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Deliberately Regulated Consumption?: Discourse on School Uniforms

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School Uniforms in Japan: Past and Present

The history of school uniforms in Japan goes back to the formation of the country as a modern nation-state and its subsequent Westernisation in the nineteenth century (Ôta, 2002). The design of uniforms is broadly classified into three categories. First, *tsume-eri*---based on military uniforms---for boys, spread among the Imperial university, normal schools and high schools beginning in the 1880s. Second, *sailor-fuku* for girls was adopted in girls' high schools from the 1920s (see plate 1). Third, the *blazer* emerged as a current popular option upon the re-design of the former two (see plate 2 and 3).

The following paper will focus on high school uniforms. In 2003, 70 per cent of students attended public schools, while 30 per cent went to private ones (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2004). By 1991, 95.5 per cent of private high schools had adopted uniforms (Nomura, 1993).

School Uniforms and Contemporary Japan

School uniforms have been the source of numerous popular culture images in Japan (see plate 4). Those images often transcend the realistic. Uniforms are 'consumed' in various forms at the same time as: apparatuses of subjectification through discipline; objects invested with sexual imagery; advertisements for so-called 'school identity'; and part of a fashion trend.

Pedagogical, cultural and commercial discourses on uniforms, which range from school regulations to adult magazines, constitute a structure of discourses. In spite of its contradictions and antagonism it has helped maintain the popularity of uniforms. The sociologist Shinji Miyadai once (1994) wrote that it is the gap between two factors that promotes the 'illusions' at the heart of uniform consumption. One is the 'public principle (*tatemae*)' stemming from the hope or desire to believe that high school girls are too young to make love. The other is the 'hidden' reality that they *do* make love. Consumption of uniforms, which is encouraged by manufacturers, retailers, teachers, guidebook for high school education, cartoons, and/or pornography, appears to be a type

of consumption dependent on 'the powerlessness (*fujiyû*)' imposed by social regulation.

As far as uniform consumption is concerned, there seems to be a direct correspondence between the 'postmodern' consumption of images and prevailing social regulations. It is commonplace that consuming passion is socially regulated and oriented as in the case of Fordism (Aglietta, 1997). Yet the case of the uniform demonstrates that regulation alone does not directly produce demand for the products. Apparently it represents a kind of 'inverted' consumption. Later I call it 'deliberately regulated consumption', which I think we can often find in everyday life in Japan. At the end of this paper, I will propose another example.

Mass Education Society and the 'Pedagogical' Value of School Uniforms

High school education was expanding during the 1960s (see figure). In the mid-1970s, over 90 per cent of junior high school students went on to high school, confirming Japan's entrance into 'mass education society' (Kariya, 2001). Quantitatively, mass education society established conditions such that almost all people wear uniforms in their younger days. It also intensified the competition of the entrance examination and inflated the value of high school education. As the distinction between those who graduated from high school as opposed to junior high only disappeared, new distinctions between high schools arose regarding type and prestige. This qualitatively made room for semiotic strategies both for schools and for students (see plate 5 and 6).

It has often been told, 'Disorder in uniforms disorder in the mind'. The school system is not the only agent that manages to find 'pedagogical' value in uniforms. Some uniform manufacturers and retailers have consciously provided such discourses. One of them tried to establish both a 'pedagogical' and 'economical' value of uniforms. They also defended 'designation system (*shiteiseido*)' on the part of school, which would protect those values above as well as their vested rights (School Uniform Association of Tokyo, 1981). Their discourse seems to be made up of 'performative utterances' in the face of continuing sales wars against department stores and large manufacturers on the one hand, and uniform-abolition movement at high schools associated with student movement in the 1960s on the other. Considering the increasing popularity of uniforms of high school girls (*jyoshikôsei*) and consequent interest in *model change* (adoption of newly designed uniforms) since the 1980s, however, this kind of discourse might play an essential part in their processes.

***Tokyo Jyoshikô Seifuku Zukan* and Its Consequences**

Tokyo Jyoshikô Seifuku Zukan (*An Illustrated Guide to High School Girls' Uniform in Tokyo*, 1985) was an epoch-making work of literature in the 'study' of uniforms. It set out the complete collection and analysis of high school girls' uniforms in Tokyo (see plate 7, 8, and 9). Until then uniforms had been seen mostly as a means of establishing discipline, whether we agreed to it or not. On the other hand *Zukan* foregrounded a gaze

toward uniforms that had never been publicly articulated. The gaze featured fashion design in the broadest sense of the term. While the book situated itself as a subcultural phenomenon, it appealed to a larger group of readers than the author expected. And so did the gaze. It became introduced into pedagogical discourse through the education industry. It was not the book that created such a gaze for the first time. In parallel with the pedagogical gaze, it had already been incorporated in students who subjectified themselves as *jyogakusei* (girls' high school students in prewar Japan) since the early days of uniforms (Kakimoto, Shimamori, and Furukawa, 1995). In addition, disparate values discovered by the gaze---alternative definitions of gender, fashion trends, youthfulness, nostalgia, or sexual imagery---had sometimes attracted the general public.

At least we cannot deny the fact that *Zukan* publicized its fashion-sensitive gaze toward uniforms throughout popular culture. Accordingly *model change* turned out to be a favorable option for schools and manufacturers. Students expecting *kawaii* (lovely and fashionable) uniforms or 'appropriating' it for their own style became familiar to us. *Kawaii* uniforms came to be highly valued icons for popular culture as well as educational entrepreneurism. Yet both schools and students do not always accept the values embodied by their uniforms. Schools have not quit intervening in the ways in which popular culture takes up uniforms and the way students wear theirs. Nevertheless, the point is that a more fashion-sensitive gaze began to sustain uniform consumption.

Burusera **and Education in 'Crisis'**

Early in the 1990s *burusera jyoshikôsei* (high school girls who sell their uniforms, underwear and gym suits called *buruma*) began to attract a lot of attention. Deliberately playing the stereotyped role of *jyoshikôsei*, they were said to adapt to new urban realities which had undermined traditional modes of communication dependent on 'communal reliability (*kinsetsuteki tashikasa*)' (Miyadai, 1994). Even students critical of *burusera* also felt a need to adapt to the disappearance of former conditions of communication. Some of them managed to establish their own imagined communities by identifying themselves with their prestigious high schools and uniforms (Kakimoto, Shimamori, and Furukawa, 1995). According to Miyadai, what made '*jyoshikôsei* brand' so appealing, especially for the pornography market, was not *jyoshikôsei* themselves. It was rather cultural critics, teachers, politicians, and parents holding steadfastly to outdated communal rules (*dôtoku*) which sanction our everyday behavior which had been left behind by the urban condition. These pillars of the community have repeatedly called for its restoration. Consequently they make stable the structure of pornographic consumption of uniforms against their wishes. Why? Because it is their wishes that some uniform lovers feed on.

Education in 'crisis' has been another frequent theme among educational circles as well as in news coverage since the early 1990s. Mass education society was blamed for bringing about serious dysfunction in schools such as violent reaction against 'uniform

(*kakuitsuteki*)' education, truancy, classroom disruption, etc. Some critics took *burusera* as a symptom of these malaises. This was almost totally pointless. Yet there is no doubt that 'crisis' discourse set up conditions for restructuring uniform consumption. Emphasising 'individuality (*kosei*)' and 'education free from pressure of competition (*yutori kyôiku*)', education reform is currently giving fuel to private school education. It provokes concerns about school image on the part of students, parents, and schools: concerns about *kawaii* uniforms, new and well-equipped school buildings, or unique curricula (see plate 10 and 11).

Deliberately Regulated Consumption of School Uniforms

Uniforms have pedagogical value which has long been regarded as their use-value, sign-value in popular culture, and exchange-value as commodities. With their various forms of value, uniforms may be seen as archetypal 'postmodern' cultural goods (Featherstone, 1991). Mike Featherstone suggests that 'new cultural intermediaries' play ambivalent roles when they produce, circulate, and consume new cultural goods, or new gazes toward existing ones. The ambivalence comes from the fact that in so doing, cultural intermediaries also struggle to accumulate and maximize their own symbolic and/or economic capital in the 'field' concerned. In other words, while they create a new demand and market for the goods, they also regulate their supply. This explains why the structure of discourses on uniforms itself remains static and promotes uniform consumption, while orthodoxy (legitimate gaze toward uniforms) has always been challenged.

There is a delicate balance of power among cultural intermediaries in terms of which kind (cultural/ economic) and what volume of capital they have. In each country consumer culture is dependent on this balance of conjuncture. It is needless to say that postwar Japan has experienced an unparalleled expansion of consumer markets led by the private-sector on the one hand, and the state on the other. Yet what is characteristic of uniform consumption is that it has been regulated by those intermediaries who tend to situate themselves outside market economy even when they are in the middle of it. While there is no doubt that deregulation (*kiseikanwa*) has become a buzz word in business and politics these days, 'deliberately regulated consumption', as in the case of uniforms, survives and undergoes restructuring to adapt to current global-postmodern conditions of culture and economy. The disneyfication of public facilities (see plate 12) is an example of this deliberately regulated consumption (Nakagawa, 1996). Is it the case that market economy undermines the public sector, as some critics of postmodernism detect? I suspect that it is rather *kôkyôjigyô* (collective consumption by the national and local government) which appropriates postmodern commercial imagery to protect itself. Deliberately regulated consumption represents the heights and depths of Japanese consumer culture.

Last week I presented the earlier version of this paper and also participated in other sessions at the IIS congress held in Beijing. There I had chances to got various suggestions for my research. Of them I think it is relevant to introduce just one here. Professor Robert Dunn from California State University presented a paper on Chinese consumer culture and made a point that there could be a possibility of consumer culture taming desire for socio-political democracy in China. At a glance his view looks nothing more than that of members of Frankfurt School, especially Adorno on culture industry and Marcuse on one-dimensional society and I think there must be consumer freedom which is not reduced to mere diversion. On the other hand, however, I also admit that such freedom turns out to be diversion at a certain condition. This sometimes (if not always!) seems to apply to uniform consumption in Japan.

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