

EXPLOITATION OR SEXUAL REBELLION? **ANDREW LEE** INVESTIGATES THE PLAYFUL WORLD OF JAPANESE *EROPURI* – WHERE GIRLS RULE AND BOYS MOST DEFINITELY DROOL.

IF YOU SHOULD FIND YOURSELF IN TOKYO any time soon make sure you spend time browsing magazines at one of the big bookstores. In the section for teenage girls you'll find titles such as *Smart Girls* and *Egg* and in the back of these, you'll be confronted with a strange phenomenon: snapshots of young women topless, naked and simulating sex, which the girls themselves have taken and submitted for publication – not, as you might expect, for the consumption of dirty old men, but for other girls.

This type of photo is part of a trend known as *eropuri*, and while it may at first look like porn, it is in fact the latest manifestation of a very Japanese kind of women's liberation.

The trend can be traced back to the mid-1990s, when a new tribe of provocatively dressed schoolgirls arrived on the scene in Tokyo's Shibuya shopping precinct, and sent a ripple of consternation through Japanese society.

Wearing exaggerated makeup and bleached hair, these so-called *kogyaru* took their name from the street slang for school (*kosei*) and girl (*gyaru*). They rolled their school skirts up to show more thigh, and let loose socks bunch around their ankles like leg-warmers to make their legs appear longer. They were obnoxious, confident, loud and very proud of the way they looked – which was not how Japanese girls were meant to act at all.

Their behaviour broke all the rules of the Confucian system on which Japan's patriarchal society is based. This traditional code of conduct enforces the concealment of feelings and a strict sense of decorum. Saving face is everything. Traditionally, Japanese women are meant to be

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I SHOT MYSELF
A SHOOT FROM AN
ISSUE OF *SMART
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subservient and modest; they should be obedient, demure and they should respect the authority of older males. Men in turn are obliged to respect those who rank higher than them in society. In former times this meant the Emperor; these days it means the company boss.

For Japanese men, the company comes first. They commonly work 16 hours a day, six days a week. This keeps them away from their families, but it is a man's duty to work without complaint and a woman's to be a good wife and wise mother. Children are expected to spend their years at school preparing for these roles.

The *kogyaru* stood in defiance of this. These young women had grown up seeing the tough lives their parents were leading and wanted no part of it. Author Nicholas Bornoff, who has written much on the subject of sexuality in Japan, writes (in a 2002 essay) that “to Japanese women, the fight for liberation and equality doesn't involve male emulation: penis envy isn't on the agenda. Rather young girls just wanna have fun. The trashing of the Confucianist ideal of woman as demure and submissive is one of the essentials of Japanese feminism.”

This is exactly what the *kogyaru* were doing and their arrival was as shocking in Japan as punk was in Britain. As anthropologist Laura Miller has noted (in *US-Japan Women's Journal*), when the *kogyaru* appeared on the streets of Tokyo the Japanese media began to exhibit “an odd mixture of mass anxiety and voyeuristic interest”. Generally focusing on the more negative aspects of *kogyaru*, such as their supposed sexual promiscuity and the phenomenon of *enjo-kosai* (or “compensated dating”), the media helped fuel the fad. One of the traits that particularly irked the general public was how narcissistic and selfish the *kogyaru* were. Many could not understand why these girls were not ashamed to be shirking their social responsibilities.

An essential accessory for the *kogyaru* was a camera. Soon, young female photographers came to public attention when they won highly publicised emerging artist awards with snapshots of the girl-dominated world in which they lived. Labelled, somewhat condescendingly, the *onnanoko no shashinka* (girlie photographers), their work soon became extremely popular with high school girls who could identify with these images of their lifestyle.

They also garnered the attention of the art world. In 1993, 20-year-old Yurie Nagashima won the Parco Prize with a series of very frank photos of herself posing nude with her family. She followed this in 1995 with a book of “self-nudes” and was soon credited with starting a boom in photography among young women. The *kogyaru* in particular were quick to pick up on the craze. One such girl was a 17 year old calling herself Hiromix (Hiromi Toshikawa), who was the next of the “girlie photographers” to make it big.

Hiromix was chosen by renowned Japanese photographer Nobuyoshi Araki as the winner of the New Cosmos of Photography award in 1995 with her diary of colour photocopies entitled *Seventeen Girl Days*, a peek into the private world of a high school girl. Alongside everyday scenes such as friends playing, plates of half-eaten food and her pet cat were more self-nudes. Taken in front of a mirror, these portraits were a personal document of a girl's narcissistic pleasure in her own beauty.

Hiromix and her contemporaries were breaking the rules of Confucianism: these kind of images were meant to be kept private. But Hiromix was suggesting that there was more to life than being cute and submissive. In an interview with *The New Yorker* magazine in 2002 she said “almost all Japanese men suffer from a Lolita complex [*lolicom*] ... Japanese guys are threatened by capable women, and would like them to be a little more stupid.”

AROUND THIS TIME, 29-YEAR-OLD MIHO SASAKI suggested an idea to her bosses at the Atlas games company that could take advantage of the photo-diary craze. Noticing the mad passion high school girls had for both photography and sticker collecting, Sasaki suggested the two could be combined into a new kind of game machine.

In 1995 the first “Print Club” (*purikura*) machine appeared in Tokyo. The brightly coloured photo-booths take your photo, juxtapose your face among cartoon characters or exotic backgrounds then print the image on sheets of cute little stickers. Only a year after their launch, Atlas' *purikura* machines made up 70 percent of the company's sales.

Purikura has since gone through several waves of innovation, as have the ways girls use the machines. At first they were happy to simply be *kawaii* (cute) in front of the camera, smiling and flashing the peace sign. But as time passed they started to add graffiti to personalise the stickers. *Purikura* manufacturers noticed this and added options to the machines that would enable girls to scribble their own messages on screen before pressing the print button.

Then things started to get altogether spicier. Print Club arcades installed full-length machines and supplied costumes for the girls to dress up in. Boys were actually banned from many of these arcades, so girls had the privacy to do whatever they liked without male interference. When the fun of dressing up in nurse uniforms or cheongsams wore off some girls ditched the costumes – and *eropuri* (erotic print club) was born.

Because girls had long been sending their *purikura* into the readers' pages of teen magazines it was here that *eropuri* first began to be noticed as a trend. In September 2003 the magazine *Popteen* ran a special issue devoted to *eropuri*. Its pages showed examples of *purikura* stickers sent in by readers who were naked,

flashing their breasts and acting out sex in the photo booths. But as *Popteen's* editor Chisako Wada said in a weekly tabloid at the time, “Today's teenage girls are pretty light-hearted. They

society hungry for nudie shots of teenagers. The reality, however, is far more complex. Japanese girls are constantly bombarded with conflicting messages. On one hand they are told to be

The fact that the products of girl culture, such as *eropuri*, are continually appropriated by the patriarchal media, only makes the girls' constant reinvention of themselves more fascinating. Japanese men are being forced to keep up, but are failing miserably.

Much has been written recently about the growing chasm between the sexes in Japan. Men there are stuck in a rut – expected to uphold their duty to the company and country – while women are taking control of their lives, refusing to get married and have kids if it means living the way their parents did. They refuse to be passive and demure, yet they can see how tough life is for men and sure as hell don't want that kind of equality. While young men are increasingly subject to the *otaku* phenomenon – becoming more and more isolated – the girls are out enjoying themselves, creating trends such as *eropuri*. ◀

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show their *eropuri* amongst each other and have absolutely no qualms about showing off their naked bodies. Showing *eropuri* is one way girls use to prove they're friends.” In other words, this was being done for their own pleasure.

Laura Miller has studied the phenomenon and suggests that *eropuri* is something the previous generation of Japanese women would have been too embarrassed to dabble in. “The idea of taking photos of themselves in revealing poses would have been unthinkable,” she says. But *eropuri* enthusiasts “show an astonishing lack of anxiety about social censure of their naughty posing and risqué words. The eyes of society, so effective in keeping their mothers in line, are of no consequence to them.” These photos, Miller says, are “not simply individual acts of deviance, but are a manifestation of general dissent among girls, who have little desire to follow in their mothers' footsteps.”

It could be argued that these girls are simply playing into the hands of a male-dominated

demure, maidenly and chaste – thereby fulfilling their role in the Confucianist system – and on the other they are encouraged to be as sexy and cute as they can possibly be. It's a Catch-22, so their reaction has been to caricature both messages and have fun while doing it. Often the shots deliberately parody the type of images that appear in men's magazines. Says Miller: “*Eropuri* mock the very visual codes that have been used to objectify them.”



MEMOIRS OF A KOGYARU (LEFT TO RIGHT) READERS' EROPURI FROM AN ISSUE OF POPTEN, EGGS MAGAZINE, AND SPREADS FROM VARIOUS ISSUES OF SMART GIRLS.