



Ballet in Japan: Reconsidering the Westernisation of Japanese Ballet

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(Received 1 October 2015. Accepted 28 December 2015)

Abstract

Classical ballet is generally regarded as part of the western high arts, and as such it has a global appeal. It is watched and learnt in all corners of the world. Ballet seems a perfect candidate for discussing the westernisation or globalisation of aesthetics. This paper, by presenting the case of ballet as consumed in Japan, however, critically examines the claims of a globally hegemonic form of ballet. The paper, on the one hand, demonstrates how the western hegemonic canons are re-enacted in the Japanese ballet world, but on the other, it highlights the specificities of how ballet is danced and indigenized in Japan. In the first instance, in Japan, as in several non-western countries, ballet is regarded as a symbol of westernisation. And as such, the consumption of ballet becomes a vehicle for enhancing social status. In the second instance, ballet as danced in Japan has unique characteristics that have developed differently from western ballet. In Japan, for example, anyone, regardless of their body proportions, has a chance of becoming a professional ballet dancer, contrary to the western aesthetic ideal 'thin and long limbed' ballet proportions. In developing its own local aesthetics, Japanese ballet appears to have a more egalitarian form if compared to western hegemonic canons and aesthetic considerations. This paper, therefore, presents the specificities of ballet in Japan, simultaneously highlighting Japanese ballet practitioners' social aspirations as well as local aesthetics. In particular, by narrating the stories of urban middle-class women this paper examines their obsession with ballet.

Keywords: ballet, glocalisation, Japan, gender, dance

* The modified Hepburn Romanisation system is used throughout for Japanese words.

Introduction

Ballet is watched and learnt all over the world. For this reason I suggest that it can be analysed with the concept of aesthetic globalisation or glocalisation (a reference will be given in the next section). In the context of Japan, the consumption of ballet refers not only to the art form's western hegemonic canons but also local aesthetics. This paper explores these twin processes of adaption. There are more than four hundred ballet studios in Tokyo alone, and the majority of people who practise and enjoy ballet are women: from young girls to middle aged women. My research underscores that this is a new form of consuming culture through taking part in *okeikogoto* in Japan. *Okeikogoto* literally means practice or lessons, but the nuance cannot be perfectly translated into English. After-school or extra-curricular activities for children and hobbies for adults, respectively, signify the closest meaning; though these "pastimes" can be, and often are, taken quite seriously. While some participants merely aim to gain a skill, others expect to attain a certain status or to acquire cultural capital through consuming and learning. Therefore, it is worth looking into the various ways, ballet as an increasingly widespread *okeikogoto*, is being consumed in Twenty-First Century Japan. In sum, this paper will explore how ballet was imported from the West and how it has become localised in Japan. In particular, I focus on Japanese middle-class women who consume ballet as a strategy to represent themselves in various ways.

In Japan, despite the existence of class differences, the majority of people claim to be middle class (Clammer 1997; Ishida and Slater 2010). This is because many Japanese people believe they can attain middle-class status through their consumption patterns. Ishida (1988), for example, argues that there *are* class differences in Japanese society, but that the lifestyle of most Japanese obscures these differences. In other words, in Japanese society individual tastes are not accurate signs or markers of class, and so consumption patterns become important ways in which to display status. In particular, because of the recessionary economy, by the early 1990s the Japanese socio-cultural systems and traditional social divisions became uncertain, even insecure. As is well documented, large companies gravitated away from offering lifetime employment, and as a result the middle-classes began to fear downward mobility (cf. Genda 2006; Ishida and Slater 2010; Miura and Ueno 2010). Therefore, what kind of *okeikogoto* Japanese people consume often becomes an important way in which to distinguish themselves from others in the shared social field (cf. Bourdieu 1984).

According to Bourdieu, cultural capital can be determined by the degree to which activities differ from 'everyday life'. Thus while some *okeikogoto*, such as swimming or

cooking, have relatively low prestige, other practices, such as learning traditional Japanese or western arts, enjoy a more privileged status. For example, studying and performing the tea ceremony or ballet requires certain knowledge and techniques which can only be acquired through years of expensive lessons (cf. Kato 2004; Wulff 1988). Therefore, as detailed below, even after a democratisation of *okeikogoto*, ballet is still perceived as a prestigious pastime by the Japanese to a certain degree, and is enjoyed by middle-class women to acquire or maintain their social status.

Moreover, ballet, a western performing art, provides middle-class women with a sense of fulfillment and an opportunity to escape hegemonic gender ideals in Japan. In everyday situations middle-class women are expected to dedicate their time and energy to others—husbands, parents, children and workplace superiors. I argue that indulging their own personal enjoyment is not encouraged by broader society, while in the “post-bubble” era the expression of neoliberal and globalised individualism is recognised among younger generations (cf. Kosugi 2003; Shirahase 2005). Within this context of expected behaviour, some women use and consume ballet as a tool of resistance, albeit a fragile one, against the ‘traditional’ gender norms of Japanese society (cf. Ortnier 2006). Therefore, this paper offers a ‘glocalised’ perspective on the study of ballet as performed by middle-class amateur women, and by doing so it highlights contemporary Japanese notions of gender relations and sense of embodiment.

Contextualising ballet in Japan

Ballet (or the “West” for that matter) constitutes an imaginary other which does not belong to local culture (cf. Goldstein-Gidoni and Daliot-Bul 2002), thus people can consume it in their own way. I define glocalisation in Japan as a process whereby modern Japan mainly imported global culture from the West, and these borrowings have been interwoven with local practices from hip-hop to wedding styles, agriculture to marketing; Japan does not exist in a socio-cultural vacuum (Condry 2001; Goldstein-Gidoni 2001; Kelly 1998; Miller 2006; Moeran and Skov 1993; Spielvogel 2003; Tobin 1992; Watson 1997). Through a process of localisation, most cultural products have been partly changed in order to adjust to the social context of Japan. For example Condry (2001) argues that, in the case of American hip-hop in Japan, the lyrics are not only Japanese as opposed to English, less a few borrowed catch words, but are also adapted to fit Japanese culture. For instance, while hip-hop in America often mentions weapons and crime, in Japan these are rarely referred to and the message is much more “innocuous” (ibid.: 383).

This localisation process occurs not only in Japan but also in many other countries, and has been termed ‘appropriation’, ‘creolization’, ‘glocalization’ or ‘indigenization’

respectively (Appadurai 1986, 1990; Hannerz 1987; Miller 1995; Robertson 1992; Sahlins 1999). These theorists explain that external cultural influence does not imply a simple acceptance of global culture but consists of transformations, an (inter)weaving that depends on local agency. For example, Miller (1995) argues that in the process of appropriation of global commodities local autonomy is asserted, rather than the process being a direct import of mass products. Indeed, the way in which ballet is practiced and consumed is very Japanese.

Ballet first flourished in Italy in the 17th century. It then emerged in France during the 19th century, and later in Russia during the 20th century. The first time ballet was introduced to Japan was in the early 20th century. Indeed, in 1911 the Japanese Imperial Theatre (*Teikoku-Gekijyō*) was founded, and its repertoire included western arts such as opera, classical music and ballet. It was Japan's first Western-style theatre. However, at this time only aristocrats and upper-class people could enjoy seeing and dancing ballet because of the prohibitive costs involved they were the only people who could access western goods or lifestyles. After the Second World War, Japan entered a period of rapid economic growth. From about 1955 to 1973 the Japanese economy began to improve and a new middle class began consuming luxury items. However, since fees for lessons were expensive and there were not many ballet studios, particularly in rural areas, only a few girls who were from upper middle class families and who lived in cities could study ballet. Yet, among such young women, being a ballerina was a dream. It was promoted by the mass media. For example, many ballet stories appeared in girls' *manga* (comic books), with titles such as *Arabesque* or *Swan*, and on the covers of many girls' magazines Japanese models posed as ballerinas. In 1972, the ballet soap opera *Akai kutsu* (The Red Shoes)¹ was broadcast (TBS: Tokyo Broadcasting System) and the popularity of ballet flourished amongst ordinary girls, although in fact only a few girls from urban upper and new-middle-class families could study ballet.

However, after the economic bubble burst in the 1990s, the country entered an economic recession and also experienced much pressure and criticism directed towards workaholic Japanese employees. As a result, working hours were legally reduced from a six day working week to a five-day working week (*jitansokushinhō*)². Moreover, since this era women have been powerful consumers of goods and leisure. Through consumption practices and preferences young women show their economic independence or changing notions of gender including late marriage or non-marriage (cf. Yamada 1999, 2007), thus more women enjoy their free time compared to the previous era. In the case of the older generations, while they are still constrained by 'traditional' gender norms, they increasingly pursue their own aims. This attracts less social disapproval if they have

completed their motherly duties (cf. Rosenberger 1996: Both cases are elaborated below). As a result, leisure time has increased alongside more varied lifestyle choices. For example, practising *okeikogoto* has become a less privileged activity, and Japanese began consuming western high arts as part of mass culture. However, as noted above, ballet continues to be imagined as part of western high culture and retains its elite imagery. For example, the style of ballet has not changed from the Vaganova style which was introduced by Russia and ballet terms in French remain unchanged, beyond *katakanization*, from those found throughout the rest of the globe. Therefore, for example, many Japanese mothers use ballet as a tool to provide social status to their daughters. However, ballet in Japan has also developed along different lines if compared to western ballet, given that the practice is situated well outside the pale of Japanese history, tradition and cultural background. Thus, it has been able to develop in a specific and localised way.

For example, unlike most European countries, in Japan there are no national ballet schools, no entrance exams or grades for learning ballet, nor are there any qualifications. Moreover, there is no licensing system for ballet teachers or ballet schools and companies, and therefore there are no official records of the number of ballet studios or of the percentage of the population learning ballet according to the Japanese Ballet Association. This lack of emphasis on grades, qualifications, statistics or licences stands in stark contrast with how Japanese traditional arts are taught and their records assiduously maintained. Several informants point out that ballet was somehow familiar to them because ballet is a stylised form of dance like Japanese traditional dance. As Japanese traditional arts regard *kata* or *katachi* (fixed posture of movement) as important (Spielvogel 2003), the basis of classical ballet training is the five positions of the feet and arms (Kirstein 1942). However, most traditional Japanese arts have strictly defined grades, require teachers to hold qualifications, and sanctioned access to these official roles cost a fortune. Therefore, the ballet system in Japan has developed along different lines compared to both western ballet and traditional Japanese arts.

Moreover, importantly, in Japan anyone, regardless of their body proportions, can start dancing ballet and have a chance at becoming a professional ballet dancer. Globally the ideal body type for ballet is considered to be slim and long limbed (cf. Fraleigh 1996; Stokes 1983). In most western countries only those dancers who have this particular type of body are allowed to enter ballet schools in order to become professional ballerinas. For example, in Russia and France, amongst the many talented applicants, only girls who have a specific ballerina body type, such as long limbs and a small face, can pass the entrance exams for famous professional ballet schools. Although the physical requirements for applicants are barely described in their websites³, documentary films

such as one about Vaganova Ballet Academy titled *52 Percent* (2007) or another about the Paris Opera Ballet School titled *L'école de Ballet* (1987) clearly show schools' bodily demands for candidates. The Vaganova Ballet Academy only considers students whose legs comprise 52% of their body length. Similarly, a dean of the Paris Opera Ballet Company said in the film that only applicants whose head comprises one eighth of their height can pass the entrance exam.

Indeed, many Japanese dancers who perform in the western world have mentioned the difficulties of dancing ballet while not having ideal body proportions. For example Miyako Yoshida (2005), a former principal dancer in the Royal Opera Ballet in Covent Garden, mentions in her book that when she started learning ballet in the Royal Ballet School in London as a teenager, she hated to see herself in the mirror because of her proportions. She said that at the time she was the only student from East Asia in the class and felt that she did not have the requisite ballet body type, in contrast with the western students who had ideal ballet bodies⁴. This means that, while studying ballet remains as a privileged and globalised activity, it has developed in a more egalitarian way in Japan. In sum, in Japan anyone can consume ballet to fulfil their own desires and this is a part of the reason why dancing ballet is becoming more popular among women. Middle-class women in particular are, more often than women of higher or lower class standing, considered through the lens of their expected gender roles by society.

Middle-class gender ideas and intergenerational change

Japanese middle-class women are largely constrained by gender ideals and socio-cultural hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity. For example, middle-class women are expected to remain at home as professional housewives to support their *salarymen* husbands, care for children and familial elderly, as such they are expected to conform to gender norms such as the *ryōsai-kenbo* (good wife, wise mother) ideology. Many anthropologists of Japan state that women who focus on the self without caring for others are considered *wagamama* (selfish) (Hendry 1993; Imamura 1987; Lebra 1984; Miller and Bardsley 2005; Moeran and Skov 1993; Tokuhiro 2010). According to Miller and Bardsley, men strongly identify being *wagamama* as the worst characteristic a woman can have (2005: 10-11).

In fact, middle-class women are often expected to follow ideals of femininity in Japan which are related to having elegant and gentle manners (Hendry 1986; Lebra 1984) appropriate make-up (Ashikari 2003), dress and clothes (Tanaka 1990), language (Lebra 1984; Tanaka 1998) and movements and body shape (Clammer 1995)⁵. For example, Ashikari (2003) explains that when in public, Japanese middle-class women are expected

to wear makeup that whitens their faces. McVeigh points out that female students at one of his fieldsites, Takasu Junior College, are formally taught these feminine manners as part of the school's aim to instil gender ideology in them (1996: 64). Yet, amongst middle-class mothers, perhaps the most striking social limitation is the difficulty they have in re-joining the job market after their children have grown up. Although most working-class mothers do not have any choice but to return to work as part-timers for the sake of their household's finances, by contrast middle-class mothers, in spite of their higher educational qualifications, were expected to remain at home in order to perform motherly duties. For example, in 2002 52.9% of married women stayed at home without a job even though their children had reached five years of age (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan 2002. See also Aoshima 2007; Nakano 2014)⁶.

However, as several scholars point out there are inter-generational changes in regard to gender norms in the post-bubble era. For example, women from older generations continue to conform to traditional gender roles such as *ryōsai kenbo*. In particular, they are expected by family or husbands to be hardworking and *gamansuru* (endure) or show selfless devotion to their children. Indeed, motherhood used to be considered a part of women's innate nature in Japanese society. Even if women did not learn anything about motherhood, from texts for example, they were believed to be able to give unconditional love to their children (Iwao 1993:128; Lebra 1984:196). In sum, mothers were expected to devote themselves to their children without question. For example, watching her children grow up was considered to be a mother's joy and it was presumed that women were willing to be selfless or to sacrifice themselves in order to experience this joy (Iwao 1993: 128-9; Ohinata 1995: 200-4).

Compared to their older counterparts, members of the younger generations have differing perspectives about gender norms and many appear less constrained by older gender norms. While the spread of individualism among young people is recognised through such indices as an increase in the number of irregular workers regardless of gender, many scholars point out that changing notions of gender in Japan are more obvious amongst women than men. This, for example, is demonstrated through their respective attitudes towards education. Today more women than men go on to higher education (cf. Shirahase 2005). A similar tendency can be seen in occupations, as some women continue working full-time even after getting married or having children, although the number of women who do so remains relatively small (cf. Aoshima 2007; Takeishi 2006; Yasukōchi 2008). Moreover, such trends can be seen in marriage, for example people getting married at a later time in life ('parasite singles'), or having a marriage with no children, or simply not getting married at all (cf. Aoshima 2007; Dales

2005; Yamada 1999, 2007). Although the government or media encourage young people to be independent, they often are alarmist in regard to unmarried young women's consumerist-oriented, hedonistic lifestyle as expressed through their enjoyment of shopping or hobbies. This is because, according to several scholars, these pursuits are seen to be a cause of delaying marriage, and so, low fertility (cf. Nakano and Wagatsuma 2004; 138-140; Sakai 2003; Ueno and Nobuta 2011). Indeed, the fertility rate has been progressively dropping since the 1990s, and in 2012 it fell to 1.41% (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2012)⁷. The majority of the aforementioned scholars conclude that young women's changing attitudes towards gender lead to a desire to show their freedom and empowerment (as a form of individuality perhaps) compared to older generations.

However, all of my informants, including the young ones in the ballet studio, were clearly not free from older gender norms during my fieldwork. It is true that they did not have to contend with financial problems, and led comfortable, even lavish, lifestyles as part of what Veblen coined "the leisure class" (1994 [1899]) over a century ago. Yet most of my informants saw their lives as being overly constrained and unfulfilling. I conducted fieldwork at four ballet studios in Tokyo from October 2006 to November 2007, and again from April to August in 2013. In total I conducted interviews with three men and thirty-eight dancing women who ranged in age from their twenties to their seventies. The interviews were conducted on a one-to-one, semi-structured basis. In the following section, I examine how my young and old informants discussed gender ideology during our interviews and how exactly these issues related to their choice to take up ballet as a hobby. The final section highlights the stage performance in which my informants participated yearly. This illustrates how ballet is localised in Japan and the relationship between ballet and middle-class ethos.

Dances with Agency: Social expectation, social constraints and women dancing for themselves

As noted above, compared to their older counterparts people of the younger generation may appear less constrained by older gender norms. However, all of the unmarried dancers at the ballet studios held office assistants' jobs, although many had graduated from university. Their jobs left them with enough time to dance ballet, as *OL* or *haken shain* (temporary workers). *OL* usually work from nine in the morning to five at night and are seldom asked to do overtime. In fact, career women friends of mine pointed out that if these women had been working as executive track full-timers, they would have had no time for *okeikogoto*, such as ballet. In turn, of course, *OLs* seldom felt satisfied with their assistant's job compared to career track women. My young informants tended to accept

their subordinated role at companies as *shikatanagai* (nothing could be done) despite their wish to find their ideal, or a full-time job and to continue working after marriage and having children.

For example, Mika-san, who was in her early 30s, had worked at a steel company for nine years as an *OL*. Although she had graduated from university, she worked in the general track (*ippanshoku*) because she had not received an offer to work an executive track job (*sōgōshoku*)⁸. She said during our interview:

In the beginning I was willing to transfer to the executive track at a later date, but once I realised how difficult this would be I thought “*shikatanagai*”. The best part of my job is that I can do it easily by myself. On the other hand, there are too many routine tasks and not enough work that requires me to think for myself. I am more interested in talking to people than just doing deskwork. If I can, I want to have a job in which I can use the English language. I have thought about changing my job before, but since I do not have any special skills, I have gradually come round to thinking ‘*sokomade shinakutemo*’ (I do not need to force myself [make such an effort] to do it). It may sound conservative but since my company is big and well-known, my parents are happy for me to keep working there.

Mika-san did not seem fully satisfied in her current job because of its monotonous nature. She wanted to use English at work, but instead of acting on her feelings and fulfilling her wishes, she faced the dilemma of being caught between her own desire to find a job in which she could use English and her parents’ desire that she continue working for a well-known company, and she had chosen to remain in stable employment. Indeed, like the case of Mika-san, many of my young informants reproduced the ‘traditional’ subordinated gender role at their workplace. However, this does not mean that young unmarried women have no ability to assert a sense of selfhood in their life. In fact, in the ballet studio young informants cultivated a perspective of *jibun* (self) in order to be confident women. Natsuko-chan⁹, a 25-year-old office lady who worked at a trading company on the general track despite graduating from university is a representative example. She told me during an interview, “While dancing ballet I am absorbed in myself (*jibun ni you*). I look at myself in the mirror and think how beautifully I can dance. In ballet I can be narcissistic, which is very special to me. Ballet is the centre of my life (*Balle wa ikiteiru chushin*).”

Many scholars point out that since the 1990s expressions such as living or working for oneself (*jibun rashiku ikiru or hataraku*), self-exploration (*jibun sagashi*), my real self (*honto no jibun*) or *jibun migaki* (literally self-polishing, but colloquially self-cultivation) are common among young people (cf. Cave 2007: 37; Kanbara 2004: 27; Nakano and Wagatsuma 2004: 138; Rosenberger 2013; Ueno and Nobuta 2011). Goldstein-Gidoni argues that contemporary young women's obsession with *jibun migaki* is embedded with "appearance, leisure and pleasure", thus they are far removed from the old generations' self-cultivation, namely "self-discipline" or "moral-training" (2012: 180). The cultivation of appearance or self-display was a focal point for young women to dance ballet. These women tried to appeal to both women and men by becoming attractive and confident self.

Some unmarried women in particular utilised ballet to cultivate self or appearance in order to find suitable marriage partners. Marriage is still overwhelmingly considered as a 'rite of passage' to become a proper adult in Japanese society, thus young dancing *OLs* were still affected by older gender norms and hoped to get married one day, especially to middle-class men. Indeed, in the 1990s *OLs* were attractive marriage partners for middle-class men because they could make a certain amount of money and then quit their jobs after getting married to support their children and partners who worked for the large companies (cf. Ogasawara 1998). However, as noted above, because in the post-bubble era the middle-class began to fear falling down to the level of working class, people have tended to get married with people of similar social standing, educational background and job status (cf. Shirahase 2005). Moreover, although the number is relatively few if compared to males, there are an increasing number of women in career track positions, as pointed out above. Therefore, in the post-bubble era *OLs'* weak financial position makes them less attractive for middle-class men as marriage partners compared to previous eras. However, because of their low wages and lack of job security, *OLs* still needed some financial support from any future husband. Thus, I suggest that ballet was important for some unmarried young women in order to cultivate their middle-class feminine beauty as a way to appeal to men.

Indeed, (average) middle-class Japanese men prefer women who have slim figures with less muscular bodies (Spielvogel 2003: 171-9). Ballet is believed by my young informants to help create elegant and delicate middle-class feminine bodies. Moreover, especially among working-class people ballet is still seen as a privileged form of dance, thus young dancing women tried to attain cultural, symbolic and physical capital through ballet in order to acquire or maintain middle-class status. Therefore, for young women dancing ballet meant that they could be an attractive to men and also express a confident feminine self compared with other unmarried *OLs*.

However, they were not just waiting to be chosen by men as had older generations. Indeed, Deacon (2013) argues that women are now often seen to chase men, and these women are called ‘predatory females’ (*nikushokukei-joshi*) in stark contrast with ‘herbivore men’ (*sōshokukei-danshi*). These terms underscore a social phenomenon that has been prevalent since the late 2000s. Both young men and women are considered by several scholars to be acting contrary to their parents’ generation’s (middle-class) gender ideals; whereby the normative expectations was then mothers stay at home as *salarymen* fathers acted as corporate warriors (cf. Deacon 2013; Fukasawa 2009). In particular, herbivore men are often characterised by their passive attitude (by a lack of confidence) towards having relationships with women, and towards marriage as well. Therefore, young unmarried informants actively utilised ballet in order to find suitable future partners by becoming what they perceived as ‘an attractive self’ while negotiating this self-conceptualization with older gender norms.

On the other hand, there were clear generation divides. During my research it became apparent that older dancers who were above their forties felt strongly constrained by ‘traditional’ gender norms. Yet they endured them. Unlike young unmarried women who were in a ‘liminal’ stage between neo-liberal individuality and older gender norms, elderly informants were deeply bound up with their family members’ demands such as selfless devotion to their children. In fact, a governmental survey showed that compared to the younger generations, older husbands had stronger views on the gendered division of labour, maintaining that women should be at home to run the household because their husbands were the breadwinners (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office 2013)¹⁰. Indeed, apart from a few who were full-time workers, all of the middle-aged dancing women were professional housewives who felt confined at home. When I interviewed them, surprisingly, all said that they came to dance ballet in order to escape from their homes or families because they were expected by their husbands to take full responsibility for the domestic work or caring for elders (*kaigo*). For example, Emi-san, a 50-year-old married woman, said that one of the reasons for her to start dancing ballet was that she was tired of looking after her mother-in-law and wanted an escape from reality (*genjitsu tōhi*). She said:

Twenty years ago my sister-in-law asked me and my husband to look after their mother because the sister-in-law did not want to live with her any more. We asked our mother-in-law to move to our apartment building; she lives on the first floor and we live on the third. However, my husband was

very busy running his business and, although he appreciated me caring for his mother, he did not help at all. My sister-in-law did not share the burden at all despite being single, and she did not even appreciate my efforts. I ended up looking after my mother-in-law by myself alone. Soon after my own mother began to suffer increasingly from Parkinson's, and I wanted to look after my mother in Nagano prefecture. However, my father told me that since I am the *yome* of another family I should prioritise caring for my mother-in-law and not worry about my own mother.

According to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2010), more women do *kaigo* for their own parents (20.9%) rather than their parents-in-law (15.2%), but during the pre-and post-war eras it was common for a *yome* (daughter-in-law) to look after her husband's family members. Indeed, the *yome* was the lowest position in the family hierarchy under the Meiji *ie* (household) system¹¹. Although the amount of *kaigo* for their parents-in-law compared to their own parents is now decreasing, older husbands more often than not expected their wives to look after their own mothers compared to younger generations. Indeed, older housewives at the ballet studio felt more constrained by gender norms than young counterparts because their family members' demands were regarded as more important than their own. A common reason for middle-aged and elderly women to dance ballet, therefore, was to escape from domestic burdens at home.

I suggest that these women often chose to dance ballet over doing other embodied activities because dancing ballet itself was their childhood *akogare* (a longing for something). As noted above, when elderly women were children, during the late 1950s to early 1970s, learning ballet was the dream of many middle-class girls. Although my informants could not take it up during the period of rapid economic growth due to financial and/or regional reasons, they have now started dancing ballet in their late 40s to 60s. Moreover, the elderly women referred to above consider ballet to also be ingrained in western culture, aesthetics and arts. Goldstein-Gidoni and Daliot-Bul state that the West represents "a dream world" for Japanese women (2002: 65-8). It is an imaginary and "Other" place where women feel that they can be away from socially imposed gender roles. Through embodying western cultural products, dancing women wished to escape from their everyday reality into a world of ballet practice.

However, until the early 2000s it was unusual for elderly women to enjoy ballet as adult beginners. Dancing ballet had always been seen as a hobby for young girls to take up. Although since the 1990s some middle-aged beginners began dancing, until recently such activities had been popularly considered *mittomonai* (unseemly) by both older men

and women because they are expected to be confined to the aforementioned *ryōsai kenbo* ideology. Since ballet is commonly embedded with images and imaginaries of youth and beauty, it was certainly not acceptable within larger society for middle-aged women to dance by themselves in leotards and even tutus on stage! This represents the situation that *dankaino-sedai* (the baby-boom generation) have more economic power compared to previous generations, and it makes it more socially acceptable for elderly women to express themselves through moving bodies. Women strategically utilised the opportunity to enjoy ballet.

Several Euro-American theorists argue that while leisure is used by women to resist dominant discourses, such as class, race and gender, such discourses also constrain women from accessing leisure activities (Clarke and Critcher 1985; Deem 1999; Green 1998; Rojek 1997; Shaw 2001a, 2001b; Wearing 1990, 1995, 1998). For example, Clarke and Critcher explain that in England “men dominate leisure physically and culturally” because women are expected to perform their gendered domestic role (1985: 176, 224–225). However in the case of Japan, middle-class wives have greater control over their husbands’ salaries (cf. Kondo 1990; Lebra 1984). Their husbands tend not to mind their wives spending their money on leisure activities, as long as they fulfil their domestic duties and childrearing responsibilities. This is also because salaried men in Japan are very busy at work and have little time to engage in leisure activities of their own. Therefore, despite several restrictions on Japanese women, middle-class women are much freer to enjoy leisure activities compared to their western counterparts.

In sum, all of my informants were bound by gender norms at workplace or home. However, young dancers negotiated with older forms of gendered norms and utilised ballet in order to be more focused on becoming confident women and enjoying attractive *jibun*. Older generations, by contrast, felt that they were more constrained by traditional gender norms thus ballet functioned as a temporary space of escape from daily burdens at home. In this sense, dancing women in the ballet studio represented inter-generational changes in regard to gender norms and negotiations in what constituted an acceptable sense of self in the Japanese society. Ballet is localised and utilised by Japanese middle-class women to assert their individual identity. The perspectives towards ballet that depend on the differing generations were also represented in what they expected through the yearly stage performance.

Women on Stage: Focusing on themselves or Displays of idealised selves

The stage performance was a key event that most students spent the year working

towards. Students practised for the stage performance for half a year, and nearing the date of performance, they practised every weekend and on national holidays. Indeed, in Japan not only small children, but also adult beginners including middle-aged women have the opportunity to dance ballet on stage because most dance studios organise and ask students to participate in a stage performance. In the case of Europe, it is far more unusual for adult beginners to dance ballet on the stage, let alone wear toe shoes, compared to Japan (Sasagawa and Ikeda 2002). Although there are some dance classes for adult beginners, students over 40 years old would not commonly participate in lessons with the exception of a few studios such as Northern Ballet or Janine Stanlowa¹². Ballet is usually associated with youth and beauty as noted above, therefore in most professional ballet companies including Japanese ones, the lion's share of dancers retire in their 40s, apart from a few exceptions¹³. At the Paris Opera Ballet Company, for example, ballerinas retire at age 40 and male dancers at 45. As a result, several professional dancers featured in a 2003 documentary titled *Etoiles: Dancers of the Paris Opera Ballet* claimed that it was a shame that their maturity and the physical demands of their roles cannot be balanced. By the time they really start understanding their stage roles, they cannot jump as high as audiences expect. In Europe these expectations of both youth and beauty affect even amateur ballet dancers to some degree, thus it is unusual for them to be involved in stage performances.

By contrast, in the context of contemporary Japan the stage performance was enjoyed by anyone including middle-aged adult beginners who cannot represent youth and beauty. This was indeed the case at least in the four ballet studios where I conducted fieldwork. However, the way of being involved in a stage performance was different depending on one's age even among adult beginners. For example, during our interviews my older informants told me they felt embarrassed to be on the stage because it is against what is expected by well-mannered middle-class women. Since dance for self-expression could be labelled *wagamama*, it follows that dance in the public while donning stage dresses and makeup, risked being labelled *wagamama* by audiences. Therefore they were reluctant to participate in the stage performance unlike younger students. For example, Abe-san in her 60s told me during an interview:

I have never invited my friends and colleagues to the stage performances although they wanted to see it. However, I like practice for the stage performance because it is different from the usual lessons. Since *sensei* (a teacher) teaches us performance steps seriously, I practise more seriously than in usual lessons. I am so impressed (*kandōsuru*) by *sensei* since she tries to improve my dance skills.

Indeed, middle-aged women were more interested in practice for the stage performance to cultivate their bodies and self rather than dancing on the actual stage. In sum, for older women dancing ballet in the studio and during stage performance practice was a place to focus on themselves.

By contrast, young students showed great passion towards the stage performance. For example, Shino-san, a hospital receptionist in her 30s, said:

I love the stage performance! And I have performed over ten times in five years. It is because I am shy but like to be paid attention to (*hikkomijian-no-medachigariya*). I love ballet make-up, and stage dress in particular, because it is like *kosu-pure* (costume play). Wearing dresses, tiaras and garlands make me feel like a princess.

According to my informants, wearing stage dresses and makeup played an important role in helping them to become ‘different’ and ‘special’ people. Butler’s notion of performativity (1993) suggests that gender is a reinforced appropriate act. That is to say, one ‘does’ or ‘performs’ a gender and there is, simply, no real perfection of a gender role. However, during the stage performance young students performed or attempted to display their idealised (*akogare*) roles or express the self that they wanted to be in their daily life through wearing dresses and makeup. Young women actively used the stage performance to display their idealised selves. Indeed, Shino-san described wearing stage dresses and makeup like *kosu-pure*. This is a form of youth culture that has been popular in Japan since the 1990s (Tanaka 2009: 25)¹⁴. In *kosu-pure*, people aim to completely disguise their identity by embodying a role through dress and action such as an animation character. Several Japanese scholars and novelists argue that young women enjoy *kosu-pure* as a mode of becoming a more attractive self, not only aimed at attracting men, but to appeal more broadly in society (Keet 2010; Narumi 2009; Tanaka 2009). Similarly, young dancing women were satisfied with becoming a “gorgeous and elegant” self on the stage by wearing special clothing and makeup, and perhaps believing that they were admired by audience members consisting of both men and women.

In concrete terms, while older women tried to improve their ballet technique and concentrate only on themselves through the practice of stage performance, young women tended to display an ideal confident version of themselves on the stage. The stage performance was a contribution to the ongoing debates of gender, performance, and an embodied sense of selfhood in action. Therefore, I suggest that the stage performance was about “showing off” a particular self and not just one’s dance ability. The way women

utilised the stage performance represented their desires and hopes beyond their mundane lives. Through stage performance both old and young students tried to assert a sense of alternate selfhood. Ortner (2006) argues that even subtle subordination plays a part in an individual's engagement in "serious games". People have their own desires that grow out of the structures that surround their daily life beyond the determinative or structuring expectations of society. In line with the arguments of Mathews (1996) and Ortner (ibid.), therefore, in this final section I have explored how within the confines of accepted gender roles women intentionally utilised ballet in order to assert their individual identity in a Japanese context. As such, the ballet studio and the learning of ballet represent females' wishes, dreams, and desires inside and outside Japanese society; specifically those women who were able to discover their own bodies, voice and agency through ballet.

Conclusion

Japanese women are often described by western anthropologists as submissive and constrained by patriarchal norms (Brinton 1993; Lam 1992; Saso 1990). Drawing on Althusser (1971) and what is popularly called second wave feminism (cf. Assiter 1990; Barrett 1988), the aforementioned anthropologists suggest that the state has tried to control Japanese women, as wives and mothers especially, through an ideology that made them subordinate in status. Similarly, ballet is commonly considered to be a constrained form of dance. Some feminists argue that ballerinas are the victims of patriarchy. For example, in the UK, where I attended university, some women told me that they do not want to learn ballet precisely because of its perceived femininity. However, my informants utilised ballet as a tool to liberate themselves and they did not consider dancing to be oppressive. They viewed ballet in positive terms. Therefore, in this paper I have suggested that ballet is highly popular in Japan *precisely because* Japanese women can represent empowerment and even resist against 'traditional' gender norms through dancing ballet. Ballet in Japan has developed differently from western ballet. Indeed, ballet does not belong to any entrenched Japanese centred tradition, thus it has been able to develop in a specific regional way through a process of localisation. Goldstein-Gidoni argues that: "Inventing the Western. . .[ways of representation]. . . is much easier than doing the same with the traditional-Japanese since there is no 'real' past to limit the Western customs dreamed up" (1997: 140). Indeed, ballet is contextualised in Japan and Japanese women utilised ballet in order to express their feminine aspirations. Yet, they do this within the confines of an accepted gender role through using ballet. The majority of the women discussed in this paper are middle-class women who do not have to contend with financial problems. For example, many young women were 'parasite singles' who

live with their parents without paying for their food or rent. In the case of middle-aged dancing women they were married to white-collar *salarymen*, allowing them to remain at home as professional housewives. Such women are often seen as having no worries in their lives. This is not the whole story however. While these women follow social expectations for middle-class behaviour, they simultaneously try to extricate themselves from their subordinate positions and pursue personal empowerment by dancing ballet. Therefore, although ballet is widely considered to be a feminine and disciplined form of dance, I suggest that ballet in Japan assists my middle-class informants to vent their feelings arising from restrictions at home, at work or even in broader society. It nourished their socially forbidden desire to be inward and self-focussed.

Notes

1. This soap opera is probably named after Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale 'The Red Shoes', or perhaps after the British film of the same name based on his stories.
2. The official name of this law is *rōdojikan tanshuku no sokushin ni kansuru rinjisochi hō*.
3. The Paris Opera Ballet School website (<https://www.operadeparis.fr/en/les-artistes/l-ecole-de-danse>) shows the minimum and maximum height and weight depending on applicants' age. For example, an eight year old candidate should not be taller than 1m 35cm or heavier than 25 kg, but the Vaganova Ballet Academy offers no such clear description (<http://vaganovaacademy.com/B/ApplicationAndTuition/Application>), accessed September 2014.
4. This insecurity about body type can also be observed with male dancers such as Hattori Yukichi at the Alberta Dance Company in Canada and Kobayashi Juichi former dancer at Béjart Ballet Lausanne in Switzerland. Both men have pointed out how they experienced a certain feeling of ambiguity (sometimes even inferiority) about their bodies in comparison with dancers who possessed ideal male ballet proportions such as being tall and muscular (cf. Burt 1995; see also the interview with Hattori about ideal male body types in ballet, <https://www.j-wave.co.jp/original/worldaircurrent/lounge/back/050409/index.html>, accessed January 2015).
5. According to Sasahara (1999: 206), these feminine characteristics are related to gaining an advantage in finding a husband, and therefore are based on male dominance rather than female autonomy.
6. According to the White Paper on National Life (http://www5.cao.go.jp/seikatsu/whitepaper/h18/10_pdf/01_honpen/pdf/06ksha0203.pdf, accessed 6 January 2015).
7. For a more detailed explanation of low-birth rate, see <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/wp/hakusyo/kousei/13/dl/1-02-3.pdf>, accessed January 2015.
8. According to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, in 2008 97.3% of female university graduates were recruited into the job market. These full-time graduates were divided into two tracks, executive and general in most big Japanese companies which had more than 5,000 employees. While the executive

track means “employees that are rotated to various departments with the purpose of giving them broad-based experience and knowledge,” the general track only entails “support-level clerical work” (Fujimura-Fanselow 1995: 145).

9. The teacher generally called students by their first name and added the suffix-*chan* for younger students and the horrific-*san* for the older ones.
10. According to their website, the Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office is aiming for women and men to have equal status and opportunities in Japanese politics, economics, society and culture. Their survey focuses on gender viewpoints in terms of jobs, households, childrearing and elder care among men and women. For more detail see http://www.gender.go.jp/about_danjo/whitepaper/h25/zentai/html/zuhyo/zuhyo01-00-25.html, accessed November 2014.
11. During the Meiji-era (1868-1912), the *ie* (household/ family) system was established based on a samurai family model and was supported by Confucian ideology (Blood 1967; Fukutake 1981; Hendry 1981; Kondo 1990). The *ie* was a patriarchal and primogenital system, thus every child except the eldest son was expected to move from their natal *ie* after marriage, and every daughter was required to move into her spouse’s household as a young bride. Since *yome* was the only person entering into this pre-existing household from another, her position was the lowest.
12. Northern Ballet is located in Leeds and has a specific class for students over 55 (<http://northernballet.com>, accessed January 2015). Janine Stanlowa is located in Paris (<http://www.institut-stanlowa.com>, accessed January 2015).
13. For example, the NDT (Netherland Dance Theatre) had three different divisions depending on age; the NDTIII was for dancers 40 years and older. However, in 2006 the company decided the NDTIII would not be continued (<http://www.ndt.nl>, accessed January 2015).
14. According to BBC website, *kosu-pure* is also getting popular among Londoners who are seeking friends or fun. <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-28297077>, accessed September 2014.

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日本のバレエ事情：日本バレエの西洋主義的観点を再考

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クラシック・バレエは常に西洋式ハイアートと捉えられていて、世界中で鑑賞され習得されている。バレエは、審美的な観点で非常に西洋的あるいはグローバル的な存在と考えられるかもしれない。しかし、日本のバレエには西洋主義的な面と、日本的発達の両方の面があるため、本稿では画一的でグローバル化した日本バレエという見解を注意深く検証したい。最初に、他の非西洋諸国と同様に、日本におけるバレエは西洋化の象徴と捉えられている例を述べる。ここではバレエを消費することはステイタスを得る一つ的手段となっている。しかし、次の事例では日本で習得されているバレエは、西洋バレエとは違う独自の性質があることを指摘する。例えば、西洋美の理想である「細くて長い手足」のバレエ体型は、日本では必ずしもプロダンサーになるための必要条件ではない。独自の審美観を発展させながら、日本のバレエは西洋主義的な審美観よりも平等主義を表している。そのため、本論文ではバレエ習得者の社会的願望と審美観に焦点を当てながら、日本バレエの特異性を考察する。特に、都市部に住む中産階級の女性とのインタビューを基に、彼女達のバレエへのこだわりを検証する。