company (abbreviation of Tokyo Takarazuka gekijō kabushikigaisha: 東京宝塚劇場株式会社) in 1932 with the aim of establishing the centre of entertainment built around the Takarazuka Theatre compatible with Broadway or the West End.<sup>3</sup> What on earth, we must ask, was the reason and the impact of all-female Takarazuka coming from the southern rural town to the most exclusive 'modern' district of Tokyo. A decade after the drastic earthquake in 1923, it was the time when urban development and its subsequent cultural maturity were at its prime in central Tokyo, through a building construction rush that provided new establishments such as cafes, bars and boutiques in western styles, and stimulated new social mingling. It is not difficult to imagine that this environment would expand people's leisure, and formulate variety in fashion from kimono to dress, from Japanese hairstyle to western bob to name a few. Hibiya and Ginza were considered to be the centre of the bursting modern life – occidental, fashionable, elegant and prestigious. Five-storied, equipped with microphones, advanced lighting system and air conditioning to house 3000-strong audiences, Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre was built next to the Imperial Hotel and Japan's first western style public garden, Hibiya Park, within a few-minutes-walk from the Palace as well as the business centre of Marunouchi. This location made a significant impact on

<sup>3</sup> Takarazuka shōjo kageki-dan (1933), preface

Japan's theatre/cinema industry which hitherto was legally limited to down-town Asakusa, the popular but relatively unsophisticated and dubious pleasure quarter, at least in the eyes of an emerging middle-class.



Photo 1: taken from Ginza direction viewing Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre on the right, the Imperial Hotel on the left and Hibiya Park and the Palace further ahead (©Fujioka Hiroshi).

Upon inaugurating the theatre on the New Year of 1934, Kobayashi Ichizo declares for Takarazuka in Tokyo to be ‘taishū -geijyutsu no jinei (大衆芸術の陣営: the Quarters of Popular Arts’ and ‘kazokuno-seidou (家族共楽の殿堂: The Palace of Family Entertainment’.<sup>4</sup> Also, it was only at this time that the famous Takarazuka motto, ‘kiyoku, tadashiku, utsukushiku (朗らかに、清く、正しく、美しく : to be Merry, Pure, Integrious, and Graceful), was introduced in their serious attempt to distinguish Takarazuka girls from those in other revue shows who were considered more like flappers if not girls of easy virtue. Notwithstanding other modernizing cities in the world at that time, Tokyo had a concentration of theatres from mainstream Kabuki and productions at the Imperial Theatre to smaller independent playhouses, to burlesque style popular performances in

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<sup>4</sup> Takarazuka shōjo kageki-dan (1933), preface

down town.<sup>5</sup> Despite the increase in the number and variety of theatre industry, it was still a hard time for women to perform on stage since professional *geisha* or dancers were there to entice male audiences. Thus, the Takarazuka motto was a necessary oath for the audience not to disturb public morals and social order, and to please family-oriented audience from children to grown-ups.

The Takarazuka Music School's rigid education system promoting decent womanhood and a refined culture has been the strong backbone for Takarazuka girls, which still continues to radiate a 'proper, sophisticated, well-behaved' image of Takarazuka theatre at large. The education is given in the rural town of Takarazuka, and this fact creates a healthy aura of innocent girls who are not yet tinged with any of the doubtful aspects of urban life. They appeared nonchalant and affable. This is the reason why they are still never called *joyū* (女優 : actresses) but respectfully *seito* (生徒:students) until they retire from the company.

At the time when Japanese women were still fighting to gain public rights, it is not difficult to imagine that the image of young and charming country girls still with the promise of potential development would have an animating effect on the metropolitan audiences and stimulate female fans. As if to elaborate their positive image as well-behaved, much admired female students, Takarazuka girls have been idealized and also called *otome* (乙女 : maidens). After their Tokyo debut, another name for Takarazuka students was created in a revue called *Takarasiennes* (1937), in resonance with French *Parisiennes*, adding a more stylish urban feel to their preexisting image. Takarazuka students in their traditional school uniform, with the flair of French cultural connotation embodied in the public recognition of *Takarasiennes* would project a peculiar yet distinctive aura of the modern. Both endearments *otome* and *Takarasiennes*, succeed in projecting the image of the rural and the urban simultaneously. When they came to Tokyo, they stood in student *kimono* amongst the Tokyo public as 'good mannered country girls' who were young, unbiased and respected the 'fragrant/western/foreign' sides of urban modernity available in the Hibiya-Ginza area (see Photo1). Thus, they stood at the threshold of both conventional and new type as *moga* (モガ : modern girls) of Japanese

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<sup>5</sup> See Osasa Y. (1998), for example.

women too. The presence of Takarasiennes was therefore ‘fragrant’, and they would perform in a manner both ‘western’ and ‘foreign’ coinciding with ‘modern’, presenting new trends not only onstage but also off stage.

There is a convincing photo-sequence of Takarazuka girls’ Promenade in Ginza published in Takarazuka Graph magazine in 1936 to show the dynamism of the metropolitan experience. In the piece, three popular Takarasiennes in the school uniform of olive green *hakama* (袴 : culotte kimono) get out of a taxi and start looking in the shop windows, mingling with passers-by. They call over a group of ladies in conventional kimono for a chat. Also, schoolgirls in *sailor-fuku* (セーラー服 : western style school uniform) are looking at them. The tangled urban atmosphere, where many novel products and images are displayed and interacting, the act of seeing and being seen is dynamically exchanged in the encounters. The article states: ‘Architecture in Ginza, the *hanamichi* (as in flower bridge at theatres) of Tokyo, is being rebuilt day by day and month by month into the modern style, but the students’ green *hakama* dream of the old days. But it is truly the magic of the metropolis of 1936 that they harmonize with every kind of modernism.’<sup>6</sup> It can be said that this mood of the modern formulated by passers-bys as in Charles Baudelaire’s poem depicting 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris recalled by Walter Benjamin to compare with 1930s Berlin, also resonates with Tokyo urban life of that time. Benjamin described such a phase of the city as ‘everything passed in review....’.<sup>7</sup> One can say that Takarazuka revue was an inevitable product of such ‘review epoch’.

Following Yoshimi Shunya’s reading of ‘the modern’ in Taishō and early Shōwa period, the city can be interpreted as a ‘performative site’ formulated by the masses for the masses, where modernity is an essential component of what constitutes urbanity.<sup>8</sup> What can be expressed in Japanese as *kindai-sei* (近代性 : modernity) or better said *kindaiteki-narumono* (近代的なるもの : something modern), connoting the characteristics which ambiguously decides ‘the modern’. In Yoshimi’s view, the Ginza

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<sup>6</sup> Takarazuka shōjo kageki-dan, (November 1936), pp.8–9

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire* (1938) in Harry Zorn’s translation in 1997, p.36

<sup>8</sup> Yoshimi S. (2008), pp.335-358

Modern stood for ‘foreign and future’ connoting *utsukushisa* (美しさ: beauty) *atarashisa* (新しさ: newness) and *kaoridakasa* (香高さ: fragrant), whereas Asakusa Modern stood for more *kakyō* (家郷: homeliness) connoting *shouka-nōryoku* (消化能力: digesting ability), *sakidori-sekaku* (先取性格: innovative temperament) and *hengenjizaisei* (変幻自在性: flexibility).<sup>9</sup> Given these hypotheses, I argue the ‘Takarazuka Modern’ established first in Takarazuka spa town and then in the heart of Tokyo would attractively combine both, i.e., the western Ginza plus the down-to-earth Asakusa. Bridging the rural and the urban, Takarazuka uniquely managed to combine both the very domestic Japanese and the aspiring western aura at the same time.

This is very much obvious in their stage repertoires, but the intention of this paper is not to analyze individual productions, but to question how urbanity is reflected in the contemporary productions, i.e. ‘revue’ as a sign of urbanity. In addition to Japanese dances principally accompanied by western music including jazz, Takarazuka has established its revue style by adopting foreign trends. In their attempt, cities like Paris, London, Berlin and New York were constant themes that would formulate the Takarazuka’s modern identity, e.g. *Mon Paris* (1927), *Parisettes* (1930), *Rose Paris* (1931), *Paris and New York* (1933), *Berlin Musume* (1933), *Manhattan Rhythm* (1937). Creativity at that time was often born out of a positive attitude toward the new urban energy empowered by science and technology that stimulated new trends in fashion and life style. Takarazuka revues would often depict trains, ships and planes to portray performers traveling across the world, observing the exotic and the unknown cities.

What is more, Takarazuka’s debut in Tokyo proved how popular revue became as a modern theatre genre in the 1930s. The contemporary dance critic, Nakamura Akiichi, extracted the characteristics of this new genre in his *Encyclopedia of Revues* (1935): modernity, popularity, variety i.e. hybridity, speed and change. It is not by sheer coincidence that these elements that constitute revues are synonymous with a description of urban poetics. It can be said that both in terms of social and cultural context, the rapid urbanization coincided much with westernization was significantly reflected on the theatrical nature of revues whose most grand and successful prototype was Takarazuka.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp.229-266

Furthermore, Takarazuka has been even more significant in the sense that its institutional presence in Hibiya influenced the people's perception of theatre in a number of ways as discussed above.

Complex heterogeneity can be still observed in Takarazuka both as institution (e.g. countryside and city, school and company, amateur and professional, women and men) and as theatrical style (e.g. new and old, western and eastern, male-impersonator and female). These binary qualities are like what Benjamin metaphorically defines as 'passages', a threshold that stands in neutrality between the two worlds.<sup>10</sup> This hybrid juxtaposition of seemingly different elements evokes a high degree of inter-culturality that defines 'Takarazuka-ness'. In fact, the tactful balance of these opposing features would constitute what we perceive as modernity, and what consequently stimulates our imagination and sense of urbanity and beyond. Takarazuka still today conveys a kind of 'retro modern' feel and continues to blend different ingredients, taking in topical trends and media even from manga and anime. This will further develop insights into Takarazuka's position within the contemporary Japanese popular culture in a 21st century urban context, but that will constitute another essay.

Today, in the Internet age, our perception of urbanity is not any longer simply bound to geographical definition but is increasingly expanding towards a more metaphorical one. Geographically, the 1930s urban legacy is still present as Toho Entertainment Area. When you take exit A5 from Hibiya metro station, you see the yellow board directing you to Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre and other smaller theatres, cinemas, the Imperial Hotel and Hibiya Park. Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre has indeed conquered this area as the center of urban entertainment. While Takarazuka maintains its fundamental activity base in their home ground of Takarazuka city, it generates its nationwide popularity from Hibiya. One can assume that if it had not come out to Tokyo in 1934, Takarazuka Revue Company might have not thrived until today. So, this year 2014, let us draw your attention not only to the centenary of Takarazuka Revue, but also to the 80th anniversary of Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre to reconsider its cultural prominence in the shifting urban context.

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<sup>10</sup> See Benjamin W. (2002)



Photo 2: Takarazuka was in the 1930s, and still is today, standing in the melting pot of urban energy. Photo taken from Hibiya Park, viewing Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre on the left, and the Imperial Hotel in the centre. (©Makiko Yamanashi)

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