

Consumption as a Mean of Democratization in Interwar Japan

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【要旨】 両大戦間期の日本における民主化の手段としての消費主義

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今日において、消費が経済成長を生み出し、近代国家の台頭が大量消費への傾向と密接な関係を有するという経済学上の基本的な定理をめぐってはほぼ議論の余地がない。しかし、近世日本では、消費は繁栄と経済成長の源泉としてではなく、利欲と不道徳な行動の現れとしてしか評価されていなかった。

従って、明治以降、近代化とともに「西洋に追い付き追い越せ」政策の実施を可能とするには、消費に対する新しいスタンスを明確に述べる必要があった。しかし、大正時代に至るまで、個人消費は、近代日本社会の驚くほど安定した要素としてほとんど認められてこなかったと言っても過言ではない。

無論、消費パターンが消費者の価値観を明確に反映しているからこそ、大正時代に芽生え、戦後の経済成長期に花開き、80年代に成熟した日本の「消費主義」は、20世紀の日本社会の変遷を写實的に描写する。本稿は、両大戦間期において（主に大正・昭和初期の阪神間の地域を中心にして）、消費パターン、特にライフスタイルの変遷が当時の日本社会の民主化をいかに反映していたか、また他方でいわゆる「指導された」消費が国家の目標達成のためにどのような貢献をもたらしたかを分析するものである。

There is almost no dispute over the basic economic argument that consumption can generate economic growth and that the rise of the modern state has been inseparably related to mass consumption in almost all parts of everyday life. Although some contemporary authors also point out that the assumption about consumer spending as a driving force behind high economic growth is one of the greatest misconceptions in modern economic theory,¹ one can hardly deny the simple fact that consumerism has become a key concept in analyzing the modern history of the Western World. Thus, modern economics is based on the assumption that individuals increasingly experience life as consumers who spend their lives in a consumer environment. Individuals identify themselves through consumer culture, which is based on the consumption of branded, mass-produced commodities, and through the orientation of their social life around such commodities. In the United States the ideology of this culture, consumerism, has already been interpreted as an ideology that actually triumphed in the twentieth century world. In his book, *An All-consuming*

1 See, for example, Christopher Lingle, "Consumption Can Drive Economic Growth?," *Ideas on Liberty*, November 2001.

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Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America (2000), Gary Cross pointed out that “Consumerism, the belief that goods give meaning to individuals and their roles in a society, was victorious even though it had no formal philosophy, no parties, and no obvious leaders.”² Likewise, historians in Western Europe have identified a “consumer revolution” that accompanied or even predated the better-studied Industrial Revolution.

Although these concepts are less commonly applied to other areas of the world, it is a mistake to assume that consumerism is a uniquely Western phenomenon and the development of consumerism is uniform around the world. Studies of the history of consumerism routinely overemphasize the role of the market, which enables the consumer to exercise free personal choice. Thus, the freedom to consume is considered as a *sine qua non* of the market economy. Don Slater identifies the common equation of consumerism and freedom in the following way:

Consumer culture denotes a social arrangement in which the relation between lived culture and social resources, between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, is mediated through markets. Consumer culture marks out a system in which consumption is dominated by the consumption of commodities, and in which cultural reproduction is largely understood to be carried out through the exercise of free personal choice in the private sphere of everyday life.³

Almost the same arguments can be found in the writings of many liberal economists – Friedrich August von Hayek⁴, Ludwig von Mises⁵, Milton Friedman⁶, or sociologists like Zygmunt Bauman⁷, who observe that the very notion of individual freedom itself has been conceptualized in terms of consumer choice.

In contrast, consumerism in many non-European countries did not stem primarily from individual freedom, self-expression, and pleasure. The “guided” consumption, or state-supported consumerism imposing serious constraints on individuals, rather than mechanisms based on individual freedom, is deeply rooted in many countries around the world. In fact, freedom in the marketplace is more the exception than the rule in the histories of consumerism in most parts of East Asia. There are many vivid examples of how the state attempted to nationalize its consumer culture and constrained individual choice. The *Swadeshi* movement, an economic strategy of self-sufficiency in India, aimed at removing British colonial power through the boycott of British goods and revival of domestic products is

2 Gary Cross, *An All-consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 1.

3 Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Oxford: Polity Press 1997), p. 8.

4 Friedrich August von Hayek, “History and Politics,” in F. A. Hayek (ed.), *Capitalism and the Historians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), Friedrich August von Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948) or Friedrich August von Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty: The Definitive Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

5 Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), Ludwig von Mises, *Theory and History: An Interpretation of Social and Economic Evolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957).

6 Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), Milton & Rose Friedman, *Free to Choose: A Personal Statement* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1980).

7 Zygmunt Bauman, *Freedom* (Open University Press, 1988). For the critical view on Bauman’s arguments see Mark Davis, *Freedom and Consumerism: A Critique of Zygmunt Bauman’s Sociology* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2008) or Michael Hviid Jacobsen & Poul Poder (eds.), *The Sociology of Zygmunt Bauman: Challenges and Critique* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2008).

one of the best-known and best-studied examples of the “nationalization” of consumerism in the world.⁸ The other is the National Product Movement in China, which was characterized by a common slogan “Chinese people ought to consume Chinese products.”⁹ Likewise, Ireland, France and Germany, among other countries, also experienced a similar phase of the “national product movements” with varying intensity in nation-making projects from the late colonial times to the present.

In Japan, at least from the eighteenth century to the present, the consumer has existed as an integral part of Japan’s economic life, acquiring, utilizing and enjoying the ever expanding quantity and range of goods that Japanese producers have created. The literature of the period describes the various kinds of goods - food, clothes, entertainment, or luxury goods - that were consumed, not just by the elite but also by the newly emerging merchant class, since at least the Genroku period (1688-1703) until the mid-nineteenth century. The masterpieces of Ihara Saikaku,¹⁰ Monzaemon Chikamatsu or Mitsui Takafusa¹¹ provide us with vivid descriptions of how the rising income and growing economic strength of Tokugawa merchants was reflected in the spread of consumer values and development of consumerism. Due to the ideological limits, however, consumption *per se* was not, in general, appreciated as a source of prosperity and economic growth but rather as a manifestation of personal greed and immoral behavior. Thus, the modernization of the country in the second part of the nineteenth century brought the urgent need for rearticulating the new concept of consumption in order to incorporate it into the officially approved and generally championed policy of catching-up.

Contrary to the generally accepted fixed idea that consumption is the purpose and the sole end of all production, the demand-side approach was not the leading concept of the economic policy at the time of industrialization in Japan. In the story of the modern Japanese nation, the Japanese have usually been described as workers and income-savers, managers and entrepreneurs, or punctual government bureaucrats, but seldom as those who have consumed most of the goods that the Japanese economy produced. Although recognizing that the “civilization and enlightenment” (*bunmei kaika*) might sometimes be embodied in the kinds of consumer goods, the Meiji government essentially concerned itself with raising investment in the industries and infrastructure that formed the basis of economic and political power in the late nineteenth century, strictly following the concept of “rich nation and strong

8 The *Swadeshi* movement, which started with the partition of Bengal in 1905 and continued until 1908, was the most successful pre-Gandhian opposition movement. For the philosophical aspects of the movement see Thomas Weber, “Gandhi, Deep Ecology, Peace Research and Buddhist Economics,” *Journal of Peace Research*, May 1999, Vol. 36, pp. 349-361, or V. Sankaran Nair, *Swadeshi Movement: The Beginnings of Students Unrest in South India* (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1985). Its economic consequences are discussed in Ajit K. Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Economic Thought* (London: Routledge, 1993), or Lisa Trivedi, *Clothing Gandhi’s Nation: Homespun and Modern India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), particularly in Chapter 1: A Politics of Consumption: Swadeshi and Its Institutions (pp. 1-37). For the relationship between consumption and nationalism, see S. Gurumurthy, “Swadeshi and Nationalism” in Christophe Jaffrelot (ed.), *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 342-354.

9 For deep analysis of the consumerism movement in early twentieth-century China and creation of the modern nation see particularly Karl Gerth, *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003.)

10 Ihara Saikaku, *Nippon eitaigura*, in Taniwaki Masachika, Jinbō Kazuya, Teruoka Yasutaka (eds.) *Nihon koten bungaku zenshū*, Volume 40 (Tokio: Shōgakkan 1972).

11 Mitsui Takafusa, *Chōnin kōkenrōkū*, in Nakamura Yukihiko (ed.), *Nihon shisō taikei*, Volume 59 (Tokio: Iwanami shoten, 1975).

army” (*fukoku kyōhei*¹²).

Thus, although the Meiji Restoration began to make significant changes in the ways of life of Japanese people, it was not until the Taisho period that consumerism became a main attribute of modernity and popularization of Western consumer goods. As more and more people in the interwar period moved from traditional family life in the countryside to work and setting up their own households in the towns and cities, new goods were acquired, new kinds of household structure established and new forms of social activity were devised. By the late 1930s, half of the population lived in urban areas, relying on the market for all that they consumed, and developing urban lifestyles and patterns of consumption, while those who remained in the countryside were becoming less and less immune from the influence of “modern life” of the cities. Although the larger share of the goods that Japanese people ate, drank, wore and furnished their houses with were still “traditional” products, they were consumed within the new context of modern life.¹³

In my brief presentation I am going to demonstrate how consumption patterns contributed to the democratization of interwar Japanese society. I will focus particularly on the Hanshin region, the area located at the foot of Mt. Rokkō between Osaka and Kobe. Since early modern times, this area has played an important role in the economic life of Japan, and after the Great Kantō Earthquake, which occurred in 1923, the significance of the Hanshin region as a local center particularly increased in the mid-twenties.

In principle, the interwar period was a time of political and economic instability, characterized by financial and economic disorder and growing discontent among political and military circles. At the same time, however, by the interwar period, Japan was experiencing significant development in many spheres of social life. It was obvious particularly in the case of the infrastructure, which began to take the features characteristic of Western-styled modern life, that is, the rapid growth of cities; the emergence of new residential areas on the suburbs of the big cities, which forced the growing number of people to commute daily from the suburbs to the centers; the establishment of department stores, catering, leisure and sport facilities; the systems of mass public entertainment; and other features. In many respects, these features provided the framework within which a growing urban middle class sought to obtain new consumer goods derived from the West, and to adopt the lifestyle inseparably bound with Western consumerism. The implementation of the infrastructure focused on modern mass consumption and its adaptation to Japanese historical milieu resulted in the Japanese version of modernity that continued to play the significant role in the everyday life of Japanese people for a long time until the war and even in the postwar years.

During the interwar period Japanese society demonstrated two main tendencies, which emerged as a natural consequence of the economic boom just after World War I. The first tendency was the rapid urbanization coming from both individual and corporate efforts to reduce time and expense in commuting while improving opportunities for jobs, education, housing, and transportation. Living in cities permitted individuals and families to take advantage of

12 Japanese personal names are quoted in the Japanese order, with family name first, and given name afterwards, and with macrons to indicate long vowels. However, in citing Japanese works written by non-Japanese authors, I have not attempted to add macrons where they do not appear in the works. Also, I have omitted macrons in the names of well-known cities, Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka, except when they are part of the transliterated title of a book or article

13 Penelope Francks, *The Japanese Consumer: An Alternative Economic History of Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 9.

the opportunities of proximity, diversity, and marketplace competition.¹⁴ The second tendency was the consolidation in urban life, since the new incomers definitely accepted the fact that their futures were inseparably bound with the cities. These features influenced business opportunity, namely, the property land development and the real estate business, and resulted in long-term prospects for investment into the social infrastructure that urban population could “consume” and utilize. However, there was a great difference in the investments in the public and private sector. While national and local governments strived to establish and improve particularly urban housing and public utilities, as one can still find, for example, in Shukugawa,¹⁵ private investors preferred to develop the transport, retail and leisure facilities that met the new, growing demand of almost all social classes. The best example of the trends was the Hankyu station of the Hankyu Railway Company located in Umeda district in the northern part of Osaka. The inauguration of the new station in March 1910 opened the way for huge expansion of the railway company into the whole Hanshin area at the foot of Mt. Rokkō.¹⁶ The network of Hankyu lines, which was practically completed in the late 1930s, remains almost unchanged today.

Hankyū Railway Company, however, was not the only case of the boom in the transport, retail and leisure sector. The same services were provided by the Osaka Municipal Electric Railway Company¹⁷, while the Hanshin Railway Company strived to draw customer attention by offering weekend bus trips to the nearby mountains, as witnessed by many period pamphlets for the new bus and special summer lines for trips to Mt. Rokkō. The transportation and communication networks were used not only by the urban population but also facilitated the integration of rural households into the emerging national lifestyle, which resulted in the gradual elimination of the disparity between rural and urban areas.

The expansion of the suburbs and the commuting life resulted in investment into shopping and leisure facilities, mainly at the central stations, such as the above-mentioned Umeda station, where commuters could spend their time while waiting for their trains to the suburbs. Hankyū Railway Company opened the Hankyū Department Store at Umeda station in 1929. Since the railway networks and the residential areas on the suburbs expanded together, the urban population got the opportunity to enjoy shopping and outings.

Investments in the new shopping facilities, however, were not limited to the railway companies, but were made by well-established department stores in the centers of cities as well. Shopping streets like Dōtonbori in Osaka were

14 The population of the six greatest cities almost doubles between 1920 and 1940. For details see Penelope Francks, op. cit., pp. 110-112.

15 For the municipal plans for the new housing facilities between the Nishinomiya and the Kōshien area see “Kōgai jūtakuchi no keisei” in *Hanshinkan modanizūmu: Exhibition Catalogue* (Kyoto: Tankōsha, 1997), pp. 26-54.

16 The history of the company dates back to 1907 when the forerunner to the Hankyū Railways, Kobayashi Ichizō, a well-known industrialist-turned-politician, made his significant contribution to establishing the Minoo Arima Electric Tramway Company (*Minoo Arima denki kidō kabushiki gaisha*). On March 10, 1910 the company opened the railway line from Umeda to Takarazuka (Takarazuka main line) and from Ishibashi to Minoo (Minoo line). To boost the use of the railway, Kobayashi promoted a number of leisure facilities at the sites along the track. In February 1918, the company changed its name to Hanshin Kyūko Railway Company (*Hanshin kyūko dentetsu kabushiki gaisha*), referred to as Hankyū, deriving the name from a combination of the Chinese characters for Osaka.

17 *Osaka shiei denki tetsudō*, in short *Osaka shiden*, established in 1903, was the first public (municipal) electric railway company in Japan. Kyoto Electric Railway Company, the first electric company in Japan founded in 1895, did not resume public service until 1912.

not only the places where people could buy the necessities but aspired to become a place of the cultural activities, mass entertainment and socialization.¹⁸ For drawing the attention of both the young, modern generation, and the older, conservative customers they implemented modern forms of shopping like open sales space in order to allow the customers to walk in just from the street without removing their shoes, and new methods of marketing such as innovative forms of advertising from poster campaigns and gift vouchers to mail order and delivery services.

The popularity of shopping in department stores also stemmed from the fact that they kept in stock a wide range of goods and offered “windows to modern Western life” while “Japanese ones” — both new and traditional — remained in the hands of small-scale retailers or street markets. Thanks to the new, above-mentioned business policy department stores took a major share of the new, middle-class market in the big cities. Regardless of the limited purchasing power, the middle class represented the main customers for the new department stores and venture business, because it was counterbalanced by the credit system provided by both banks and producers of sellers (department stores). The well-known example of such common practice analyzed by Andrew Gordon was a system of installment payment implemented by the Singer Sewing Machine Company.¹⁹

Shopping in the department stores, however, was not the only activity for which interwar urban growth provided an expanding infrastructure and new opportunities. Since the Tokugawa period the cities had been offering a range of facilities for eating and drinking outside the home. Alongside them, by the interwar period, various kinds of Western-style restaurants were becoming well established in the main urban centers. The attraction of Western style catering came particularly from the informal social context. Eating in Western style, with shoes and coats, and without formal rules and fixed sitting order, was a sign of the emancipation, and opened the way to the democratization of catering. This trend was obvious in the drinking of “Western” drinks, that is, beer, coffee and black tea. Particularly drinking beer was seen as a mean of socialization, and in the 1920s no one could ignore the rapidly increasing number of beer halls, cafes and tea houses.

The rapid development of suburban areas and their transport links with the centers of the cities also facilitated the emergence of a wide range of new leisure activities. At the same time when the Seibu Railway Company²⁰ developed mountain resorts in Hakone and Karuizawa, where visitors could ski, swim in a pool and play golf or tennis, both Hankyū and Hanshin Railway Company in Osaka pioneered other ways of increasing their passenger business,

18 Dōtonbori is one of the main commercial, particularly restaurants, centers in Osaka. It is a street running alongside the Dōtonbori canal between Dōtonboribashi Bridge and Nipponbashi Bridge in Namba ward. Its history traces back to 1612 when a local merchant and entrepreneur, Dōton Yasui, began expanding the tiny Umezu River, which ran east to west, hoping to increase commerce in the region by connecting the two branches of the Yohori River, which ran north to south, with a canal. The canal was finished by his cousins in 1615. In 1621 the Tokugawa shogunate designated Dōtonbori as an entertainment district with Kabuki theatres, popular attractions and restaurants. In modern times Dōtonbori, which preserved its fame as the center of entertainment, became the shopping district and one of the principle tourist destinations.

19 Andrew Gordon, “Selling the American Way: Singer Sales System in Japan, 1900 – 1938,” *Business History Review*, Volume 82, Winter 2008, pp. 671-699.

20 *Seibu tetsudō kabushiki gaisha*, originally founded as Seibu Railways in 1894, operated the line between Kokubunji and Kawagoe in Tokyo. Since 1895 it built and operated a number of other lines around Shinjuku in western Tokyo. In 1943 the company merged with the Musashino Railway Company, which had been operating an Ikebukuro - Hanno line since 1915. Musashino Railway renamed itself to Seibu Railway following the merger; however, the former Seibu network based around Shinjuku and the former Musashino network based around Ikebukuro remain operationally separated today.

constructing an assortment of leisure facilities, particularly a zoo, hot-spring resorts or hiking and mountaineering facilities. By the 1920s Hankyu introduced sea-bathing as a mass leisure activity with trains taking customers to the beaches at Ashiya and Kōroen.²¹

The commercialization of sporting activities, both the older, traditional and the newer, Western ones, proceeded quickly. Sumō wrestling became an institutionalized competitive sport with the establishment of the championship system.²² Professional baseball teams started to play in new stadiums, which provided large and comfortable space for the audience. One of the best-known examples has been the Kōshien baseball stadium in Osaka, which was completed in 1924 and held more than 50,000 supporters and sport fans. And those who endeavored to be smart and modern, including young women, joined sports clubs, particularly tennis or golf ones.

By the end of the 1930s, Japanese society demonstrated the high density of various forms of entertainment from billiard halls via cinemas and cabarets to the Takarazuka revue theatre. Takarazuka revue (*Takarazuka kagekidan*) was founded by the president of Hankyu Railways, Kobayashi Ichizō, in 1913 in Takarazuka city. The city was the terminus of a Hankyu line and already a popular tourist destination because of its hot springs and proximity to Mt. Rokkō mountain tracks. Kobayashi believed that it was the ideal spot to open an attraction of some kind that would boost train ticket sales and draw more business to Takarazuka. Since Western song and dance shows were becoming more popular and Kobayashi considered the Kabuki theater to be old and elitist, he decided that an all-female theater group might be well received by the general public. Within a few years several Takarazuka troupes were touring Japan's major cities and theaters were constructed for them in Takarazuka in 1924 and in Tokyo in 1934), and even today these troupes remain a unique fixture of Japanese popular culture.

Although in rural areas and the old parts of cities community based activities still remained central, thanks to the transportation networks, access to social recreation and modern forms of entertainment even for rural people became a driving force for elimination of the differences between life in the cities and the countryside. What emerged was less “mass culture” than a diversified and differentiated culture industry seeking out the segments of market that stretched from Westernized intellectuals, through “modern” boys and girls and aspiring salarymen, to the working classes. In this aspect the consumption of goods – both material and intellectual – was one of the significant factors of democratization of prewar society, and contributed to the formation of the middle class, which became the building block of the postwar egalitarian society (*byōdō shakai*).

Conclusion

In the interwar period the relationship of consumption to social and family life – including gender roles – brought a new conception of Japanese cultural identity. Namely, for the new middle classes, the purchase and use of new consumer goods formed an integral part of modern life. The new houses in the residential areas on the suburbs of the cities were designed to be inhabited by modern couples, enjoying privacy in their own rooms and eating together

21 Wada Hidetoshi, “Hanshinkan no umibe” in *Hanshinkan modanizumu: Exhibition Catalogue* (Kyoto: Tankosha, 1997), pp. 230-232.

22 Sumō became a professional sporting entertainment in the early Edo period. Current professional sumō tournaments began in the Tomioka Hachiman shrine in 1684 and have been held in *Ryūgoku kokugikan* (also known as Sumō Hall) since 1909.

at the same table. The growing abundance of goods was not, of course, to liberate women from household duties, but rather to demand of them a professional commitment to the rational and scientific management of everyday life. Thus, there is no exaggeration to say that the concept of the full-time housewife, *senryō shufu*, as a typical phenomenon of postwar Japanese society, began to sprout from the consumerism in interwar Japan.

On the other hand, it was not only in the cities where consumerism became an unavoidable part of everyday life even for rural families. As conflict with the West intensified through the 1930s, some intellectuals tried to define what was distinctive about so-called “Japanese civilization” and provide a philosophical basis for the values, and traditions that seemed to still survive in rural life.²³ However, by the 1930s it was no longer possible even for “rural” and “traditional” to be anything other than fashion choices for those who lived within the consumer culture of the urban world.

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23 Penelope Frank, op. cit., p. 143.

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