

The Depths of the Showa Retro Boom

By Inamasu Tatsuo

OVER the past few years in Japan, a “Showa Retro” boom has steadily gathered strength. The term “Showa” comes from Japan’s particular system of naming eras on the basis of the imperial system, and Showa is the period from 1926 through 1989. As it is understood in the term “Showa Retro,” however, it refers to the particular portion of the post-World War II period from roughly 1955 to 1974 (Showa 30s-40s).

Looking Back at the Good Old Days

In the context of fashions, the current “retro” boom can be seen as less of a spontaneous phenomenon than as a marketing strategy employed to direct consumers’ focus, at a time when no new trends seem to be forthcoming. By appealing to a sense of nostalgia among those who themselves experienced that period and a sense of novelty among young people who did not, the term has been used to describe a makeshift fashion all its own. For example, trends and fads such as “Fifties culture” and “Ivy League fashion” have been revived repeatedly over the decades. In short, in a large number of cases, “retro” has been the result of a marketing gimmick that has been repeated through a fixed cycle.

However, there are aspects of the current retro boom that cannot be explained by marketing theories alone. For example, as premiums and freebies given away with candies and sweets, the popularity of figures of animation heroes and reissued CDs of hit songs is easily comprehended as falling within the products’ general province. However, certain new phenomena are not limited by such associations. Smaller regional cities like Bungo-takada City in Oita Prefecture and Ome City in Tokyo have gained attention through their efforts to revitalize themselves by reproducing “Showa townscapes” as sightseeing attractions. As another example, the domestically produced film “*Always - Sunset on Third Street*,” which was released in 2005 and made a clean sweep of the Japan Academy Awards, portrayed a human drama of everyday life in Tokyo during the Showa 30s beginning in 1955, the period of high economic growth. The film was also a major box-office hit. In other words, this boom is not just a one-off phenomenon in specific

fields such as fashion or music, but rather the two-decade period from the Showa 30s to 40s is clearly in the limelight.

The Major Feature of “Showa Retro” Boom

The major feature of this particular boom is that those who are most enthusiastic over it are those who experienced that era first hand. In previous retro booms, as one might expect, it was young people who were targeted, those who are generally the most responsive to new information and most likely to follow fashions. However, what has expanded and sustained the current boom is that adults have been caught up in it in a big way. Moreover, these adults have not merely been aroused by a nostalgic feeling for the good old days. The boom has also given them opportunities to reflect on their own lives, to grope for a sense of self-identity and to try to determine who they really are.

The principal role in this is played by members of the *dankai sedai*. The term is used to refer to Japan’s own baby boomers, specifically those born between Showa 22 and 24 (1947-49). They are extremely prominent, even in terms of the population distribution. When they were born, they easily exceeded 8 million members, and currently they account for close to 7 million people. Considering that recently, as the decline in the birthrate continues, less than 1.2 million children are born in Japan each year, one cannot but be overwhelmed by this figure born within a short three-year span.

They possess more than numerical prominence. A major characteristic of Japan’s *dankai sedai* is that as a result of Japan’s defeat in World War II, they were educated in a spiritual climate that totally disowned the “traditional” prewar value system. In other words, because their parents’ generation virtually overnight forfeited legitimacy and lost self-confidence, the new generation from the outset won the struggle between the generations. From a historical perspective, they were unprecedented because they embodied “the righteousness of a new generation” from the moment they were born. (In actual fact, the university disturbances of the late 1960s were a large-scale clash between the generations.)

For people of this generation, although they may have lived in tough circumstances during the Showa

30s (1955-1964), there was vitality and a strong hope for the future. In a sense, we find in them the archetypal image of the contemporary Japanese, which fuses a traditional lifestyle with a Western materialistic one. That they would direct their attention to this particular period is not simply due to the psychological effect of seeking "healing." Rather, as they overlay their own individual lives on top of the period itself, they feel a certain nostalgic yearning as they sense the gap between the future that they themselves once visualized and the reality that they now experience.

■ The "2007 Issue"

In this connection, it has been pointed out that Japan will confront what is known as the "2007 issue." This refers to the fact that beginning in 2007 the members of the *dankai sedai* will reach retirement age and, for better or worse, this may bring about social changes.

From a negative perspective, it is suggested that because the generation's technical skills and experience have not been passed down, productivity and efficiency will deteriorate. On the other hand, from a positive perspective, it is suggested that the potential capacities that the generation directed toward their companies and businesses will be released in the form of volunteer activities and service to the community. (This argument for the most part focuses only on men. Women of the *dankai sedai* have long been active in local community affairs.)

At the bottom of this "Showa Retro" boom, in one sense, is the active interest of the baby boomers in looking back over that period and the society in which they lived. It is different from a passing fad. This is the social significance of this particular retro boom.

There is some justice to the warnings regarding the "Showa Retro" boom. In idealizing the period of their youth, adults tend to overlook the less attractive aspects of that period, such as acute industrial pollution and intense social competition. It is pointed out that, in the final analysis, they often fall into simplistic nostalgia for "the good old days."

■ Characteristics of the Showa 30s

It seems to me that the period the Showa 30s – symbolized in trendy contemporary phrases including "the 3 sacred treasures" (electric refrigerator, electric washing machine and electric vacuum cleaner) and "the 3 Cs" (car, color TV set and cooler

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A scene from the movie "Always - Sunset on Third Street." Tokyo Tower was constructed in 1958 and has received over 150 million visitors so far.

[Japanese term for air conditioner]) – was one in which the desire for material abundance had been steadily satisfied as economic growth continued. Once the desires were satisfied, an easily quantifiable sense of well-being or happiness was achieved during the period. I refer to the period as "a time when unhappy people became happy." In contrast, in our day we have in one way or another attained material abundance, and so we are already at the point where the goal used to be.

In the context of the Showa 30s, we are blessed and are to be envied, but from the point of view of today's young people, all that we have is taken completely for granted. We can already see that they encounter hardship when they are forced to discover a "personalized happiness of their own." While the image of "standard happiness," which anyone can aspire to, has been dismantled, the present time is "an epoch in which happy people seek even greater happiness."

In other words, in the current "Showa Retro" boom, what the adult generation ought to seriously question, as they reexamine this, is what sort of model for happiness can it come up with beyond a materially satisfied life. Before they end up simplistically talking about how great those earlier days were, filled with vitality and hope, they should recognize that they are being challenged to transmit their aspirations for the future to the next generation. **JS**

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