

Exploring the Takarazuka world: An ethnographic study of Takarazuka Revue's marketing strategies, urban space, and fan culture development

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With the looming issue of a long-term population decline, the Japanese entertainment industry is facing a turning point as it struggles with the problem of dwindling audience numbers, yet one theatre company appears to prosper even in these challenging times. Boasting over 100 years of history, the Takarazuka Revue is a popular all-female Japanese theatre well-known for its glamorous musical performances which attract a predominantly female audience. Owned by the Hankyu Corporation, a private railway company, and established as part of a larger hot spring resort complex in the suburbs of the Hanshin region, the company now gathers an annual audience of over 2.7 million people — making it one of the largest theatre companies in contemporary Japan. What makes it especially interesting to scholars and media alike is the fact that Takarazuka Revue is an all-female theatre and all of its performances are produced with an entirely female cast. Scholars have taken various approaches to studying the phenomenon of Takarazuka Revue with much discussion being dedicated to the cross-gendered performance of the *otokoyaku* (the male role players) and their zealous fans as well as the theatre's early formative years. What is largely missing from these discussions is a critical and comprehensive analysis of the process of the development of Takarazuka Revue's distinct fan culture, the evolution of and reasons behind the implementation of the company's current marketing strategies, and the role of urban space surrounding Takarazuka Revue's headquarters — the Takarazuka Grand Theatre — in relation to the unique practices of the local fan community and its consumer culture.

This dissertation presents a theoretically engaged ethnographic examination of the Takarazuka fan culture phenomenon in Japan. The aim is to demonstrate that the geographic location of Takarazuka Revue's headquarters, the Takarazuka Grand Theatre, located in Takarazuka City, Hyogo Prefecture, has been instrumental in not only the early development of Takarazuka Revue's fan culture, but also in the continuous process of transformation and maintenance of this distinct cultural phenomenon. By examining Takarazuka fan culture from within its imagined nucleic centre, this dissertation explores how the urban space surrounding the Takarazuka Grand Theatre is perceived, created and made significant by the local fan community.

The main approach of this research project is an ethnographic inquiry into the chosen local community — Takarazuka Revue's fan culture which developed in the theatre's birthplace, Takarazuka City in Hyogo Prefecture — and a large proportion of the data was collected through participant observation and thick descriptions of events observed. This approach is supplemented by other qualitative research methods, including in-depth life story interviews and a visual research mapping method combining sketch maps and qualitative GIS (Geographic Information System).

This dissertation demonstrates that although the *otokoyaku's* performance is imperative to

the high-intensity and high-involvement consumption practices of Takarazuka fans, it is only part of the often lifetime-long theatre-going experience. Examining the perception of Takarazuka Grand Theatre as the 'sacred site' of Takarazuka fan culture and its imagined core, I argue that the public/private urban space surrounding the theatre is being utilised as a place of convergence for Takarazuka fan practices in ways surpassing a 'conventional' theatre-going experience. Finally, this dissertation concludes that Takarazuka City centre's urban landscape serves a multidimensional function in Takarazuka fan culture, resulting from conscious and ongoing place-making efforts of the local fan community. The findings showcase that it is this simultaneously real and imagined dimension ascribed to a geographically-located theatre building and the surrounding urban space that, experienced through the routinised bodily movement of individual Takarazuka fans, becomes the pillar of the Takarazuka world experience.

This dissertation introduces a new concept of 'fan-culture geography' — the process in which public and geographically-located urban spaces become utilised and continuously re-created sites of imagination and fantasies shared by a local fan community. This recognition of a community-based urban space as a space made significant based on individual fans' perceptions implicates new insight into the current understanding of modern fan culture formation processes, experience-based consumer culture, and the place-making strategies of urban developers. Furthermore, the original multi-method approach adopted in this dissertation, which combined empirical methods with qualitative cognitive mapping methods, may be applied to a variety of other studies researching fan cultures, consumer cultures or urban communities elsewhere in the world. Lastly, the findings of this dissertation illustrate how bodily motion can be seen as a significant dimension of developing and experiencing the space utilised by both individuals and communities, and demonstrates that bodily movement can be considered instrumental in the process of creation and maintenance of geographical safe spaces of local communities. These findings contribute to understanding of community development within urban spaces and can be of broad use to urban cultural studies.