

Beyond the Spotlight: Unveiling the Takarazuka Revue's Complex Legacy of Art, Gender, and Society

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Abstract. The Takarazuka Revue, a distinctive all-female Japanese musical theatre troupe, is renowned not only for its lavish productions and the unique approach of having women perform male roles but also as a subject of extensive socio-cultural discourse. This article meticulously examines the troupe as a microcosm reflecting a broader spectrum of societal issues in Japan, such as deep-rooted gender discrimination, systemic bullying, and the subjugation and objectification of women. The investigation is both critical and detailed, unveiling the darker aspects of the institution, including the oppressive and authoritarian practices within the Takarazuka Music School, the gruelling transformation of women into performers, and the manipulation of art as a medium to perpetuate traditional gender norms and societal expectations. Furthermore, the article delves into the psychological impacts on the individuals involved, scrutinising the long-term effects of power dynamics and stringent training regimes. It artfully argues that the Takarazuka Revue, once a beacon of theatrical innovation and excellence, now stands as a complex symbol of the intertwined relationships between art, gender roles, and societal structures in Japan. The article provides a balanced perspective, acknowledging the artistic value and cultural significance of the Revue while critically analysing its broader societal implications. Through this in-depth analysis, the article aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the Takarazuka Revue and its role in Japanese culture, encouraging a reassessment of the intersection between art and social norms, including gender dynamics.

Keywords: Takarazuka Revue, Sexism, Japanese society, Music Industry in Japan, School bullying.

1. Introduction

The Takarazuka Revue, once hailed as the "Broadway of Japan," has significantly influenced the "idol trend" in Asia, impacting groups like AKB 48, Produce Camp, and Nogizaka 46. Established in 1913 by Ichizō Kobayashi, its initial purpose was to attract visitors to the Takarazuka hot springs, but it gradually evolved into an emblematic symbol of Japanese culture [1]. This all-female troupe is renowned for its lavish productions and exquisite performances, comprising five distinct troupes: Flower, Moon, Snow, Star, and Cosmos, each with its unique style [2]. The performers, rigorously trained in singing, dancing, and acting, blend traditional Japanese arts with elements of Western musical theatre. The troupe stages original works and adaptations of classic Western musicals and literary pieces, covering themes from history to romantic love and contemporary subjects [3]. Takarajennu divides roles into male roles (otokoyaku) and female roles (musumeyaku). Known for female performers playing male roles, this characteristic not only reshapes the boundaries of gender representation but also profoundly influences global theatrical arts [3]. Today, it is not only a symbol of Japanese culture but also widely recognized and acclaimed internationally. The Takarazuka Revue firmly believes that "performers must be cultivated at the Takarazuka Music School to qualify for the troupe," leading to the school's high competitiveness, only 40 people are admitted each year. There is this saying, "The East has Tokyo University, the West has Takarazuka," chosen by people with affluent backgrounds as a dream sanctuary [4]. However, recent changes in the school's ethos, including the abolition of traditional one-on-one guidance (based on a disciplinary relationship between senior and junior students), have drawn national attention in Japan. This shift has exposed negative news such as the suicides of popular actresses and their departures to adult film industries, bullying between seniors and juniors, victim-blaming, psychological depression due to excessive

workloads, and the school's indifferent response, causing a global sensation. The "dream factory" image of the Takarazuka Revue has revealed the darker aspects of Japanese society's oppression and enslavement of women. The media and art circles have delved deep into the hidden dark world beneath the bright facade of the Takarazuka Revue. This article will specifically elaborate on the troupe's sinister deeds, previously unknown, focusing on issues of bullying, the inhumane transformation of women, and the tarnishing of art.

2. The Problems of Takarazuka - The Bullying

Bullying is a persistent and pernicious issue in Japanese society, affecting individuals across all age groups. Students can become targets of bullying for various reasons, such as appearance, interests, socioeconomic background, academic abilities, or behavioural traits. Initiated by individual students or groups, bullying inflicts ongoing distress and pain on its victims [5]. Additionally, the Japanese workplace is plagued by Power Harassment, a form of workplace bullying that manifests as excessive pressure beyond job requirements, personal attacks, or cold indifference [6]. The impact of bullying on mental and physical health is substantial [7].

In 2020, the number of suicides in Japan reached 21,000, with 512 being students below high school level [8]. In 2022, the number of suicides among Japanese women rose to 7,135, accounting for 32.6% of the total and showing an upward trend, reflecting the multifaceted challenges women face in society [9].

The Takarazuka Revue has long been the dream school for many Japanese girls, with countless individuals investing time, effort, and money into their training. Those admitted to the Takarazuka Music School are the cream of the crop, mostly coming from Japan's elite families, and the school's fees are reportedly beyond the reach of ordinary families [10]. Takarazuka's 96th class member Rena Takatsuka faced prolonged bullying and rumours from her peers due to her less affluent background, eventually leading to a false accusation of theft and forced expulsion. Rena later cleared her name legally, but in 2016, she chose to debut in adult films as a form of retaliation against the school and her past bullies [11]. In October 2023, a 102nd class member, originally named Koiki Nagisa, renamed herself as Nagisa Koiki and entered the adult film industry to fulfil her "dream." Unlike Rena Takatsuka, Koiki Nagisa was born in the wealthy Kansai region of Japan and had over a decade of classical ballet training. However, she too endured long-term bullying at Takarazuka, choosing to retire at the height of her career in 2022 and turning to a self-destructive path of selling her body, leading to widespread lamentation [11]. Regardless of background, the Takarazuka Music School is a place where all endure a dark time of bullying [12].

3. The Oppression

In Japan, the unfair treatment faced by women is particularly evident. Although women have equal educational opportunities compared to men, traditional gender and family norms are still deeply ingrained in society. These norms influence women's career choices, and Japanese women generally earn less on average than their male counterparts. Women attempting to break traditional gender roles or achieve professional success often face discrimination in the workplace. Their participation in social and political spheres is also limited, with female representation in politics significantly lower than that of men [13]. Various cases reveal that Japanese women are oppressed by male perspectives and societal traditions, and years of subjugation under such conditioning have led some women to resort to extreme measures for retribution.

Chie Nakane spoke about the scale of interpersonal relationships in Japanese society, which is directly proportional to the duration and depth of actual contact. Newcomers are always at the bottom of the relationship hierarchy, illustrating the Japanese consciousness of order [14]. This highlights the essence of bullying and violence in Japan as stemming from its extreme senior-junior culture, with Takarazuka serving as a microcosm of society.

The Takarazuka Music School, renowned for its achievements in arts education, has a strict discipline and regime that can be unbearable. Several rules include: 1. If a senior student does not have an umbrella, junior students, even if they have one, must also walk home in the rain. 2. If a junior student is the first to use the bath, they must leave it spotlessly clean, not even a single hair should be left behind. 3. Bowing when a train passes by is mandatory, as a senior might be on it. 4. When responding to seniors' questions, juniors can only answer "yes" or "no" without additional thoughts [15]. This military-like management numbs the initially innocent girls, leading to severe psychological issues. Respect turns into fear and dread for juniors, and when they become seniors, they might inflict the same treatment on their juniors, creating a vicious cycle. Thus, the students' freedom, including in social activities and personal expression, is restricted, leading to isolation. This not only adversely affects their mental health but also results in malicious bullying behaviours.

Former Takarazuka Revue member Maya Ayahane, in an interview, questioned the inhumanity of these practices, asking, "Why must one endure such guidance?" Koyuki Higashi from the 91st class convinced herself that all the endurance was for the sake of performing on stage. Evidently, the Takarazuka Music School casts a lifelong shadow on them, symbolizing oppression and enslavement [16]. In 2023, an active female role player, Ki Aria, committed suicide. Further investigations revealed that she had long suffered from senior bullying, public reprimands, insults, and an overload of work, exacerbating her mental burden. Bullies often warned her, "You are responsible for the mistakes of the juniors." Even during rehearsals, her forehead was burnt by a curling iron wielded by senior Mineri Amairo, and a classmate who tried to protect Ki Aria was also injured in the changing room. In June 2023, Ki Aria was chosen as the lead for a new production. Despite reaching this milestone, she still had to endure loud scoldings from seniors, juniors did not follow her directions and ostracised her. These bullying acts were overlooked without serious attention or help, resulting in accumulated stress for Ki Aria, leading to a mental breakdown. After the first day of her lead performance in the musical noir PAGAD, she chose to jump to her death [11]. She used her life to fight for a chance, yet the Takarazuka Revue merely attributed it to her "inability to cope with long working hours." The curling iron incident was dismissed as an accidental burn, completely denying any bullying. The school's indifference undoubtedly chills everyone to the core. Bullying can lead directly to retaliation. The rigid hierarchy of seniors and juniors, coupled with an indifferent social atmosphere, breeds a significant amount of vengeful psychology. American anthropologist Ruth Benedict, in distinguishing the Japanese culture of shame from the Western culture of guilt, explains that the Japanese culture of shame, formed by omnipresent social perception and public opinion, is a pervasive subconscious phenomenon [17]. Consequently, the Japanese do not face significant psychological barriers in switching from one behavior to its antithesis. Without a fixed value system, they do not view self-destructive retaliation as shameful, paying extra attention to the opinions of others, thus turning to extremes. Under traditional Japanese values, women's property and voice are often dominated by others. Without absolute economic control, they resort to punishing their bodies to undermine the dominator's status, creating an illusion of equality to rationalize past injuries. Regarding the perplexing choice of extreme retribution, scholar Li Yuning provides an analysis: In Korea, it is a culture of hate, while in Japan, it is one of resentment, an emotion vented against others and external circumstances. It requires revenge for its resolution, like a raging fire [18]. These young girls from Takarazuka pay the price of their lives and futures for the sake of revenge.

In addition to the strict hierarchical system in the Takarazuka Revue, there are also shocking practices in managing body shape and enforcing gender roles that degrade and objectify women. Girls in the Takarazuka Revue are educated into two categories: female roles and male roles [3]. Male roles involve transforming spirited females into more handsome figures than men, with behavior and thought patterns masculinized and molded after the ideal male template. Female roles are required to be extremely thin; a fuller figure often leads to controversy and insult. In performances, female roles completely complement the male roles and are meant to enhance them. Essentially, they are all crafted according to Takarazuka's template as traditional "production machines", losing individual uniqueness and contradicting the natural essence and personality of art. Art aims to express the

relationship between humanity and nature, with its value closely tied to human connections [19]. It not only represents aesthetics and culture but also carries human emotions, thoughts, and history. It can convey an artist's inner world, reflecting personal experiences, emotional states, and worldviews. Often, it stimulates emotional resonance in the audience, triggering deep reflection and feelings. This emotional exchange makes art a powerful communication tool, transcending cultural and linguistic barriers. Art also plays a vital role in education and enlightenment. It inspires creativity and imagination, positively impacting cognitive development and mental health [20]. Art education fosters critical thinking and innovation, crucial for individual and societal development [21]. Even though the Takarazuka Music School studies classical art, turning everyone into the same type of artist also causes art to lose its original character, contradicting the purpose of art education. Furthermore, for these girls, art becomes a shackle and a means of objectifying and enslaving women under the guise of beauty.

The Takarazuka Revue allows the male roles some space as they are the primary performers with a degree of artistic freedom and opportunities for display, and they garner considerable fame and fan attention. The lead male roles become the core of the troupe, with other performers revolving around them, creating a distinct pyramid of hierarchy. Becoming a principal male role is no easy feat; it requires at least a decade and involves living daily life in a manly manner, with some actors even undergoing vocal cord surgery if their voice is not deep enough. This crafting plan starts in their teens, and this continual gender role-playing can impact their gender identity [22]. Meanwhile, the female roles serve the male roles, essentially setting standards for women to serve men, crafted according to male preferences and desires. The training goal for the female roles is to represent "Yamato Nadeshik", the ideal woman under Japanese patriarchy – sexy yet modest, gentle and caring, loyal and submissive, epitomising the perfect bride in a traditional sense. The Takarazuka Music School's curriculum includes painting, tea ceremony, musical instruments, dance, vocal, and physical training. Girls from Takarazuka also become the most sought-after in Japan's upper-class marriage market. In March 2021, the news of the fifth-generation "prince" of the Toyota family, Daisuke Toyota, marrying 26-year-old Takarazuka female role star Hitomi Seira, created a sensation in Japanese society [23]. This can be seen less as a troupe for crafting performers and more as a bride school, where they are trained with strict hierarchical notions, willingly playing a supporting role centred around men. This training is undeniably conditioning women, moulding them into standards serving men. Moreover, all females must remain unmarried during their traineeship, and even dating is not allowed, leading to a loss of personal freedom. Despite the Takarazuka Music School and Revue being all-female entities, they still elevate the male role to the highest status, truly reflecting the remnants of feudalism and the epitome of Japanese male supremacy. With campus bullying, hierarchical oppression, and gender discrimination, Takarazuka still lives in the era of feudal ignorance, unable to represent the power of modern women. It has become a shackle for women, trapping their minds and bodies under layers of rules and regulations, suffocating them.

4. A Stain on Art

Music, as an elegant and pure form of art, not only enriches human cultural life but also promotes the development of human emotions and intellect [24]. The investment and training it demands are not just a drill in skill, but also a pursuit of beauty and the cultivation of human empathy. In the world of music, everyone can find resonance, comfort, and inspiration, making music an indispensable part of human life. Music education plays a vital role in cognitive and emotional development. It fosters brain development, enhancing memory, attention, and creativity. Music is also used as a tool for therapy and education, helping people deal with emotional and psychological issues [25]. From the perspective of music and art, the Takarazuka Revue, despite its notable achievements in the performing arts, also reveals its deceit. The tradition of women playing male roles offers a unique form of artistic expression but is also catered to male audience fantasies and societal elite expectations. In the divided roles of male and female characters, male roles always dominate, further limiting the

freedom of expression for female performers. On one hand, this practice breaks traditional gender boundaries, offering a new form of female self-expression [26]. However, on the other hand, it reinforces gender stereotypes, confining female performers within the framework of male fantasies and expectations [27]. In such an environment, women's self-identity and gender expression are shaped to fit the audience and societal expectations, not to truthfully express their personality and artistic pursuits [28]. This transformation of female concepts can limit women's artistic performance and personal development, harming their psychological health and career prospects, and potentially causing confusion and conflict in their gender identity [27]. Furthermore, the issue of bullying and oppression by seniors in the Takarazuka Music School reflects the deeply rooted hierarchical system and authoritarianism in Japanese culture. This system, ostensibly to maintain discipline and tradition, greatly leads to the abuse of power, causing long-term psychological and emotional harm to young students. In such an environment, students may experience extreme stress, affecting their artistic development and personal well-being. A more important reflection is that art and music should be domains of free expression and creative thinking. These young girls start their training from a young age, aspiring to join the Takarazuka troupe as their life's dream. The beautiful music and swirling dance on stage are the accumulation of years of sweat and tears. However, within the Takarazuka system, artistic expression is often severely restricted by commercial and societal expectations. Female performers are forced to follow strict norms, limiting not only their artistic freedom but also affecting the authenticity and depth of their artworks. They are unable to infuse their understanding of art or truly experience the value of music. These "crimes" bring complex impacts on female concepts and question the purity of art. The Takarazuka motto "Pure, Right, Beautiful" no longer leads them to the noble halls of art but enslaves women, conditioning them to blind obedience, thus serving as a selection pool of brides for the wealthy and influential, fulfilling men's dreams. Takarazuka deceives naive girls chasing dreams and hopeful parents, using fame and fortune as a lure, under the guise of fulfilling musical aspirations [29]. Takarazuka shows the hardships and splendor of art, but it also reveals that art is no longer the unstained lotus emerging from the mud, unveiling the internal gender discrimination, restrictions on free expression, and commercialisation eroding the purity and elegance of art.

5. Conclusion

The Takarazuka Revue was once a symbol of theatrical excellence in Japan, but it has now become a vivid reminder of the complexities and contradictions at the intersection of art, society, and gender. Despite its outward elegance and cultural significance, the practices of Takarazuka, especially in terms of gender roles and hierarchical structures, reflect deep-rooted societal norms that perpetuate gender stereotypes and male supremacy. The strict role divisions between female roles and male roles, the expectation of blind obedience to authority, and near-servile rigorous training highlight the oppressive nature of traditional Japanese societal structures. Art has been transformed into a tool for maintaining societal expectations and gender stereotypes, particularly evident in the context of Takarazuka. While Takarazuka provides a platform for artistic expression, it paradoxically confines its performers within rigid gender roles, limiting their creative freedom and personal development. This duality not only undermines the individuality and authenticity of the performers but also raises questions about the role of art in society and its ability to challenge and redefine cultural norms. Furthermore, the issues of bullying and hierarchical oppression within the Takarazuka Music School highlight the darker aspects of Japan's social order, where power dynamics and authoritarianism can lead to long-term psychological trauma and stunt personal growth. This environment, intended to foster creativity and self-expression, instead becomes a breeding ground for fear, conformity, and the suppression of individuality. The young girls who enter this system, driven by dreams of artistic glory, often find themselves trapped in a web of exploitation, losing sight of their artistic aspirations in the face of overwhelming societal and institutional pressures.

In summary, although the Takarazuka Revue has achieved artistic success, it serves as a microcosm of broader societal issues in Japan, particularly regarding gender roles, artistic expression, and power dynamics. The challenges faced by its performers symbolize the struggles of many Japanese women, who navigate a landscape marked by tradition, expectation, and constraint. As we reflect on the legacy of Takarazuka, it becomes clear that true artistic freedom and gender equality remain elusive goals in a society still grappling with the shadows of its feudal past and the complexities of its modern identity. The story of Takarazuka is not just about the spectacle of performance; it is a narrative about the ongoing struggle for self-expression, identity, and equality in the face of enduring cultural and societal norms.

Takarazuka Revue and Takarazuka Music School have had a significant impact on Japanese society and even the female idol scene in the entire Asia. However, their distorted mechanism of producing musical talent and the subjugation of women have cast a negative shadow over Japan's art scene. These are crucial issues that need profound introspection and reform at both artistic and societal levels.

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