

# Takarazuka Review Company and the Power of ‘Community’<sup>1)</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

One of the most well-known all-female theater companies in the world, Takarazuka Review Company has remained popular since its first performance a hundred years ago. What is the main reason for its success? Focusing on the time of its foundation in the early 20th century, this paper will show that two particular forms of community have been the Company’s primary driving force up until the present.

The founder, Ichizo Kobayashi (1873-1957), was a great businessman whose major railroad enterprise has grown into Hankyu Hanshin Toho Group today. He made the Company in 1914 in the small town of Takarazuka, Hyogo Prefecture about thirteen miles from the city of Osaka, or about 310 miles west of Tokyo. Today the Company consists of about 400 performers, all of them unmarried women mostly in their 20s and 30s. Its repertoires include reviews, musical plays, Japanese dance shows, concerts, and more. They give about 1500 stages a year, performing almost every day at their two home theaters, in Takarazuka and Tokyo. They also tour domestically as well as give occasional overseas performances. Since the Company had its first oversea tour in 1938, they have performed in many foreign cities including New York, Honolulu, London, Paris, Berlin, Seoul, Shang-hai, Hong Kong, Taiwan and so on. Its popularity is tremendous; it sells around a million tickets every year. Celebrating a centennial anniversary in 2014, the Takarazuka Review Company has now become an integral part of the Japanese theatrical tradition.<sup>2)</sup>

The most striking point about Takarazuka as a company is that all roles are played by women. Those who dress and play male roles are called *otoko-yaku*. *Otoko-yaku* has been a hot focus of gender and queer studies both in Japan and abroad. In the past, *otoko-yaku* has generally seen as the main source of the Company’s enduring popularity, given that individual actresses rarely play both male and female characters. However, that contention

does not hold up to close examination: Otoko-yaku hardly seems to suffice as sole explanation. Transvestitism, after all, is a universal phenomenon and the Takarazuka Review is not the only exception at all. Kawakami Sadayakko (1871-1946), who is said to be the first modern actress in Japan, confessed in her memoir in 1911 that she had played male roles in amateur performances at *geisha* house before turning to the professional acting in 1899 (quoted in Kano 43). Also, until around the 1930s, otoko-yaku on Takarazuka stage was not a firmly established institution at all, as whether a performer played a male or a female role changed according to the play and direction, and participation of real male actors was planned several times during the early history of the company. Moreover, in the past there were many other all- female review companies featuring otoko-yaku<sup>3)</sup>, but only Takarazuka prospers to this very day.

Then why could Takarazuka Review Company develop for these hundred years? It seems that the founder Kobayashi innovatively organized two communities and that it is these which form the most important basis for the Company's longevity. They are the all-female theater community itself, one modeled after a typical girls' high school, and the local community along the railway that Kobayashi built. Kobayashi intentionally made full use of both the existing school system and the images that comes from it when organizing these communities.

## 2. Girls school community

One year before the first performance of the Company, Kobayashi founded the all-female school, and later named it the Takarazuka Music and Review School (renamed as Takarazuka Music School in 1946). Accredited by the Ministry of Education in 1918, the school offered its teenage girl pupils instruction in acting, singing and dancing for two years, before allowing them to debut in the Takarazuka Review. The school system and its culture were extended into the Company too. Up until today, all performers must graduate from this school to join the company. Even today, directors and producers are called *sensei* (teachers) while performers are called *seito* (students). The girls are called 1st grader, 2nd grader and so on according to the years they have been members, and when they retire from the stage, it is called a graduation instead of a mere retirement.

The important point about this Music School is that its ultimate goal, at least on the

surface, was not to train students to be talented performers, but to be a good wives and wise mothers after their 'graduation' (Kobayashi 1935, 71). Recalling some forty years of school history in 1955, Kobayashi wrote that his school had been "unexpectedly a finishing school" rather than an acting training institution. According to him, of about 2000 graduates so far, only thirty-seven of them remained in the world of entertainment, the rest being "decent, polite madams with artistic grounding in music and dance" (Kobayashi 1955, 459-60). And Kobayashi, far from crying over financial loss, was quite happy about that. Even though Kobayashi established a school for girls and all-female theatrical company, this does not necessarily suggest that he advocated contemporary women's right movement.

As such, the Music School closely adhered to the format and structuring of girls' high schools established under the 1899 Law on Girls' High Schools (*Koto jogakko rei*), whose purpose was to offer modern education. Separated completely from boys, teenage girls over twelve years old were to be given instruction for four years in liberal arts, domestic science, and moral education. At that time, following the domestic ideology, women were considered to be adults only when they were both married and had children. There hardly was a chance for a girl to enter university or to get professional job after she graduated from high school, so most of them simply got married after graduation. Thus high-school girls, neither working nor as yet married, were able to enjoy a short moratorium period. It gave images of immaturity and amateurism. In addition, these girls' high schools were elitist and exclusive communities, comprised solely of the daughters of upper- and middle class families. Only about 15 % of girls who finished primary schools could enter there. Girls' high school thus evoked associations with immature but respectable and decent youthfulness.

Kobayashi made the most of such images to justify his new Takarazuka Review Company. Remember that since the mid -17th century, actresses in Japan had been prohibited from appearing on stage due to moral strictures. That is why we still have all-male Kabuki Theater today. It was in the late 19th century, when Western theater culture flowed into the country, that actresses began to appear on Japanese stages. That is not to say that there were no female performers during those centuries; on the contrary. But female performers bore a strong image of geisha, who had long capitalized not only on their performing talent, but also on their adult beauty and charms. In order to avoid the

moralists' criticism, Kobayashi insisted that his Takarazuka Company performers were not adult women, but mere schoolgirls.

Therefore he prohibited to give only theatrical trainings (Kobayashi 1935, 72) and said the students of Takarazuka must be "purely like girls-high school students" (Kobayashi 1924). The school would follow "the standard of general girl students and take the policy that focus on marriage in order that a students can accomplish happiness as one woman." Such policy was apparent in the fact that the Music School was especially eager to induce graduates of public girls-high school enter the Music School.

Accordingly, Kobayashi never used the term 'actress' when referring to his performers.<sup>4)</sup> For him, they were 'students'; sometimes he mentioned them as 'musicians' rather than 'actresses' (Kawasaki 37-38, Ota 112). Nor did he ever let them wear their hair in the style of married women, the so-called *marumage* style, even when playing adult roles. All performers were supposed to be unmarried. They were sustained in the stage of school-girlhood, before they become adult by marrying to adult man. Although they performed before an adoring public, their status as high-school girls did not upset the patriarchy of Japanese society, since these 'schoolgirls' would soon graduate and become the good wives and wise mothers like all other good Japanese schoolgirls.

Of course, this girls' school community was one in name only. There were actually many men working in the Company, and many performers were too old to be high school girls. Yet Kobayashi successfully used the school system and its image to negotiate with domestic ideology of the time and thus made women performers acceptable to the conservative society at large. The rule that all performers were required to be graduates of the Music School was and is never bent until today and Kobayashi's vision has been best expressed in the famous motto of both the Music School and the Company, "Purely, Righteously, and Beautifully (*kiyoku tadashiku utsukushiku*)."

### 3. Local community

The girls' school community that constituted the basis of the Company was a part of a larger economic and cultural community. In 1910, Kobayashi built a new railway, Minoo Arima Tetsudo (Minoo Arima Electric Railway Company) from Osaka to the village of Takarazuka, which eventually developed into a vast railway network now known

as Hankyu Railway. Takarazuka was a solitary village at that time, awkwardly located between the two burgeoning cities of Osaka and Kobe. The area is called '*Hanshinkan Area*' which translates literally as "between Osaka and Kobe." This new railway bisected a vast pastoral space. In order to increase the number of passengers, Kobayashi built department stores and office buildings at one end of the railway in Osaka, and at its other end, he staged Takarazuka Review at the 4000-seated Takarazuka Grand Theater (opened in 1924). Then, he built new houses all along the route, so that people living there would use his railway for commuting twice a day.

Yet, what he actually created was more than a mere group of houses. It was a chance to live a modern lifestyle. Against the background of a rapidly developing consumer culture which thrived in the booms after the Russo- Japanese War (1904-05) and the First World War (1914-18), a newly emerging middle class sought to enjoy a new lifestyle of mass production and mass consumption. The development of such mass communication as radio, newspapers and magazines, spread of higher education, and beginning of women's right movement all contributed to the rise of middle class popular culture of mass production and mass consumption.

In the vast pastoral Hanshinkan Area between Osaka and Takarazuka Village, Kobayashi not only laid a line and built some houses but designed a suburban 'Hankyu' community where middle class people could enjoy modern consumerist life.<sup>5)</sup> In 1909, Kobayashi published a PR magazine with a chapter titled "What Kind of House Should You Live In?" for promotion of the new town to be built along the new track. There, he presented an idea that a middle-class wage earners "who commute every day from the suburb to spend busy days working in the big city" should have a warm home in the pastoral suburb full of nature (Kobayashi 1909, 210). The man living along Kobayashi's railway lived in a modern house with the latest appliances. On holidays, he could take his wife and children either shopping in Osaka, or to see a Takarazuka review. Kobayashi intended to build a community: as such, he constructed houses in clusters, with tens of them in one place around a clubhouse or meeting place which the residents could and did use. In the pastoral Hanshinkan Area, Kobayashi designed a homogeneous suburban community where rising middle class families could enjoy a modern consumerist life. That was how it was sold, and the Takarazuka Review Company was part of the package. It was so successful that later, when Kobayashi built other railways to connect Osaka and other

Illustration 1 Communities along Hankyu Railway, 1910s-20s

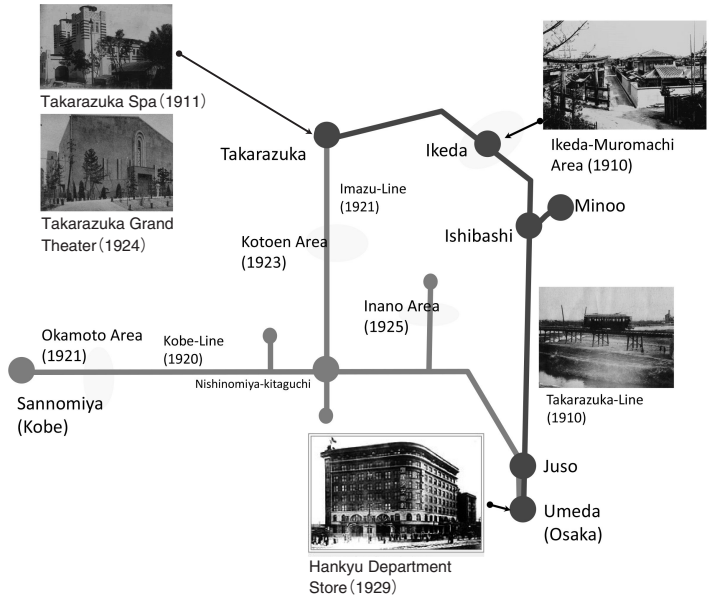
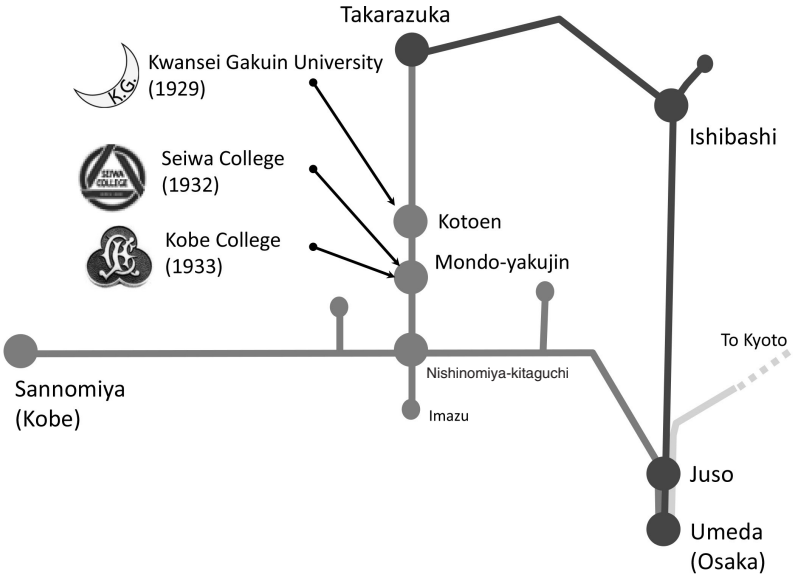


Illustration 2 Three schools along Hankyu Railway



big cities in western Japan, he planned the same kind of communities along the new railroad lines. (see Illustration 1) None had Takarazuka at its terminals, though.

It is important to stress here something that has not been mentioned much in earlier studies of Takarazuka: the extent to which Kobayashi exploited the images of schools in making his new local communities just like he did so when founding the Takarazuka Review Company.<sup>6)</sup> He attracted universities and high schools to build campuses along his railway. (see Illustration 2) In 1929, when inviting Kwansei Gakuin, a prestigious Christian school founded by the Methodist missionary, Kobayashi provided fund and land at Kotoen station along his Takarazuka line. Then, all-girls Kobe Jogakuin (Kobe College) moved next to Kwansei Gakuin in 1933. According to Junne Kikata, these two schools with the one known today as Seiwa University<sup>7)</sup> determined the image of Hankyu Railway and its communities. These schools were all established by Christian missionaries and their whole campuses were designed in modern Spanish colonial style. Kobayashi was keenly aware of "the benefit of 'high quality' yielded by the schools he invited". This included for instance, the "image" of passengers who used his lines to attend schools (Kikata 76). Many other schools followed. Today there are hundreds of schools along his railways. Although some of them are not necessarily invited directly by Kobayashi himself, descent image of Hankyu communities along with convenience of railway network helped to allure those schools to build their campuses there.

Obviously his biggest primary reason was to get more passengers. In the morning, workers living in the suburban area used trains to Osaka while students used trains in the opposite direction to go to school. However, Kobayashi must have understood that schools could give good image to the Hankyu community. Schools, especially colleges and girls' high schools, evoke an air of refinement and culture along with youthfulness and purity and goodness. Such an image overlapped perfectly with his vision of a white-collar community, one that contrasted sharply against both the snobbishness of established, privileged elites as well as with the brutishness of blue-collar workers. And, the most symbolic among the string of schools built along the Hankyu railways was of course the Takarazuka Music and Review School.

There were two communities that supported the Takarazuka Review Company — the girls' school community itself, and the Hanshinkan local community. The relationship between them is, however, complementary. On one hand, the girls' school community of

the Company succeeded in improving the image of the local community with its implied connotation of purity, youthfulness and moral refinement. Moreover, since the final goal of the Company was to mold the performers into good wives and good mothers of middle class families, we can say that, at least in the early period, the Company functioned as an important provider of future members of the local community. On the other hand, entertaining and uplifting the Hanshinkan community had been a *raison d'être* of the Company from its inception. It was precisely for the benefit of the local community that the Company had been founded — both to increase the number of passengers (and thereby rail revenues), and to offer decent, wholesome, modern entertainment to the families living there. The local community in turn provided a constant audience, too. It can be said that this interaction between the girls' school community and the Hanshinkan local community was indeed the true source of power for the Company's growth and development in the early 20th century.

#### 4. Power of B class

Importantly, these communities were far from mainstream. In fact, they were B class in two crucial ways. First, concerning the location, the Company was based in the Hanshinkan area, far from the traditional centers of culture. Osaka and Kobe are the nearest big cities though both of them are still far away. Moreover, even though these two cities are the two of the biggest ones in Western Japan, they are still ranked as secondary, even minor as cultural centers compared with Tokyo, the nation's political, financial, and cultural center. Takarazuka was out in the middle of nowhere. Second, the Company itself is odd, because it has only female performers. Thus Takarazuka Review has rarely been seen as 'legitimate' art by the critical and cultural elites, but as inferior, freakish theater. Because of these two unique elements, when the Company first began performing in Tokyo in 1918, critics in Tokyo insisted that it remain amateurish and innocent, and when it staged some rather artistic stories or used realistic depictions, many of them attacked such attempts as arrogant, somehow unbecoming such a minor company (Watanabe 53-77).

But Kobayashi took advantage of the company's status as unconventional and out-of-center. According to him, local areas were much better than big cities. For instance, once



in the chapter titled "What Kind of Town Should You Choose?" in the PR magazine (1909), he vividly contrasted the relaxed pace of life in the garden-like suburban community against the hectic pace in industrial, polluted urban city like Osaka.

This moniker of geographical outsider influenced Kobayashi's views on art. He knew too well about the shortcomings of the all-female Company, but used them as a weapon to rail against elitist Tokyo. People in Tokyo undervalued Takarazuka Review because it lacked male singers, though its name included the term *kageki* which means 'opera' in Japanese. In the early 20th century, Japan was in the mode of westernization, and there was a strong push to recreate Western opera in Tokyo. While Western opera was seen as integrated and perfect, the all-female Takarazuka Review was denounced as "unnatural" and "deformed" (Kobayashi 1922, 20; 1955, 514-15).

Kobayashi severely criticized such Tokyo's view, insisting that "the future of the Takarazuka Review solely depends on not being addicted to naïve over-valuation of Western opera," Kobayashi insisted that the all-female Takarazuka Review be appreciated as a stylized, formalistic art form, like the all-male Kabuki Theater: "Just like our Kabuki has transformed its unnaturalness into artistic performance, girls' review without male chorus definitely has a meaning to develop into a peculiar art as girls' review" (1922, 22). Much later in his autobiography, Kobayashi reflected that "anomalous art of girls' review that is Takarazuka's specialty probably could never result from mixed-gender performers" (1953, 235).

His anti-Tokyo vision went even further. He challenged Eurocentric stance of Tokyo by mixing western music and Japanese story so that non-elite people were able to feel familiar with what is going on stage. Further, Kobayashi criticized elitist nature of Tokyo saying that stage entertainment in Tokyo was mainly monopolized by upper class audience. He built a huge theater at Takarazuka Village so that many people could see performance at cheap price. Certainly the Takarazuka Review was B class in a sense that it was an all-female, half-Western, half-Japanese performance based not in Tokyo, but this is what makes it one possibility for a new form of popular art in the young democratic country that Kobayashi pursued all through his life.<sup>8)</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

Has such B class status proven disadvantageous for the Company? The answer is no. On the one hand, it is worth noting that, in these hundred years since its foundation, the Company basically has not extended beyond the framework of these two communities — nor it doesn't seem that the Company has ever tried to do so. The Company has no intention of relocating to Tokyo; its headquarters is still in the small town of Takarazuka, and almost all of its works premiere there. They do tour overseas every few years, and according to Koichi Kobayashi, a former chairman of the Company, its ultimate goal is to have a performance on Broadway (2015, 136). Interestingly however, they have never tried to garner a worldwide following by, for example, performing in English. Its English website is still very simple. It is local, domestic theater. The girls' school system has also been preserved until today. Even more surprisingly, the company basically does not recruit anyone from outside. Producers, directors, writers, musicians, choreographers, costume designers, teachers at the Music School and so forth all belong to the Company — the works are very much in-house productions from start to finish.<sup>9)</sup> The Company seems perfectly as a close-knit, B-class or outsider subculture, firmly based on and serving two distinct communities.

To no small degree does the very closed-off nature of the Company's own internal culture account for its dismissal by the mainstream. It is generally not regarded as a form of art but as kitschy *otaku* theater. It has rarely been a subject of serious critical or academic studies. As since so few outside of its self-generating, self-perpetuating world have taken it seriously, there have been few incentives to change its basic structure from within. But again, this B class status has not only excluded the Company from mainstream art; rather, its cult-like nature has inured it to outside pressures or criticisms, and oddly enough guaranteed its survival. Despite the condescension, the ridicule as local and freakish, Takarazuka Review has remained very popular throughout its history. It's a haven for outsiders. What may have started as an innovative management policy based on two forms of community that Ichizo Kobayashi worked out a hundred years ago, set down deep roots. The dynamic interaction of these two special communities was and still is a driving force behind the Takarazuka Review Company which, ironically, is now becoming a Japanese theatre tradition in its own right.

## NOTES

- 1) The early version of this paper was presented at Annual Conference featuring "Tradition, Innovation, Community" of International Federation for Theatre Research at Osaka University, Japan on August 12, 2011.
- 2) For basic information, see two-volume comprehensive histories edited by Koichi Kobayashi published for the commemoration of the Company's centennial anniversary. See also, Yamanashi. Official website of the Company is useful, too.
- 3) Takarazuka Review Company with Shochiku Kagekidan (Shochiku Review Company, 1928-96) and the one best known as Osaka Shochiku Kagekidan (Osaka Shochiku Review Company, 1922-, changed its name occasionally) are three most popular review companies with otoko-yaku tradition. In addition, Kurahashi and Tsuji (2005) explore that there were more than twenty all-female small review groups all over Japan in prewar period.
- 4) Actresses too had to stress their purity so that they would not be confused with geisha and prostitutes. Kano describes how New Theater (*shingeki*) made use of "purer than thou" structure, by distinguishing New Theater actresses from "less pure" women of other acting schools (167-68).
- 5) For Kobayashi's modern community along the railroad network in Hanshinkan Area, see Kakita, Takemura, and Tsuganezawa (1991), 176. Takemura says, "Kobayashi's Hankyu 'transportation cultural community' has had tremendous influence on Japanese people's way of living and pastime. We may say that, today, most people in the cities live in the 'railroad castle town' founded by huge private capital and are put under its control over their labor, consumption and leisure" (374).
- 6) Preceding indication includes Kawasaki 72-73 and Kikata 67-79.
- 7) Seiwa University has its roots in Kobe Girls' Seminary founded in 1880 which moved close to Kwansei Gakuin and Kobe Jogakuin in 1932. The school merged with Kwansei Gakuin in 2009.
- 8) Kobayashi had left so many writings about his vision on *kokumingeiki* (theater for the people) throughout his life. See for example "Takarazuka manpitsu" (1955), 512-15; "Nara no Hatagoya" (1933), 213-39.
- 9) In fact, the Company has staged stories by outside writers, the most striking example is of course its biggest hit, *The Rose of Versailles* first performed in 1974. Also, they have sometimes recruited outside musicians or choreographers. But those cases are still rare exceptions.

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