

University of Wollongong

## Research Online

---

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts -  
Papers

Faculty of Arts, Social Sciences & Humanities

---

1-1-2013

### Sweat, perfume and tobacco: the ambivalent labor of the dancehall girl

Vera C. Mackie

University of Wollongong, vera@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Law Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Mackie, Vera C., "Sweat, perfume and tobacco: the ambivalent labor of the dancehall girl" (2013). *Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts - Papers*. 387.

<https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers/387>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: [research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

## Sweat, perfume and tobacco: the ambivalent labor of the dancehall girl

### Abstract

In his 1931 novella *Dancers and Drawers* (*Dansii to zurosu*), Tada Michio describes an enchanting figure, a dancehall girl on the streets of Tokyo: "With a cheeky bob and slim legs. With stockings of a color that matches her skin so well she looks like she's not wearing any. Her shoes are patent leather with high heels. Her gaudy salmon pink dress flutters in the wind as she steps along the pavement" (Tada 1931: 1).

### Keywords

era2015

### Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

### Publication Details

Mackie, V. C. (2013). Sweat, perfume and tobacco: the ambivalent labor of the dancehall girl. In A. Freedman, L. Miller & C. Yano (Eds.), *Modern Girls on the Go: Gender, Mobility and Labor in Japan* (pp. 67-82). Stanford: Stanford University Press.

## Sweat, Perfume and Tobacco: The Ambivalent Labor of the Dance Hall Girl

Vera Mackie, University of Wollongong

in Alisa Freedman, Laura Miller and Christine Yano (eds) *Modern Girls on the Go: Gender, Mobility and Labor in Japan*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013.

In his 1931 novella *Dancers and Drawers (Dansā to zurōsu)*, Tada Michio describes an enchanting figure, a dance hall girl on the streets of Tokyo: “With a cheeky bob and slim legs. With stockings of a color that matches her skin so well she looks like she’s not wearing any. Her shoes are patent leather with high heels. Her gaudy salmon pink dress flutters in the wind as she steps along the pavement” (Tada 1931: 1).<sup>1</sup>

### [Figure 1: Kawanishi Hide, 1930, “Dance Hall”]

Kawanishi Hide’s (1894–1965) woodblock print of a dance hall from 1930 presents another intoxicating scene [Figure 1]. The print is composed of fields of a few strong colors: red, yellow, green, black and white. The figures of women in vivid dresses overflow the edges of the rectangular print. The black jackets and trousers of the men throw the bright colors of the women’s dresses into relief, while these shapes and colors are reflected in the glossy dance floor below. In the background is a stage where musicians play trombones and trumpets, and the gaudy colors and strong lines of the picture somehow suggest the swing of the music. Dance hall girls are seated around the edges of the dance floor, waiting for the next patron to purchase a ticket to dance.<sup>2</sup>

Such scenes from popular culture reflect a fascination with dance hall girls in 1920s and 1930s Japan. These women appear regularly in the visual culture, literary works, and popular sociology of the time, and dance halls also provide a backdrop for satirical cartoons on the foibles of the “modern girl.” While the dance hall girl is regularly represented in the writings and art works of others, her own voice and her own experiences are somewhat more elusive. In order

to get a sense of the working lives of such women, it is necessary to read between the lines of a range of sources: fiction, popular culture, popular sociology, visual culture and ephemera.

The dance hall is a contradictory site for the enactment of practices of labor and leisure. For the male patrons, the dance hall is a site of commodified leisure, where they can purchase the company of a female dancing companion for a short time. For the dance hall girls, however, the dance hall is a site of labor. Their company is a commodity to be purchased. Dancing is hard work, and the dance hall is a workplace structured by power relationships shaped by gender, class, ethnicity, and racialized positioning. These dimensions of power determine which men can purchase the company of which women, so that the binaristic gender relations of male purchaser and female provider of services are mediated by class and ethnicity. The dance hall is also symptomatic of Japan's place in the world. The practices of the dance hall were transmitted from the United States in the 1920s to the rest of the world. Dance halls and taxi dancing were adopted not only in the urban centers of Japan, but also in other major East Asian cities such as Shanghai. The history of the dance hall thus takes us from the major cities of the United States to Europe and East Asia, reflecting the movements of people, products, practices, and ideas under conditions of colonial modernity (on colonial modernity, see Barlow 2004: 7 and 1997: 1–20). The appearance of the dance hall girl in these sites reflects the gendered and ethnicized power relations of each place.

### **The Dance Hall**

The taxi dance hall was invented in the United States during the Prohibition Era, and provided a space where men could socialize with women without alcohol. The first taxi dance halls were in port cities on the West Coast but soon spread to Chicago, New York and other major cities. Men would buy tickets to dance with the women, who came to be known as “taxi

dancers.” Like taxi drivers, they provided services for a limited amount of time, in turn, to whoever could pay the charge. The dance halls revealed some of the gendered, classed, and ethnicized dynamics of the major United States cities and provided the site for one of the classic sociological investigations of the Chicago School: Paul G. Cressey’s *The Taxi-Dance Hall* (1969 [1932]). The clients of these dance halls were often men who were marginalized in society and could not otherwise hope to interact with women in a casual way. For example, immigrant men from the Philippines, at that time a United States colony, frequented the dance halls as one of the few places where they could socialize with white women (Parreñas 1998: 115–134). Right from the start, the dance halls were a site where the dynamics of imperialism and colonialism were revealed.

As the dance hall was introduced to Japan in the 1920s,<sup>3</sup> special-purpose buildings were constructed, although some dances were also held in hotel ballrooms. Several books appeared on the architecture of dance halls, which had to be suited to the purposes of social dancing, while complying with regulations designed to discourage unseemly mixing between men and women off the dance floor (Nagai 2004: 659–679).<sup>4</sup> The dance halls provided an opportunity to experiment with new architectural styles and interior decoration. They were situated in major cities like Tokyo and Osaka, former treaty ports like Yokohama and Kobe, and other major entertainment centers. The Takarazuka Hall (Takarazuka Kaikan) in Western Japan, for example, was in the latest art deco style. The dance halls were places where the newest international fashion and accessories could be seen, worn by young men and women often referred to as “modern boys” and “modern girls.” The dance halls flourished from just after the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, until they were suppressed with increasingly moralistic regulations in the 1930s.

Kon Wajirō and his colleagues in “Modernology,” who conducted ethnographies of the places and practices of daily life, described the various dance halls in Tokyo in their 1929 *New Guide to Greater Tokyo* (*Shinpan dai-Tōkyō annai*), reporting that the halls would generally charge an entrance fee of around fifty *sen*, although the entrance fee might be commuted if dance tickets were purchased. Dance tickets cost ten *sen* in the daytime when music was provided by phonograph records and twenty *sen* at night when there was a jazz band. The dancers pocketed around forty percent of the fee. The Tokyo Dance Research Institute (Tokyō Buyō Kenkyūjo) in the Kyōbashi neighbourhood was one of the older dance halls, rather formal, and with a Filipino jazz band. The Union Dance Hall in Ningyo-chō had a “hedonistic” and “cheerful” atmosphere but charged an entry fee of one yen, as well as charging for dancing tickets. The Kiraku-kan in Shibuya had only twenty or so dancers who seemed like beginners, and neither the dancers nor the patrons were very skillful. The Kokka in Shinjuku had an air of decadence, while the Iidabashi Dance Hall (Iidabashi Buyōjo) had a more serious (*majime*) atmosphere. The Ikeuchi Dance Hall (Ikeuchi Buyōjo) in Sugamo Shinden boasted of being the oldest dance hall in Tokyo and had rather a warm, “domestic” (*kateiteki*) feel (Kon 2001 [1929]: 287–291).

The Florida Dance Hall in Akasaka, described as being as large as the Moulin de la Galette in Paris,<sup>5</sup> had a Hawaiian band (Kon 2001 [1929]: 287–291). Florida is perhaps the best known of the Tokyo dance halls and has been immortalized in the photojournalism of Hamaya Hiroshi (1915–1999) and the paintings of Enomoto Chikatoshi (1898–1972) (Brown 2012: 258–263). One of Hamaya’s well-known photographs provides a behind-the-scenes glimpse of a dance hall: a barely-clad woman is seen from behind as she gazes at her reflection in a mirror, resting her elbows on a ledge in front of the mirror. She is perhaps checking her make-up before her appearance on the dance floor, or perhaps taking a moment to rest between dances. Enomoto’s

series of large fan-shaped paintings prepared for the Gajō-en wedding hall in Meguro in Tokyo (Brown 2012) depict the women of the Florida Dance Hall. One woman sings into a microphone, while a pair of dancers in revealing dresses clutch small purses to keep their dance tickets. All of the women in Enomoto's paintings have bobbed and permed hair, wear rouge and lipstick, and have fine plucked and pencilled eyebrows in the style of the modern girl (for more on this style, see Mackie 2010b; Mackie 2012).

The *New Guide to Greater Tokyo* provided a taxonomy of the dance halls and other entertainment venues in the metropolis, while other writers and artists provided a taxonomy of the different kinds of people found there. The Modernologists' casual references to Filipino and Hawai'ian dance bands suggest wide-ranging circuits of mobility for the jazz musicians. Jazz bands played on the ocean liners which plied the Pacific and East Asia, and some of these bands played in Osaka or Yokohama dance halls while docked in these port cities (Atkins 2001: 60).<sup>6</sup> Dance hall girls, too, moved between these sites, as we shall see below.

### **The Modern Girl and the Dance Hall Girl**

The dance hall girl may be seen as one manifestation of the figure known as the “modern girl.” The rise of the modern girl roughly coincides with the rise of the art deco and modernist styles in the period of reconstruction after the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 (Mackie 2010b: 906–1011; Mackie 2012: ). She is associated with the spaces of the café, the cinema, the theater, the department store, the ocean liner and the dance hall. In visual culture we see her driving, shopping, swimming, playing sports, smoking, drinking, and dancing.<sup>7</sup> Advertisements often present the modern girl as both consumer of modern products and as a spectacle to be consumed (Mackie 2010a: 91–116). The modern girl has a distinctive style: western dress with short skirt, a

cloche hat, shoes and stockings, pearls, beads, rings and earrings, lipstick, rouge and beauty spots. The modern girl herself can be seen as an icon of modernity, and the shape of her bobbed hair, also came to function as a metonym. The figure of the modern girl decorates the sheet music of the 1920s and the matchboxes used to advertise cafés, cabarets, and dance halls (Mackie 2012). The dancing legs of the modern girl in her short skirt also function as an icon in this context (Silverberg 2007: 53).

Dance hall girls were also, of course, working women. Most visual and literary representations, however, focus on their attractiveness to the male client and consumer, rather than on the conditions of their labor. The *New Guide to Greater Tokyo* describes the attraction of the dance hall for the male patrons.

On looking at the swirling pleasure in the white-hot mass of men and women in the dance hall, there is no doubt that anyone who could dance would want to join in, to keep dancing to the sound of that cheerful jazz music with a young woman in your embrace... To get close to a waitress (*jokyū*) in a café, in one of the high class cafés in Ginza, for example, takes quite some time, and even then the rules forbid even holding her hand. In the dance hall, however, just for the price of a bottle of beer, one can openly hold hands with a woman and dance madly with her for a few minutes without anyone trying to stop you... There is no other entertainment so modern (*kindaiteki*), so cheaply available, and such good exercise (Kon 2001 [1929]: 287).

These reflections suggest that, in the popular mind, the dance hall girl was connected with other modern women's occupations, such as the actress, the artist's model, the café waitress



and the cabaret dancer. What these occupations share is some form of commodification of women's bodies and sexuality. There are also, however, hierarchical differences: the company of the dance hall girl is apparently cheaper than that of the café waitress. The names of many of these occupations were formed through neologisms employing the suffix “*gāru*” (from the English “girl”), such as “*sutekki gāru*” (“stick girl,” a woman who could be hired for a short time to accompany a man on a walk) (*Examiner* 1929: 18). “*Gāru*” was used for women in service jobs (see Tipton, in this volume and Miller in this volume). Other terms used the suffix “*jō*” (literally “daughter” but also translatable as “girl”). The term “*dansu-jō*” (dancer, taxi-dancer) is thus a hybrid term, formed from the Japanese transliteration of the English word “dance” (*dansu*) and the Sino-Japanese “*jō*.”<sup>8</sup> The café waitress, by contrast, was linguistically domesticated with the use of the Sino-Japanese term *jokyū* (waitress, literally “woman who serves”). The labor market for these service industries was paralleled by other labor markets.<sup>9</sup> Other women worked in factories or as domestic servants, while more elite women with a higher school education might work as teachers, shop assistants, or telephone operators (Tsurumi 1990; Hunter 1995).

While the Japanese media debated the morality of the modern girl in all of her manifestations (see Introduction and Tipton in this volume), international correspondents in the Anglophone media reported on the spectacle of the bobbed-haired, short-skirted women in the dance halls of the major cities of Japan (Point True 1928: 19; *Cairns Post* 1928: 11; *Morning Bulletin* 1929: 8; Uenoda 1930: 13–21; *Queenslander* 1933: 35; *Brisbane Courier* 1933: 7). Most of these journalists saw the dance halls as exotic spaces and the dance hall girls as exotic figures. While the practices of taxi dancing and the figures of taxi dancers were familiar from other major international cities, the dance hall became an exotic site when relocated to Japan, and the dance hall girl became an exotic spectacle in the eyes of the Anglophone viewer. The dance hall girl

was simultaneously a figure of modernity for the Japanese metropolitan male, and a figure of exoticism for the Anglophone male. For the Japanese male, the dance hall girl was “other” in terms of her gender and class. For the Anglophone male, there was in addition an ethnicized otherness. All of these male viewers, however, could reaffirm their masculinity through the power to purchase the services of the dance hall girl for a short time.

**[Figure 2: Kitazawa Rakuten, “Bad Girl,” *Jiji manga*, October 1925.]**

Although the dance halls seemed glamorous to many of the male patrons, mainstream society often looked on the dance halls with a judgmental gaze. In October 1925, artist Kitazawa Rakuten (1876–1955) contributed a cartoon, “Bad Girl” (*Furyō shōjo*), to the satirical magazine *Jiji manga* (Comic Times) [Figure 2]. Rakuten was commenting on a seventeen-year-old woman, Fukaya Aiko, who had shot her lover “Ricci” with a gun. The cartoon reveals the cultural associations of the dance halls in 1920s Japan: a space where both sexes mix, young people wear Western dress, and cross-cultural encounters take place. The insouciant modern girl in cloche hat, bobbed hair, and form-fitting dress dominates the foreground of the frame. She plays with her scarf with one hand, while placing her other hand on her hip. A respectable man and woman are seen in one corner of the cartoon, obviously judging the deviant modern girl and demonstrating the respectable standards she is being measured against. The respectable woman wears a kimono, while her husband wears a western-style suit. Their faces are creased with concern at the antics of the modern girl, the focus of their concern shown in a balloon above their heads. The balloon shows a couple dancing in a dance hall, their posture echoed by another whimsical couple, a champagne bottle dancing with a champagne glass.

Moral reformers coalesced with the Home Ministry, calling for reform of cafés, cabarets, bars, and dance halls. As dance halls were controlled by municipal governments, these campaigns took place at different times in different cities. The crackdowns in Osaka in 1927 led to a boom in dance halls in post-earthquake Tokyo, until the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, in turn, exercised its own controls (Atkins 2001: 58). Social critic Tosaka Jun (1900–1945) noted the contradictory attitudes of the Home Ministry. While they suppressed cafés and dance halls – which were associated with non-Japanese culture – licensed prostitution districts continued as before (Tosaka 1983 [1936]: 44–47, cited in Silverberg 2007: 76). The Home Ministry and Tokyo Metropolitan Police exercised increasing control in campaigns between 1928 and 1930, and again in 1934 and 1938, with dance halls closing down by 1940 as part of the mobilization of the populace for total war (Garon 1997: 107–8; Atkins 2001: 63–4; Silverberg 2007: 76).

### **Gender and Class on the Dance Floor**

The dance hall is an ambiguous and ambivalent space: a place of leisure and entertainment for the male clients, but a workplace for the female dancers. Nomura Toshihiko's (1904–1987) print from 1924 depicts a different view of the dance hall from most other contemporary representations, for it does not actually show anyone dancing. Two women sit on chairs, no other men or women in sight. They wear the short skirts and bobbed hair of the modern girl. They slump in their chairs, their heads cast down. It seems they are resting between dances.<sup>10</sup> Their posture highlights the fact that they are working women, and that dancing is, in fact, hard work for them. The print is in sombre tones of dark red and green, in contrast to the vibrant colors of Kawanishi's dance hall. The name of the dance hall on the window behind them is "Break Away" (in English), perhaps ironic in its associations. Does it mean that the dance hall is a place where men can "break away" from their everyday lives or does it suggest that the

women would like to escape from their ambivalent situation? The *New Guide to Greater Tokyo* documented the working conditions, economic conditions and profound ambivalence of the dance hall.

The young dancers, around the age of twenty, have to dance from two o'clock in the afternoon until eleven o'clock at night embraced by men in a whirlwind of sweat, perfume, and tobacco. Supposing that they dance continuously from afternoon to evening, around sixty dances, they could pocket four out of every ten *sen*, which would give them two *yen* and forty *sen*; and if they danced another hundred times up to eleven o'clock, then they would keep eight *sen* from each twenty *sen*, meaning they could take away eight *yen* for the night. So, they could make a maximum of ten *yen* per day. However, a dancer would have to be very popular to dance that much, and even so, there are few women who would have the stamina to keep dancing like that, so they would likely have to refuse half of those dances, and might come away with around five *yen* for the day. While the men dance cheerfully, happy with this pleasure in tangible form, the women dance in their dance partners' arms with a rather pained cheerfulness, their eyes burning brightly, but with a cold, ashen taste in their mouths (Kon 2001 [1929]: 290–291).<sup>11</sup>

The power dynamics of the dance floor are revealed in several scenes of author Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's 1925 novel *Chijin no Ai* (*A Fool's Love*, translated as *Naomi*, the name of the main female character, Tanizaki 1986). The novel focuses on the relationship between a white-collar salaried worker, Jōji, and a woman known as Naomi. Jōji comes to know Naomi in her work as a waitress in a café, and he eventually marries her in the expectation that he can train her to be his

ideal companion: schooled in English, singing, and social dancing. Naomi has been described as the archetypal “modern girl,” and several scenes in the novel are played out on the dance floor (for further discussion of the dance hall scenes in this novel, see Mackie 2009: 3–9; Gralla 2010: 88–106).

These scenes reveal a shifting hierarchy shaped by class, gender and racialized positioning. There is a taxonomy of different types of women in the novel. The most refined of middle-class Japanese women are not encountered on the dance floor. The Russian countess and dance teacher, Madame Shlemskaya, suggests the complex history that brought Russian refugees to Japan via Shanghai (Sawada 2001: 31–46). The actress Kirako seems a charismatic and refined figure in the world of the dance hall, but, as an actress, she would be beyond the pale from the point of view of respectable middle-class families (Tanizaki 1986: 92).<sup>12</sup> Jōji’s partner Naomi is a long way from the refined middle-class ladies and the “white countess” Madame Shlemskaya, but may be placed precisely in a hierarchical relationship with the other women encountered in the dance halls. Naomi can look down on another woman, Mā-chan, who presents a carnivalesque image of mismatched colors, much more vulgar than Naomi (Tanizaki 1986: 83–4). Even lower in the hierarchy would be the women who dance for a fee. Naomi is not a dance hall girl, but she does have a background as a café waitress and comes from a family associated with the “water trades” (*mizushōbai*).

Dancing provides Jōji with an opportunity to observe various women at close hand – not only to look but to experience this proximity with all of his senses. Madame Shlemskaya is associated with the whiteness of fabrics such as Georgette and precious stones such as diamonds (Tanizaki 1986: 60–1), but Jōji also has a more earthy response to the experience of dancing with her. In his comments on Madame Shlemskaya’s body odor, Jōji articulates commonly-held views

of racialization at this time. Non-Japanese bodies were thought to have a distinctive smell, due to the consumption of animal products, such as milk, butter, and meat. Indeed, one epithet used to describe Europeans and Americans was *bata-kusai* “smelling of butter.” This passage also, however, expresses the closely linked attitudes of anxiety and fascination, fear and desire (Hamilton 1990: 14–35), which are revealed in Jōji’s encounters with white women on the dance floor.

What’s more, [the countess’s] body had a certain sweet fragrance.... I’m told that Westerners do have strong body odor, but to me, the faint, sweet-sour combination of perfume and perspiration was not at all displeasing – to the contrary, I found it deeply alluring. It made me think of lands across the sea I’d never seen, of exquisite, exotic flower gardens. ‘This is the fragrance exuded by the countess’s white body (*shiroi karada*)!’ I told myself, enraptured, as I inhaled the aroma greedily (Tanizaki 1986: 69).

In the dance hall, Jōji casts his taxonomic eye over a series of women, placing them in a strict hierarchy according to racialized standards of beauty. The dance halls of Tokyo, then, provided a site where men and women of different classes and nationalities could mingle, but these encounters often served to highlight hierarchical differences rather than overcoming them.

Men and women in the Tokyo metropolis could also imagine visiting dance halls in other exotic places, as depicted in Toyoharu’s painting of a dance hall in Marseilles from 1923 (reproduced in Brown 2012), or Tani Jōji’s (real name Hasegawa Kaitarō, 1900–1935) fictional depiction of the entertainment world of Manhattan (Tani 1927; cited in Omori 2003: 239–245). While the dance halls and ballrooms of the United States and Europe were distant dreams, the dance halls of Shanghai were somewhat closer to the metropolis of Tokyo. Artists and novelists

from Japan depicted scenes of dancing with Japanese, Chinese, and Russian women in places like Shanghai's New Carlton Hotel.

### **Colonial Modernity and the Dance Hall**

In 1924, artist Yamamura Kōka (1885–1942) produced a color woodcut depicting the dance hall of the New Carlton Hotel in Shanghai.<sup>13</sup> In this scene, two women are seated at a round table. One has bobbed hair; the other wears a red hat. Both wear western dress, but the embroidered jacket draped on one of the chairs suggests the fashion for Chinoiserie. Several couples dance in the background of the picture, the women all with similar bobbed hair. The male dancing partners are barely visible, and the women are seen from behind, giving them a sense of anonymity. The lack of individual features of the women dancing in the background also suggests a degree of interchangeability between the taxi dancers. The ethnicized and racialized positioning of the dancing women is unclear, but at least one of the seated women appears to be of “European” appearance, possibly Russian. The women, with their bobbed hair and western dress, clearly reference the style of the modern girl.

Several scenes of Yokomitsu Riichi's (1898–1947) novel *Shanghai* also take place in dance halls.<sup>14</sup> Several of the dance hall girls in the novel are Japanese, and they dance with patrons from all over the world, including the Japanese businessmen who are the main protagonists of the novel. Yokomitsu's novel suggests, then, the regional mobility of both men and women from Japan at this time (on regional mobilities, see Driscoll 2010, Itō 2006, Matsuda 2006), but does not go into detail on the routes and circumstances which would have brought such women to Shanghai. Tada Michio (1931: 14), in *Dancers and Drawers*, relates stories of women who went from dance halls in the Tokyo metropolis to Shanghai having been advanced

the cost of their travel and their clothing. Yokomitsu's dance hall portrays a confusion of different nationalities:

An American was holding a German. A Spaniard was holding a Russian. Portuguese bumped into people of mixed blood. A Norwegian kicked at the legs of a chair. Englishmen caused an uproar with a shower of kisses. Inebriated people from Siam, France, Italy, Bulgaria. Sanki alone, his elbows resting on the back of a chair, was staring like a frog at the voluptuousness of people of all nationalities entwined in the strands of tape (Yokomitsu 2001: 80; for a similar description of the various nationalities encountered in a Shanghai dance hall, see Tada 1931: 14).

Historian Frederic Wakeman notes that Shanghai became “a city of tawdry, sordid dancehalls” (Wakeman 1996: 108). He has described the changing fortunes and changing composition of the dancers and patrons of the notorious Carlton Hotel in Shanghai, not so different from Yokomitsu's fictional depiction of a Shanghai dance hall.

The old Carlton closed. It opened again at once as a dancehall with Russian hostesses, a risqué floorshow, and became a cabaret of sailors. Public dancing during the 1920s had been more or less monopolized by White Russian women, but around 1930 dance halls on the Western model began to open up in Shanghai and other Chinese port cities with Chinese *wunü* (dance-hall girls) ... Eventually, toward the end of the 1930s, Shanghai would have 2,500 to 5,000 taxi dancers... (Wakeman 1996: 108).



Historian and literary scholar Leo Ou-fan Lee describes Shanghai in the 1930s as “the cosmopolitan city par excellence...the center of a network of cities linked together by ship routes for the purposes of marketing, transportation and tourism...an international cultural space in which not only Britain and France but also Japan played a significant role” (Lee 1999: 409). Under the terms of the unequal treaties with the Euro-American powers in the nineteenth century, certain ports in Japan and China were designated as “treaty ports,” where international traders could gain access to port facilities, ships could take on fuel and water, and their nationals were exempt from prosecution by the local legal system under the principle of extraterritoriality. By the turn of the century, Japan had successfully renegotiated its treaties with the United States and the European powers and had in turn forced a similar treaty on Korea, before finally annexing Korea in 1910. Cities like Shanghai, Yokohama, Nagasaki, Hakodate, and Kobe were linked with international trading routes. The routes that linked these cities referenced the overlapping circuits of European, United States, and Japanese colonialism and imperialism in the East Asian region. Ocean liners plied these routes, transporting tourists and traders, jazz bands and dance hall girls between the treaty ports. Yamamura Kōka’s print of the New Carlton Hotel in Shanghai provided viewers in Japan with an image of an exotic site, a projection of the dreams of the men of the metropolis. Dance halls were subjected to increased control not only in mainland Japan but also in Manchukuo from 1938, and closed down by 1940, as the government cracked down on activities which were not seen to contribute to the war effort (*Courier Mail* 1938: 14; *Townsville Daily Bulletin* 1938: 11; *West Australian* 1938: 15; Russo 1938a: 18; Russo 1938b: 6).<sup>15</sup>

### **Postscript: The Return of the Dance Hall Girl**

After Japan's defeat in 1945, military forces from the United States, United Kingdom, and other Allied countries occupied the nation from 1945 to 1952, under the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP), General Douglas MacArthur. Once Allied troops landed on Japanese soil, dance halls sprang up again after their wartime suppression. The dance hall proprietors revived the practices that had been outlawed just a few years before, this time with the occupying soldiers as their clients. In January 1946, the *Nagasaki shinbun* reported on the opening of the Roseland Dance Hall to cater to Allied troops stationed at Sasebo (*Nagasaki Shinbun* 1946, cited in Kovner 2009: 794). The international Anglophone media also reported on the entertainments available to the Allied soldiers (*Argus* 1946: 3), usually from the point of view of the soldiers and often referencing knowledge about the entertainment districts of Japan's major cities before the outbreak of war: "Meanwhile, if you are a non-Axis white, and provided you have American dollars or American dollar backing, you can have almost as swell a time as old Japan hands had before the war" (*Courier-Mail* 1946: 2).

At times the tone was highly moralistic. A "Special Correspondent" for *The West Australian* reported on the "taxi dance racket" as early as December 1945, describing dance halls apparently run by the Recreation and Amusement Association (RAA, *Tokushu ian shisetsu kyōkai*) (*West Australian* 1945: 11; see also Percival 1945: 9).<sup>16</sup> While most entertainment establishments were placed off limits to troops, the "Special Correspondent" (*West Australian* 1945: 11) reports that soldiers were allowed to enter the "Oasis of Ginza" because alcohol was not served there (in the Australian vernacular, the "Oasis" was "dry"):

Troops descend to the hot cigarette-smoke-filled basement, 50ft below street level, and choose their partners from 500 simpering Japanese girls in gaily coloured kimonos. They purchase strips of two-yen tickets, each of which entitles

them to a three-minute dance to a slick Japanese orchestra playing latest American dance hits. Obedient to their training, the taxi-dancers make themselves bright and agreeable partners and collect their tickets at the end of each three-minute dance... It should not be imagined that all [the price of the tickets] goes to the taxi dancer, or that taxi-dancing is a lucrative pastime for the tiny doll-like dancers. On the contrary. They are bound to their service by an original debt for their clothing, which includes a beautiful kimono that may cost 1,000 yen, and by the fact that outside exists unemployment and hunger. The dancers live dormitory style in sections of unbombed city buildings, and are provided with their frugal rice meal by their employers. And for this food and shelter they pay from the 150 yen a month... allowed them from their earnings (*West Australian* 1945: 11).

The description of the ticketing system suggests that the practices of the 1920s and 1930s were revived in the Occupation period, and that the house still collected most of the proceeds from the dance tickets. While the dance halls of the 1920s and 1930s had been associated with modernity and Western dress, the Occupation era dance halls catered to Allied expectations of exoticism. The “Special Correspondent” writing for the *West Australian* above, describes the women as “simpering” and “doll-like.” The dance hall girls variously wore kimono, Chinese-style dress, or Western dress. A “Member of the Occupation Force,” reporting on dance halls for *The Mercury*, described the scene: “Paper streamers, festoons, and garlands of all colors in profusion give an air of gaiety. The soft lighting, diffused by multi-colored “Chinese” lanterns and glass shades, lends an exotic aspect to the scene” (Member of the Occupation Force 1946: 3).

Sumi Seo Mishima, in her memoir of postwar Japan, reports on women in dance halls wearing “sarong style evening gowns” (1953: 155), and recounts the sad stories of the dance hall girls.

[M]any of these dancers for hire were war-widows, who had been burnt out or repatriated from the Continent. Each had a sad story to tell of how she had been stranded on this growing crust of postwar Tokyo – a series of tragic, wasteful quarrels with her parents-in-law, accounts of hellish repatriation journeys from a far outpost of the collapsed Japanese Empire, recollections of nights spent penniless, foodless and shivering in the street with her little children, and so on (Mishima 1953: 155–6).

Reports on the dance halls in occupied Japan also reveal tensions between the different armies involved in the Occupation.

In the larger cities, such as Osaka, there are cabarets that really are large dance halls, having a few extra attractions such as drinks, waiters, and stage shows. These places are even more expensive than the dance halls, especially if the visitor avails himself of the facilities for drinking.... The Americans patronize these cabarets in large numbers, but the British troops, with their smaller incomes, could not patronize them to this extent even if available in their area (Member of the Occupation Force 1946: 3).

The suggestion that the dancers were indentured to the dance halls in order to repay debts highlights the extreme poverty of Japan in the immediate postwar period. Accounts from the 1920s and 1930s do not often describe such indenture in the dance halls, although this had been common in brothels and in factories. The involvement of the Japanese government in setting up

the RAA dance halls contrasts with the repressive moralism and nationalism of the wartime regime that had closed down the dance halls in the late 1930s. There are, however, continuities in the wartime provision of military brothels for soldiers of the Japanese army and the postwar provision of various forms of “entertainment” for the occupying soldiers under the auspices of the short-lived RAA.

The shifting history of the dance halls in 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s Japan reflects the shifting gendered, classed, and racialized dimensions of Japan’s place in international circuits of power. In the 1920s, the dance hall showed Japan’s place in the international transmission of cultural forms and practices, with Tokyo taking its place alongside other major global cities. The dance halls of post-earthquake Japan were places where the latest international fashions could be seen, while the buildings themselves were sites for experimentation in the latest modernist, art deco and art nouveau styles. In the 1930s, the dance halls were the sites for cross-cultural encounters. Patrons in Tokyo, Yokohama, and Osaka danced to the music of Hawaiian and Filipino jazz bands, possibly learning to dance from “White Russian” immigrants. Dance halls in Shanghai reflected the intersecting circuits of European, United States, and Japanese colonialism and imperialism. For readers and viewers in the Tokyo metropolis in the 1930s, the dance halls of Shanghai seemed accessible because of Japanese economic and colonial power. In Occupied Japan, the floor of the dance hall was one of the places where new forms of Euro-American hegemony were enacted, in practices which drew on early twentieth century forms of commodification, reimagined through new forms of Orientalism. The figure of the dance hall girl moved through all of these spaces, subtly reimagined in each new decade, gazed on by a series of dancing partners and represented by artists, photographers, novelists and sociologists, but rarely invited to speak for herself.

---

<sup>1</sup> This chapter draws on research conducted as part of two projects funded by the Australian Research Council, “The Politics of Visual Culture in Modern Japan” and “The Cultural History of the Body in Modern Japan”; and an international collaborative research project on “Colonial Modernity and the Modern Girl in East Asia,” funded by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, and convened by the Institute for Gender Studies, Ochanomizu University, Tokyo. I am indebted to Taylor Atkins, Hugh de Ferranti, Alisa Freedman, Mark McLelland, Laura Miller, Erik Ropers and Christine Yano for advice and support. Translations from Japanese are my own unless indicated otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> See also Onchi Kōshirō’s woodblock print “Dance Hall” from the series “One Hundred Scenes of New Tokyo” (reproduced in Chiba-shi Bijutsukan 2000: 142).

<sup>3</sup> Social dancing had been introduced to Japan in the 1880s, when the new government built the Rokumeikan pavilion and hosted balls for elite international visitors (Mehl 2005).

<sup>4</sup> The dancers’ changing room thus took on the character of a forbidden space. See Tada Michio’s imagining of the dancers in their changing room in *Dancers and Drawers*, where he reiterates that he is describing a space that men are not supposed to enter (Tada 1931: 2–3).

<sup>5</sup> This is the ballroom depicted in Auguste Renoir’s painting “Bal du Moulin de la Galette” (1876).

---

<sup>6</sup>See also the mention of a Filipino band in a Shanghai dance hall in Yokomitsu Riichi's novel, *Shanghai* (Yokomitsu 2001: 80).

<sup>7</sup>These are also the sites portrayed in modernist fiction (Omori 2003: 18, 53; Gralla 2010: 83–106).

<sup>8</sup>In this chapter, I use “dance hall girls” when referring to Japanese sources which use the term “*dansu-jō*.” I reserve the phrase “taxi dancer” for English-language sources. I have not seen the phrase “taxi dancer” in Japanese-language sources, although the system of selling tickets for dances was similar to that used in the United States taxi dance halls. Needless to say, the use of words and suffixes describing women as “girls” or “daughters” emphasizes femininity and infantilizes these working women.

<sup>9</sup>In *Dancers and Drawers*, Tada describes a young woman who chose to work in a dance hall rather than doing office work, as she could then send more money home to support her younger brother's education (1931: 10–12). While this is, of course, a fictional representation, it provides an insight into common understandings of the choices made by women workers at the time.

<sup>10</sup>Several other prints of the time depict the fatigue of women in service industries. See Ōta Saburō's 1914 print “Café Waitress,” which depicts a woman alone in a café, despondently resting her hands and chin on the back of a bentwood chair. The print is in two tones: black and sandy beige (Reproduced, for example, in Ajioka et. al 2000: 47). See also the photograph of lines of dance hall girls waiting for partners, reproduced in Sato (2003: 62).

---

<sup>11</sup>In her memoir of her time in the labor movement of the 1920s and 1930s, Nakamoto Takako (1903–1991) notes that, at roughly the same year, a female factory worker would receive forty to fifty *sen* a day, with the possibility of a bonus depending on productivity. However, twenty or thirty *sen* would be deducted for meals, leaving the factory worker with around twenty *sen* a day (Nakamoto 1973: 14). Andrew Gordon (1992: 134) reports that the daily wage of a young male worker in 1923 was around one hundred and fifty *sen*. (There are 100 *sen* in one *yen*.)

<sup>12</sup>Page numbers hereafter refer to Anthony Chambers' (1986) English translation.

<sup>13</sup>On Yamamura Kōka [Toyonari], see Menzies (1998: 157) and Brown (2001: 32); on the New Carlton Hotel, see: Wakeman (1996: 108).

<sup>14</sup> See also *Ōgon Tonsōkyoku* (Golden Fugue), a novel by Abe Masao (1902–1957; also known as Hisao Jūran), which includes a character of mixed Chinese and Japanese parentage who works in a Shanghai dance hall (Abe 1935; cited in Aoyama 2012: 54)

<sup>15</sup> It seems, however, that dance halls were not found in colonial Korea. Kim Jinsong reproduces an open letter from a group of café proprietors, *kisaeng*, waitresses and actresses in Seoul who requested the colonial police to allow them to open a dance hall there (Kim 2005: 56–60). However, 1937 was probably too late for such a petition, for the suppression of dance halls on the mainland of Japan was well advanced by this time.

<sup>16</sup>The Recreation and Amusement Association (RAA) was established by the Japanese government in preparation for the landing of the occupying armies. Most attention has



---

been paid to the brothels that were run by the RAA, which in recent scholarship have been linked with the enforced military prostitution of the wartime period. It seems that the RAA also ran dance halls in the early months of the Occupation. On the RAA, see Dower (1999: 127–131) and Tanaka (2002: 133–166).