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## **Fashion Changes: How Advertisers in East Asia used the Image of the Modern Girl to promote Cosumerism**

Madelyn Foster  
*University of South Carolina - Columbia*

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FASHION CHANGES: HOW ADVERTISERS IN EAST ASIA USED THE IMAGE OF THE  
MODERN GIRL TO PROMOTE CONSUMERISM

By

Madelyn Foster

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for  
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Approved:



Dr. Amanda Wangwright

Director of Thesis



Dr. Catherine Keyser

Second Reader

Steve Lynn, Dean

For South Carolina Honors College

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## **Thesis Summary**

The modern girl is one of the most visually memorable female archetypes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She emerged at the beginning of the century in countries across the world and represented the merging of modernity and consumerism, as well as the increasingly visible role of women in the public sphere. She can be seen in the art and media of many different nations around the world, and while her basic essence is the same across countries- a young, cosmopolitan woman who dresses in modern fashions- her specific traits and clothing choices depend heavily on the nation in which she is being depicted. This variation is due to the significant differences in culture, history, and political circumstances that exist between countries.

This thesis focuses specifically on depictions of the modern girl in advertisements in three East Asian nations- Japan, China, and Korea. These three nations were selected as they share a similar history but were in extremely different political and social situations during the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Advertising and magazine depictions of the modern girl in all three countries are examined in order to show how the different circumstances of each of these countries affected the development of the modern girl, as well as what these images can reveal about the attitudes of Japan, China, and Korea during the 1920s and 1930s.

## **Introduction**

In the first half of the 20th century, many cultures across the world underwent a period of rapid transformation. Increased globalization and new innovations in technology led to many changes in the politics, culture, and day to day life of people across the world. One aspect that was particularly affected by the changes of the early 20th century was the perceived societal role of women in many cultures. Across diverse cultures, there emerged a new kind of woman in popular culture- the modern girl, cosmopolitan, sophisticated, and free of the conventions of the past. While this new type of woman represented a step forward from many of the societal restrictions that women have historically faced, her image was often used by advertisers and corporations to advance their capitalistic and economic interests in appealing to new markets. By establishing the modern girl as a new type of woman-- liberated from the domestic sphere in many ways- advertisers were able to encourage the consumption of many diverse types of goods. This new type of woman was not limited to only one region of the world and coincided with the rise of megacities and modern consumer culture.

The modern girl is exceedingly interesting due to her adaptability. She appears in both Eastern and Western countries, and though her essence is usually similar, her specific manifestation varies wildly by culture. She is deeply influenced by the values, ideals, and history of each country she appears in, and by analyzing her specific characteristics in a particular culture we can discover a lot about the feminine ideal in that culture. In the Western world, there has been a great deal of research focused upon the modern girl in countries like the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, but not as much has been published about the 'modern girl' in Eastern countries. This has left a gap in Western knowledge about the archetype, as many people wrongly assume that the modern girl has the same qualities and features across nations.

The modern girl is above all a beautiful woman. She is extremely feminine and takes actions that confirm both her femininity and her modernness. This is done by the consumption of

goods that feed into these identities--items such as cosmetics, modern clothing items, and cigarettes.<sup>1</sup> In her consumption of these products, she becomes even more beautiful and desirable, in a way that could not be accomplished without the products that she uses. In this way, she is the ultimate form of advertisement. By buying the goods she is used to sell, the consumer could also become this new, infinitely desirable woman. She appears in many forms of media, but most often in advertisements published in magazines and on posters for various products.

In many works on the subject, it is unclear whether the modern girl was an organic phenomenon that emerged across the world concurrently in a natural way through the processes of globalization and modernization, or if it was spread artificially through Western advertisements and media. It appears that the modern girl image was largely developed artificially by advertisers and media producers and was specifically and intentionally tailored to the culture and standards of each individual nation. In analyzing the manifestation of the modern girl in a select few countries in East Asia, insights can be found as to what each country finds desirable and transgressive. This analysis will also reveal how advertisers and marketers worked to specifically construct the modern girl in each country.

## **Historical Context**

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas 24

East Asia in the early 20th century was a rapidly changing region with a constant shift of political power and influence. In China, the nearly 300-year-old Qing Dynasty was falling, and a new, republican government was being formed to take its place. Japan was gaining influence on the world stage and beginning to increase its colonial ambitions as the empire attempted to match the ambitions of Western colonial empires. In Korea, the country suffered under the weight of Japanese ambition as the nation was occupied by the Japanese from 1910-1945. All these situations caused a great deal of change within these nations, and these changes were reflected in the cultural and social situations of the countries.

In China, the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty led to the establishment of the Republic of China (1912-1949). The republican era in China was marked by a high degree of conflict, which stemmed both from domestic and international disputes. Domestically, there were many groups competing for influence in the new republic, including several influential leftist groups that wanted the government to protect the working-class people of China. Internationally, the Republic struggled with Japan, as Japan occupied and waged war against China.

From 1868 to 1947, the Empire of Japan held power after the Meiji Restoration, which consolidated political power in Japan under the Emperor Meiji. Japan always technically had an emperor, but before the restoration the true political power in the country was held by feudal lords and the emperors of Japan lacked the true power to control the nation. After the restoration, however, the control of Japan was consolidated by the emperor and many steps were taken to increase the power of Japan on the world stage.

For much of the first half of the 20th century, Korea was occupied by Imperial Japan. From 1910-1945, the Empire of Japan served as a colonial power in Korea and attempted to push the country towards modernization and industrialization while also committing violence against

the native population in an attempt to retain power. This simultaneous period of violence and modernization created a sense of confusion in the nation as they attempted to reconcile the two seemingly opposite actions taken by their colonizers.

## **The historical role of women in East Asia**

### **Women in China**

Throughout most of Chinese history, the role of women in society was heavily influenced by the Confucian-based values held by the government officials and most of the country's population. For more than two thousand years, until the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911, Confucian philosophy was the foundation of China's culture and social structure. Confucius was a Chinese philosopher who lived from 551 BCE to 479 BCE, and his philosophy is widely considered to be the basis of East Asian culture. In looking at any aspect of East Asian society and values, it is important to have a foundational knowledge of Confucian philosophy, as his work often underlies the attitudes and beliefs that are observed.

Confucius's philosophy was based on his understanding of the nature of the relationships between different people and groups and how he believed that those relationships should operate.<sup>2</sup> Confucius believed that women were lesser than men and should be treated as such. His philosophy taught that men and women were fundamentally different and had separate and very different roles to play in society. Men were to be active and strong players in the public sphere, while the role of women was to be silent and serene and only to participate in the aspects of life that occurred at home.

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<sup>2</sup> Muesse, Mark W. "CONFUCIUS." In *Four Wise Men: The Lives and Teachings of Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad*, 1st ed., 1–67. The Lutterworth Press, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvhrd1rs.6>.

According to traditional Chinese values, influenced heavily by Confucius, the ideal woman was a woman that followed the “Three Obediences and the Four Virtues.”<sup>3</sup> She was to obey first her father, then her husband, then her son. She was also meant to be sexually pure, a hard worker, quiet, and modest. All these characteristics add up to a woman who always puts other people before herself and is free of any personal desires or ambitions. Chinese women were thus expected to stay inside of the home and do what they were told.

Achieving a socially advantageous marriage was one of the only things a woman could do to help to improve her family’s position, as women were barred from nearly every profession. Women did work, of course, but this was usually limited to manual labor. Formal education for women was extremely uncommon until the early 20th century, and before this the only way a woman would be able to access an education was if she had wealthy parents who paid for her to have private lessons. This led to an extreme lack of opportunity for Chinese women, who were heavily restricted in the choices that they were allowed to make.

Women and girl children in China were not considered nearly as valuable or desirable as males. Families wanted male children and often were disappointed at the birth of a daughter, as it was often assumed that any daughters born would just grow up to be married off and thus, they would not provide any important contribution to the family of their birth.<sup>4</sup> The one sphere in which women could potentially wield power and influence is within the family that they marry into. Women were highly valued due to their ability to produce sons and heirs, and the Confucian social system highly emphasized loyalty to one’s parents, which meant that the mothers of sons were highly valued and expected to be deferred to. This influence was still contingent on a man

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<sup>3</sup> Croll, Elisabeth. “The Movement to Criticize Confucius and Lin Piao: A Comment on ‘The Women of China’ (Vol. 2, No. 1).” *Signs* 2, no. 3 (1977): 721–26. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173283>.

<sup>4</sup> Gao, Xiongya. “Women Existing for Men: Confucianism and Social Injustice against Women in China.” *Race, Gender & Class* 10, no. 3 (2003): 114–25. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41675091>.

though, as only the mothers of grown sons usually had any real degree of power within the household.

Historically, gender roles for women in China were often incredibly restrictive. One of the most infamous aspects of traditional Chinese womanhood is the practice of foot binding. Foot binding was the process of tying a woman's feet in restrictive constraints from early childhood into adolescence to prevent the growth of her feet. This process was typically done by women to their daughters and was a long, involved process that could take over a decade.<sup>5</sup> Having small feet was an important part of the Chinese feminine ideal, and in forcibly making their daughter's feet smaller, mothers attempted to help their daughters fit more securely into the beauty standard and thus make them more likely to secure an advantageous marriage. This practice began during the Song Dynasty (960-1279 A.D.) and increased in popularity until an estimated 40-50% of all women in China had bound feet.<sup>6</sup> This widespread practice reflected the fact that the traditional Chinese feminine ideal was a woman who was sedentary and did not often leave the home, as foot binding made it difficult for women to complete day to day activities and a woman with bound feet could certainly not participate in manual labor.

Women in China in the lead up to the 20th century were still quite restricted. In the late Qing Empire, women still lacked access to jobs or education, even though the empire was being led by Dowager Empress Cixi, a woman. Foot binding was also still extremely prevalent, with a sizable minority of girls being subjected to the practice. These conditions meant that women did not have total autonomy over their own lives, and many women longed for greater opportunity and control.

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<sup>5</sup> Blake, C. Fred. "Foot-Binding in Neo-Confucian China and the Appropriation of Female Labor." *Signs* 19, no. 3 (1994): 676-712. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174774>.

<sup>6</sup> Louisa Lim, "Painful Memories for China's Footbinding Survivors," NPR (NPR, March 19, 2007), <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=8966942>.

## Women in Japan

East Asian cultures have had a high degree of cultural exchange throughout the millennia that has led to many shared aspects of culture across the East Asian nations. One prominent effect of this cultural exchange is that the Confucian philosophical system of values and ethics that has been so historically influential in China also has also heavily influenced Japanese culture.

Confucian ideals emphasized balance above all. Historically in Japan, this meant that the role of women was held to be to bear and raise children and to manage their household while men were meant to concern themselves with affairs outside of the home. For Japanese women, household management was an expansive task that involved cooking, cleaning, balancing budgets, decorating, raising children, discipline, and shopping, among other tasks.<sup>7</sup> While women were typically not allowed to be highly active outside of the home, many of them did have a higher degree of autonomy in their home lives and were allowed to make decisions for their families. Women thus had a relatively large amount of power within their households, but like in most other cultures of the past, they had little freedom in deciding what path they wanted to follow with their life and were almost exclusively confined to the domestic sphere.

During the Meiji Era, women were allowed to take a larger role in the public aspects of Japanese society. Several women's groups were established that advocated for political causes publicly, and a few individual women became prominent parts of political movements.<sup>8</sup> Women also had access, for the first time, to education outside of the home. Despite this greater freedom,

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<sup>7</sup> Yonemoto, Marcia. "The Perils of the 'Unpolished Jewel': Defining Women's Roles in Household Management in Early Modern Japan." *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*, no. 39 (2010): 38–62. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42771853>.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, Marnie S. "Women and Political Life in Early Meiji Japan: The Case of the Okayama Joshi Konshinkai (Okayama Women's Friendship Society)." *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 44, no. 1 (2013): 43-66. [http://scholarworks.smith.edu/hst\\_facpubs/1/](http://scholarworks.smith.edu/hst_facpubs/1/)

the political causes that women were allowed to advocate for and the education they were able to access were still primarily 'female' coded in that they were considered within the bounds of the female gender role. The political causes were primarily charitable, while the education options for women were targeted at increasing her ability to effectively run a household.

While women had a relatively higher amount of autonomy in Japan than in other East Asian countries during the beginning of the 20th century, their options were still extremely limited due to their gender.

### **Women in Korea**

Much like that of both China and Japan, the culture of Korea has long been heavily influenced by the philosophy of Confucious. This cultural foundation has led to the establishment of strict hierarchical relationships in Korea, as Confucian philosophy places a high degree of emphasis on the correct way to conduct relationships between types of people. Korean culture and society have traditionally been quite strict, with clearly defined notions of status, hierarchy, and gender.<sup>9</sup>

In the 500-year Joseon kingdom of Korea, which lasted from 1392-1897, women held virtually no power or influence. Like in other East Asian societies of the time, women did not have access to education and in Korea almost all of them were illiterate.<sup>10</sup> During this period, women were effectively 'otherized' and unable to exert any influence outside of the home as they were considered less than men. The largest amount of power most women would ever have

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<sup>9</sup> Cheon, Sang Yee, and Kevin Kim. "Teaching Korean Culture with Advertisements: Change and Persistence in Family Values and Gender Roles." *The Korean Language in America* 15 (2010): 1-22. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42922517>.

<sup>10</sup> Suh, Jiyoung. "The 'New Woman' and the Topography of Modernity in Colonial Korea." *Korean Studies* 37 (2013): 11-43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24575275>.

access to in Joseon Korea was the ability to help in the arrangement of marriages for her children.

Education for women, which had been non-existent in Korea for so long, began to be supported by some members of the Korean public in the beginning of the 20th century. This public support, though small at first, introduced the idea of broadening the role of women in Korean society into the public discourse for the first time. The idea gained traction in Korean society as at the turn of the century many people believed the nation had fallen behind other countries in terms of societal advancement, and educating women seemed like an effective way to help the nation begin to catch up with others and gain more power. The role of Korean women at the turn of the century was thus not equal to that of men, but there was beginning to be a change in the societal perception of women and their potential value to the nation.

## **I: The Modern Girl in Japan**

Japan in the early 20th century was a powerful economic force and a regional colonial power. This increased presence on the world stage meant that there were many questions within Japan about how the nation's changing international status should impact the inner workings of Japanese society. Many within the nation were in favor of social reforms including increased rights and opportunities for women, but this view was not shared by all.<sup>11</sup> Some believed that Japan was becoming too Westernized by increasing industrialization and globalization, and that social reforms were just another way that Japanese society was slowly being transformed into a carbon copy of Western society.<sup>12</sup> These two competing views in public discourse meant that the

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<sup>11</sup> Lowy 83

<sup>12</sup> Harootunian 201

proper role of women in the public sphere was a highly contentious topic in Japan in the 1920s and 1930s.

Residents of urban areas in Japan during this period often enjoyed participating in new activities and consumptive habits that reflected the modernness of the age. These habits and hobbies often led to the construction of new, cultural identities for those who participated in them. These identities were different from traditional ways of identifying a person, as instead of being based on factors that could not be controlled (such as social class or age) they were a matter of individual choice.<sup>13</sup> One cannot control the position they were born into, but one does have a certain level of control to make their own choices about how to groom, dress, and present themselves.

The modern girl developed in Japan in a different way than in China. In China, the modern girl was originally a type of activist whose primary concern was building a better future for the people of China. In Japan, the modern girl was always a more superficial identity. A large reason for this was the very different political situations these nations were in at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Japan during this time was prosperous, stable, and beginning to take on an ever-increasing role on the world stage as the Japanese attempted to become more of a colonial power. This contrasts with the political situation in China during this period, where China had just become a republic and was struggling internally with conflicts of ideas as to what the future of the nation should be. This meant that there was far less internal political debate in Japan than in China during this period. The more stable political situation in Japan meant that politics were seen as relatively less important than in China, which made having strong political opinions and

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<sup>13</sup> Harootunian 203

being an activist less appealing in Japan than in China. The modern girl in Japan thus was less concerned with politics and nation building and more concerned with other aspects of modernity.

In Japan, this female archetype was known as the *modan garu*, or *moga*.<sup>14</sup> The aesthetics of the modern girl in Japan were heavily influenced by American movies and movie stars, as American films were extremely popular in Japan during this period. Early American films, such as the ones that would have been shown in Japan in the early 20th century, strongly promoted the consumption of consumer goods as a vehicle to constructing a personal identity.<sup>15</sup> The Japanese modern girl wore her skirts short (always above the knee), applied makeup, and wore her hair short like a silent film star and was bold, confident, and independent, both financially and in her personal life.

Since the modern girl in the Japanese context was less politically sophisticated and more aesthetic-based than the manifestation of this archetype in other cultures, the Japanese version of the modern girl was easily integrated into advertising and marketing campaigns. She developed less through political and philosophical communities in Japan than in other nations and was more likely to be found in the media than in the real world.<sup>16</sup> The modern girl identity in Japan was primarily based upon a woman's fashion and grooming choices, so advertisers sold their goods by promising that they would help women become a modern girl, which was her ticket into appearing worldly, attractive, and sophisticated.

Women's magazines played a significant role in Japanese culture during the 1920s and 1930s, as was common in many countries during this period. These magazines were explicitly produced for consumption by women and included articles and images meant to appeal to

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<sup>14</sup> Harootunian 203

<sup>15</sup> Harootunian 204

<sup>16</sup> Stalker 260

cosmopolitan women. One prominent Japanese magazine during this period was *Josei* (Woman). This magazine appealed to modern girls in Japan by promoting modernism and a new sense of what women's role in society and the household should be.



Figure 1: *Josei* (December Taishō 14 Cover). Nakayama Taichi, *Josei* (Japan: Platonsha, 1925), Cover.

Figure 1 shows the cover of a 1925 issue of *Josei*. The cover depicts a woman with short hair standing in the spotlight of a stage, holding a musical instrument. This woman can be recognized as a modern girl in several ways. First, her hair is cut short and styled in a way that is recognizably modern, and her makeup is also done in a distinctly modern way. She is also wearing a dress cut fashionably above the ankles with her shoulders exposed, which was a fashionable style among modern women in this period.

Finally, the fact that she is standing on stage alone as the center of attention signals that she is a new type of woman. She is clearly comfortable with seeking attention and confidently performing in front of others. She is also evidently a trained musician, as she is getting ready to play her violin to an audience. This shows that modern girls in Japan were not simply concerned with their domestic duties but had interests that went beyond the home. For this woman to be

able to perform in front of an audience, she would have had to received instrumental training, which signals both an interest in education and a dedication to self-improvement and cultivation that was characteristic of the modern girl in Japan.

This *Josei* magazine cover projects the modern role the magazine imagined its female readership admiring. The woman is fashionably yet not revealingly dressed and is not engaging with men in any way. Women that would be drawn to this image and want to purchase the magazine were likely women who were interested in having lives outside of men, marriage, and children. They would most likely be interested in modern fashions and ideas. *Josei* gives them a gateway, through its images and its advertisements, to adopt these trends for themselves.



Figure 2: Advertisement for Kurabu Cosmetics in *Josei* Magazine. Sept. 1923.<sup>17</sup>

Figure 2 is an advertisement that was included inside of one issue of *Josei* magazine. This advertisement, which was for the Kurabu Cosmetics Company, shows a modern girl looking

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<sup>17</sup> Shunsuke

knowingly at the viewer. Her slightly upturned glance and confident smile shows that she is self-assured, which would be extremely appealing to women who wanted to gain confidence and self-possession for themselves. She is wearing a fashionable hat and coat combination. Her hair is short and curled and her makeup is applied stylishly. The advertisers who made this image knew that by showing an example of the modern girl in a magazine that was bought primarily by modern girls and those who wanted to be modern girls, they would be able to attract new customers for the cosmetics company.

This image was produced for a majority female audience, which can be seen in the way that it portrays the modern girl. The woman depicted in the image is not sexualized at all, and while her clothes still show modernism she is covered up and her outfit is not revealing. This differs from other images of the modern girl that were intended for predominantly male audiences and show women that are far more sexualized and presumably sexually 'available' than this woman seems to be in her large coat and hat.

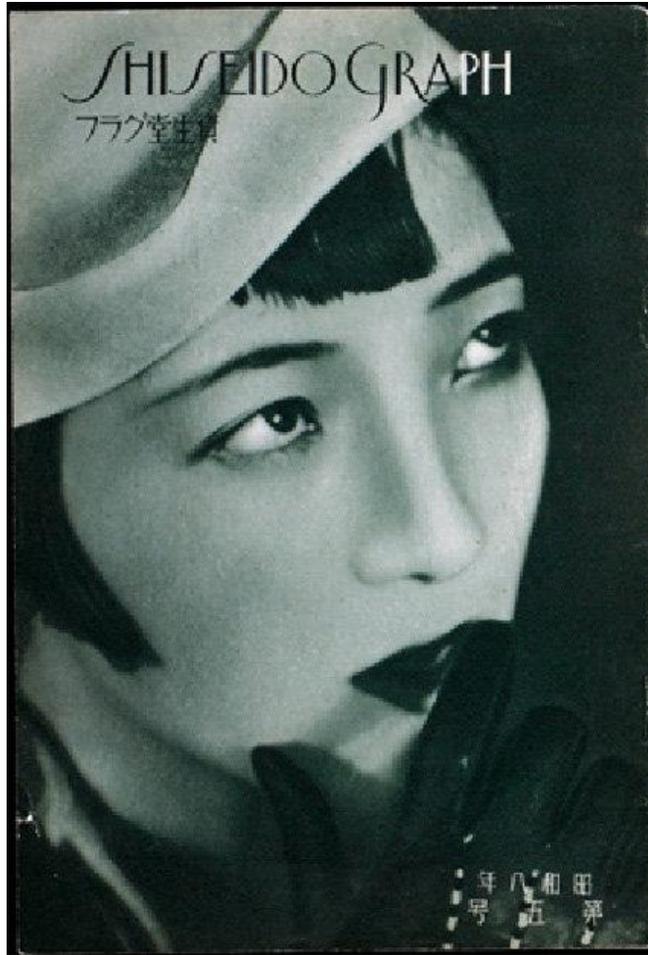


Figure 3: *Shiseido Graph* 5, cover, November 1933.<sup>18</sup>

Many companies capitalized upon both the modern girl and the prevalence of women's magazines in order to sell their products more effectively. Japanese cosmetics brand Shiseido, which is still in operation today, created a free magazine for customers that they called *Shiseido Graph*. This magazine showed modern Japanese women engaged in a variety of different activities- all while wearing Shiseido products, of course.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Zhou

<sup>19</sup> Gumpert

The covers and inside pages of *Shishido Graph* would feature images of glamorous and wealthy women going about their everyday lives. This was intended to influence women to invest in the company's cosmetics as it would help them to become more like the girls they saw in the magazine. Figure 3 shows the cover of *Shiseido Graph's* November 1933 issue. The woman depicted on this cover is clearly a Japanese modern girl, or *modan garu*. Her hair is cut short and close to her face, she wears a trendy and Western-influenced hat, and her eyebrows and lipstick are done in a movie-star style. This cover is from the 1930s while the other images we have looked at were from the 1920s, and the change in the decades can be seen as this depiction of the modern girl is more similar to the style Hollywood actresses of the 1930s while the earlier images did not have this exact fashion style.

This cover would appeal to those who admired the modern girl aesthetic as it plainly and prominently displays a clear example of this archetype. The message of this being on the cover of a cosmetic company's promotional magazine is clear- if you bought their makeup and skincare products, you too could be a glamorous and modern woman. While the woman on this cover is beautiful and heavily made up, she is still not sexualized but rather seems like an aspirational figure. This is likely due to the fact that this magazine too was produced explicitly for women's consumption.

The sexualization or lack thereof present in any given image of the modern girl is a key difference in depictions that are intended for male versus female audiences. Though both images intended for men and women are recognizably depicting the same archetype of woman, the execution of the two is completely and obviously different. Depictions of the modern girl for female audiences usually focus on showing a confident woman wearing nice clothes and participating in social activities. For male audiences, however, she is usually shown as an extremely sexually available woman. This is done in a myriad of ways, such as by wearing

extremely revealing clothes, indulging in intoxicating substances, and looking directly at the viewer with eyes that seem to communicate her willingness to engage in sexual behavior. This reveals the separate ways in which men and women may have thought about the modern girl—women may have seen in her the potential for increased freedom and opportunities, while men may have seen in her the seductive appeal of modernism and all the temptation that accompanies it.

## **II: The Modern Girl in China**

The emergence of the modern girl in China occurred at the same time that the nation transitioned uneasily from the Qing Empire to the Republican era. In China, there was a societal divide between conservatives who wanted the new regime to continue with the values and traditions that China had historically held and liberal reformers who wanted to create a new society with new ideals and traditions.

In China, the first appearance of the modern girl was as a part of the May Fourth Movement in 1919.<sup>20</sup> The May Fourth Movement was started by large student demonstrations against imperialism, and quickly spread beyond the university crowd to other parts of the country. It marked a new era in Chinese intellectual thought and ideas.<sup>21</sup> This use of the modern girl as political icon served as a direct challenge to traditional Confucian values and ideals. In promoting a role for women that was liberated from the home and family, supporters of the May Fourth Movement were able to rebuke one of the foundations of Confucian society and philosophy. Even in this refutation of traditional values, however, an ancient ideal persistent-

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<sup>20</sup> Edwards 119

<sup>21</sup> Chen 66

women were at the moral heart of society and by looking at the nation's women you could tell the national character.<sup>22</sup>

The modern girl, in the Chinese context, was originally a very politicized role. She was a woman who cared about her education and wanted to use that education to work for the betterment of society. This origin is a bit different from other cultures in which the modern girl was not a primarily activist role at first. Many women in Republican-era China adopted the dress of the modern girl to clearly communicate their adherence to a new set of values and ideals.

In China during the 1920s, women increasingly began to take on an active and visible role in the public sphere. No longer confined to the home and kept out of the spotlight, women became larger parts of public life. This shift in what was considered an acceptable role for women coincided with a shift in depictions of women in the media. In Republican-era Chinese society, there were two distinct 'modern' female identities that were represented in the media—the modern girl and the new woman. The new woman was an intellectual, independent type of woman who was committed to her political ideals and invested in constructing a strong, powerful China for the new era. In contrast, the modern girl was a shallower archetype, focused on aesthetics instead of cultural values.<sup>23</sup> The two shared many physical traits, but the new woman had much more depth.

Advertisers and marketers noticed this change and began to strategically target their advertisements and create content that conformed to this new image. This was a calculated move intended to attract buyers who wished to see themselves as a part of the new, changing Chinese culture. The modern girl was easy to incorporate in advertisements due to her distinct and highly recognizable appearance. She wore her hair short and wore much shorter skirts than was

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<sup>22</sup> Edwards 127

<sup>23</sup> Stevens 84

traditional and carried herself with an air of confidence.<sup>24</sup> Advertisers used this figure of the modern girl to promote the sale of new, modern products. In addition to the traits the modern girl already held, such as intellect and outspokenness, advertisers made her fashionable and desirable. This represented a shift in the modern girl from being politically oriented towards being commercially and culturally oriented. The very things that originally represented an independent woman became large parts of capitalist consumer culture. Instead of a woman who participated in politics and had strong opinions, the modern girl instead became a woman who participated in modern consumer culture.



*Figure 4: A Coca-Cola poster depicting Chinese silent film actress Ruan Lingyu , late 1920s.*

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<sup>24</sup> Lewis 1386

This image from the end of the 1920s is a poster advertising Coca-Cola. The woman depicted in the poster is actress Ruan Lingyu, who was a prominent film star in China at this time. It provides a textbook example of the Chinese version of the modern girl in mass media. Her hair is worn short and gently curled, her eyebrows are thin and carefully groomed, and she wears a lot of jewelry- earrings, a bracelet, and a ring. She wears high heels that show off her feet, which are unbound. This is in clear contrast with the traditional Chinese beauty standard of women having tightly bound feet. Most notable however is the type of dress that she wears, the *qipao*. The *qipao* is a particular type of Chinese dress that is associated with the modern girl. It became popular in the early 1920s and blends western and Chinese style, particularly combining aspects of traditional Manchu men's robes with Western dresses.<sup>25</sup> It was extremely popular during the Republican period in China and was worn by wealthy, cosmopolitan women. Most images of the modern girl in China depict her wearing a *qipao*.

This image was intended for a mass audience of both men and women, so it attempts to appeal to both. Her dress is longer and less tight than in images meant to appeal just to men, but it still reveals the shape of her body. She appears happy to see the viewer though she does not appear to be seducing them. She is beautiful and welcoming in a way that is not sexualized. This would help to achieve the Coca-Cola Company's goals in the production of this advertisement, as it can attract a wide audience. The modern girl in this image is fashionable and sophisticated enough to appeal to women who would like to be like her without repelling them through overt sexuality but is also beautiful and inviting enough to attract the male gaze.

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<sup>25</sup> Chan 220



Figure 5: Grande, Price, & Co., 1934. Poster advertisement for the Yuanhe Trading Company. China.<sup>26</sup>

Figure 5 is a poster advertisement for the Yuanhe Trading Company, an alcohol manufacturer. The woman in this poster is the epitome of the image of the modern girl in China in the 1930s. Her hair is short and perfectly arranged, and her makeup is artfully applied. Her dress is tight and has an alluring slit nearly to the hip in a way that is reminiscent of the Western styles of the era, but it remains distinctly Chinese in its cut and materials as a *qipao*. She wears jewelry on her hands, wrists, and ears, which shows her admiration of beautiful objects, as well

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<sup>26</sup> Bin 90

as ornately decorated high heels on her feet. She is looking at the viewer in a bold, flirtatious manner that shows that she is confident and sexually available to the audience.

The woman in this poster shows her willingness to participate in cosmopolitan consumer culture both by the way that she dresses and by the habits that she engages in. This advertisement is for an alcohol manufacturer and so she is shown with a bottle of alcohol on her table and two full glasses waiting to be sipped. The inclusion of the second glass also shows the modernness of this woman, as she appears to be at her home, but she is clearly entertaining a companion.

This advertisement is intended for a male audience. The woman depicted is highly sexualized, as can be seen in her teasing, invitational body language and the way that her *qipao* is cut nearly all the way to her hip. She also is entertaining a companion who is more than likely a male lover, as we can assume from her stance and the way she has two glasses of liquor poured for the two of them. The high degree of sexualization in this advertisement would help to draw in male customers as it would be an attractive image for them to keep, and whenever they looked at it, they would be reminded of the trading company.



Figure 6: "Three Cats" cigarette advertisement calendar. 1930s. China. Poster.<sup>27</sup>

Figure 6 shows a poster depicting the modern girl. This image is an example of a calendar poster. Calendar posters were a dominant form of advertising during the Republican era in China and became an important part of the Chinese art scene in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. These posters blended Chinese style with Western style and served as advertisements for a variety of products while also functioning as products themselves.<sup>28</sup> By creating beautiful calendars that potential customers would want to display, advertisers ensured that people would be constantly reminded of their products.

This advertisement is for an American cigarette company, Three Cats cigarettes. The poster shows a woman wearing a swimsuit that would have been considered quite scandalous in the 1930s in many circles, which shows the modern girl's lighthearted disregard for the cultural

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<sup>27</sup> Bin 66

<sup>28</sup> Laing 62

norms of the past. She is smiling while she sits on the beach and smokes an American cigarette. The way that she is smoking a cigarette casually and publicly also conveys her status as a modern girl, as cigarettes were seen as a male habit and women smoking cigarettes was seen as transgressive at the time, another norm that the modern girl breaks happily.

This image is clearly intended for a male audience. The woman in the advertisement is visibly sexualized. Even as she sits on the beach in leisure, the woman is wearing high-heeled sandals, which communicates another important trait of the modern girl: she highly always values her appearance. Her hair is carefully curled and set, and she wears makeup on her face. The amount of skin that she is showing is far beyond that shown in images of the modern girl that were intended for female audiences. In contrast to depictions of the modern girl made for female audiences, the focus of this image is not on the woman's fashion or personality, but on her sexuality. Everything about the way she is depicted--from her revealing swimsuit to her makeup and hair to the way that she smokes her cigarette in an inviting manner--indicates that she is a more sexually liberated woman and therefore available to men.

These posters all show the way in which advertisers working in China during the 1920s and 1930s appropriated the image of the modern girl and coopted it in order to reach new audiences for their products. By stripping away the political and social significance of the modern girl and reducing her to her appearance and clothing choices, these advertisements play with consumer's desire--either the desire to become more like the modern girl, or the sexual desire of the male gaze.

### III: The Modern Girl in Korea

Korea during the 1920s was under colonial rule by Imperial Japan. During this period, many Koreans were extremely opposed to the colonial regime and protested and spoke out against it. As Koreans resisted Japanese rule, they attempted to strengthen their own society in an attempt to increase national power and hopefully drive out the Japanese. In 1919, the March First Movement was a national attempt to restore Korean independence. This movement, though ultimately unsuccessful, saw nearly two million Koreans participate in demonstrations across the country in support of ending Japanese colonial rule. Although the Japanese occupiers were able to suppress this movement, it did lead to slight concessions being given to the Korean people. Most notably, a greater amount of freedom of expression was allowed, though explicit anti-Japanese sentiment was still restricted.<sup>29</sup> Writers and artists across the country seized this loosening of restrictions and attempted to capitalize upon it by sharing ideas and values that they hoped would contribute to the building of Korean nationalism and national identity.

Many prominent intellectuals in Korea at this time believed that one reason for the nation's continuing subjugation by the Japanese was that Korean culture and society had not sufficiently modernized or adapted to the rapidly globalizing world.<sup>30</sup> As in Japan and China, there was a powerful sense in Korea that a nation's modernity and advancement could most clearly be seen by observing the status of women in society.

In Korea, there was a great deal of discourse surrounding the appropriate role for women in a newly modern society and particularly about a certain type of woman known as the "new woman" (*sin yosong*). Similarly to the modern girl in China, the new woman in Korea was

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<sup>29</sup> Lee 92

<sup>30</sup> Yum 107

supposed to be a passionate citizen who was devoted to her nation and worked every day to create a better future for her country.<sup>31</sup> She was educated, which was exceedingly rare among women (only 10% of Korean women were literate in the 1930s).<sup>32</sup> She held strong opinions and could articulate and defend them.

A clear difference existed between the new woman and the modern girl. The new woman was educated and passionate and worked for the advancement of Korea, while the modern girl represented the negative, shallow aspects of modernity. This is remarkably similar to the way that these archetypes were seen in Japan and in China. The Korean modern girl could be easily identified in the media by her clothing and aesthetic choices, as she typically wore outfits that blended traditional aspects of Korean fashion with Western items. She was usually shown wearing her hair cut short, high heels, and a short (often knee-length) skirt worn with a more traditional blouse.<sup>33</sup>

Women's magazines were vital in the construction of the new woman archetype in Korea. This is similar to the prominent role played by women's magazines in Japanese culture during the 1920s and 1930s. These magazines advocated for the rights of women and shared a new, more independent idea of the proper role of women in Korean society.<sup>34</sup> Since most women in Korea at this time could not read, the images used in the magazines were extremely important as they were the only aspect of the publications that most women could understand.

Advertisements in newspapers and magazines targeted to Korean women in the 1920s focused on selling the 'essentials' of modernity to women.<sup>35</sup> As Korea began to modernize,

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<sup>31</sup> Yum 110

<sup>32</sup> Hyun 45

<sup>33</sup> Lee 98

<sup>34</sup> Hyun 44

<sup>35</sup> Bae 116

consumers began to have access to new products and goods that they previously were not able to purchase. Advertisements in this period thus focused on telling potential customers how their product would help the customer to become a more modern, sophisticated person.

In Korea specifically, many advertisements attempted to force a Japanese culture and identity on consumers. Japan occupied Korea for 35 years, from 1910 until 1945, and during this period the Japanese tried extremely hard to replace Korean culture with their own. For this reason, many of the advertisements distributed in the colonial period depicted Japanese women instead of Korean and often used Japanese text.<sup>36</sup>



Figure 7: Cover page of *Sinyōsōng* magazine. 1924.

*Sinyōsōng* magazine was one of the most influential women's magazines operating in Korea during this period. The magazine's name translates to 'new woman,' and this is the type of woman the magazine sought to appeal to. Due to the low literacy rates of the time, formally

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<sup>36</sup> Bae 117

educated women were the only demographic of Korean women who were all literate, so *Sinyŏsŏng* initially was marketed explicitly towards female students and was explicitly meant to be distributed broadly.<sup>37</sup> It included essays on a variety of topics as well as beauty and cooking tips.<sup>38</sup> The magazine intended to provide all of the information and content that a modern Korean woman would be interested in, though it was not politically minded at all.

Figure 7 is the cover of an issue of this magazine from 1924. The woman depicted in this image is a modern girl. She provides a good example of what the modern girl looked like in the Korean context. Much like the Chinese and Japanese modern girls, she wears her hair short, her skirt short, and has high heels on her feet. Korean influence is shown in her top, which is a *hanbok*, a traditional Korean item of clothing. While her outfit is not revealing, it does show the outline of her body.

This image was produced specifically for an educated, female audience, as that is the demographic that read *Sinyŏsŏng* magazine during the 1920s. This cover is similar to images from Japan that were made for a female audience, as the emphasis is not placed on the woman's body but instead on her clothing and style choices.

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<sup>37</sup> Lee 95

<sup>38</sup> Lee 96



*Figure 8: Advertisement for Ajinomoto in Sinyōsōng Magazine, April 1939*

Figure 8 is an advertisement that was placed in *Sinyōsōng* magazine in the late 1930s. The image is selling Ajinomoto, which is a popular Japanese food seasoning product. Korea was still colonized by Japan when this advertisement was created in 1939. The advertising of this product, along with other Japanese products, in a Korean market served as another form of Japanese imperialism. Advertisements for Japanese products always implied that Japanese culture and products were more modern and were superior to Korean culture and goods.

This Ajinomoto advertisement associates the use of their seasoning product with modernity. The main text on this image reads “Ideal seasoning, a true revolution in food” (quoted in translation).<sup>39</sup> This explicitly ties the use of this product to societal advancement through the choice of the word ‘revolution’. The picture used for this advertisement also encourages the association of modernity with Ajinomoto, as the young woman and her companion are depicted wearing Western-style clothes and appear to be on a date.

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<sup>39</sup> Bae 117

As this advertisement was included in a women's magazine, it was intended for a female audience. The woman and man depicted in the image look to be on a date, but they are both modestly dressed and are not touching. The woman is a modern woman, with a Western-style hat, an above the knee skirt, and short hair that looks to be pinned back. These factors would be more appealing to women than an explicitly sexualized image. This demonstrates again that depictions of the modern girl across nations differed highly in their degree of sexuality depending on which gender they were meant to be targeting.

In Korea, depictions of the modern girl cannot be divorced from the fact that the country was under colonial rule by Japan during the 1920s and 1930s. This imperialism contributed to a feeling of powerlessness in Korea that made many people deeply uncomfortable and made them long for change. Modernity was seen in Korea as a way for the nation to regain its power and step into the future in control of its own destiny. The modern girl in Korea was an artistic representation of the nation's potential to become independent and powerful in its own right.

## **Conclusion**

While the modern girl originally was a real type of women living in Japan, China, and Korea, this archetype was quickly appropriated and exploited by advertising professionals in all three of these nations and used to sell a globalized and commercialized culture to their residents. The authenticity and origin of her emergence varied across these three nations and spoke to the distinct cultures and circumstances in each of these three East Asian nations. Each of these countries had distinct iterations of the modern girl that expressed different values and priorities, and some focused more on aesthetics while others focused more on character traits.

In China, the modern girl was originally an extremely political woman who was meant to advocate for a brighter future for her nation and her people. The Chinese modern girl was initially significantly intertwined with political and cultural ideals, which meant that she lost more when she was appropriated by advertisers for the sale of commercial and Western goods. She was still easily depicted in advertisements and media, as her appearance was distinct and easy to recognize, but her inclusion in advertisements for cigarettes and beauty products necessarily divorced her from her political and social ideas. Advertisers thus had to strip more from the Chinese modern girl in order to use her to promote consumerism than they did in other nations.

In Japan, the modern girl was always a shallower and more surface-level archetype. Part of this may be due to the fact that Japan was in more a prosperous and powerful position than the other two nations during this period. This meant that the people of Japan were likely less interested in political action and change than residents of the other two nations, which factored into making political engagement and awareness a less important trait for people to see. The

Japanese modern girl was thus more easily integrated into advertisements, as she was more fashion-and-appearance based than other iterations of the modern girl.

Korea in the 1920s and 30s was a nation under active colonial rule, which was reflected in their culture and politics as the Korean people actively worked to carve out their own identity and power from under Japanese oppression. Many people in Korea during this time period associated modernity with the power and freedom they did not have access to, and so by conforming to ideals of modernism they expressed their hope that Korea would be able to reclaim its national power and step into the future. This meant that the modern girl was important to many Korean people as she represented potential for the future. In Korea, much of the modern girl's original symbolism was in the desire for the nation to modernize and step into the 'future,' which made her a more natural figure to use in advertisements as many of the products she was used to sell were 'modern' in the globalized, commercialized way. This also made her use particularly potent in the media as a form of advertisement, however, as modernity was highly desirable, and many people wanted to buy into it in any way that they could.

The image of the modern girl thus was used in China, Japan, and Korea in a similar way- to sell products such as makeup, hair products, clothing, alcohol, and cigarettes to consumers in all three nations. Advertisers in these nations picked up on the potency of aspiration and desire to influence consumers to buy new goods and appropriated the use of a highly desirable and instantly recognizable woman to do this. Since the advent of the fusion of mass media, consumerism, and globalization at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the female image and body have been used to promote consumption, a trend that continues today in the form of social media influencers and fashion models.

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