

Images of Working Women

By Ato Ekusa

The Japanese are extremely resourceful when it comes to coining words to describe new social phenomena. One of the latest expressions to enrich the Japanese language is *ojingyaru*, a combination of *ojin* and *gyaru*.

Ojin is the word that young women often use to describe, in a rather unfriendly way, a middle-aged man who is past his prime. Since the word suggests a certain degree of contempt, a woman rarely says it to a man's face. *Gyaru* is the Japanese rendition of the English word "gal." So an *ojingyaru* is a young woman who behaves like a middle-aged man on the wane. Let me give a few examples.

When you enter an office building in places like Otemachi and Marunouchi, the business center of Tokyo, one of the first things you will notice is the vending machines in the corridors. In the past, these vending machines provided only fruit juices and other soft drinks, but recently their offerings have come to include tonic drinks full of vitamins and other energizers. The main consumers of these tonic drinks are worn-out male office workers, but recently a growing number of female employees has been imbibing them too. A young woman worker in need of a tonic drink is a typical *ojingyaru*.

As well as providing many benefits, the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, which went into effect in 1986, appears to be taking its toll. The law encourages companies to give talented women the same job opportunities as men, but on the other side of the coin, it also requires women to do their share of overtime. Hence the increasing number of tired female workers joining their older male colleagues for a tonic.

Another example of the *ojingyaru* phenomenon is the growing number of young women who use the time they spend on jampacked commuter trains every morning to browse through the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, Japan's leading business daily. The *Nikkei*, as it is called, contains mainly economic and political articles and used to have an almost entirely male readership.

The typical female office worker in Ja-



Women office workers like these are now nicknamed *ojingyaru*.

pan used to be considered something of a simpleton. She would be given nothing more to do in the office than serve tea for visitors and make photocopies of documents when asked to do so by her seniors or other male employees. Her reading fare was limited to weekly magazines offering a diet of gossip about television celebrities and hints on how to find a marriage partner.

Following the implementation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, however, more and more women are being given positions of responsibility in the workplace, and many of them have taken to reading the *Nikkei*, as their male colleagues do, in the hope of increasing their knowledge and thereby furthering their career.

As women have gained better positions at work and their salaries have risen, a growing number of them have caught "money fever." Having read the *Nikkei* on the train to work in the morning, on the way home the *ojingyaru* opens the pages of the *Kabushiki Shimbun*, an evening paper, devoted to stock market news. In the past, young women used to keep their distance from the risky stock market, but now they are eager to invest their spare money in shares in the hope of making a little extra.

Have money, will travel. According to the Japan Travel Bureau, a nationwide

travel agency, the number of Japanese women making overseas trips in the summer now exceeds that of men by a ratio of 3:2. More and more women are making domestic trips, too. In the past, the main purposes of traveling in Japan for women were to see beautiful sights and to enjoy some good food, but the *ojingyaru* enjoys nothing better than "getting away from it all" by visiting a relaxing hot spring, especially one with an invigorating outdoor bath.

In the past, hot springs in Japan catered mainly for groups of middle-aged workers on company trips and elderly people seeking relief from rheumatism or postoperative fatigue. Now they are being invaded by young women. A certain Japanese-style inn in the hot spring resort of Nanasawa in Kanagawa Prefecture, southwest of Tokyo, recently underwent a major renovation, making the common bath for women larger than that for men.

As young Japanese women become even more independent-minded and well-heeled, one wonders what bastion of middle-aged society the *ojingyaru* will conquer next. ■

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