

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Café
Contested Space of Modernity in Interwar Japan

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Why study cafés? In 1978 Steve Bradshaw wrote a book on café society which, so far as he knew, was “the first attempt to evoke the atmosphere of those nights” in cafés which fostered major cultural and political movements such as Impressionism, Surrealism, and the French Revolution,¹ but he wrote nothing about cafés in Japan, nor anywhere outside Europe or the United States. His EuroAmericanism is probably not surprising to scholars of non-Western societies, but also notable is his claim for the originality of his subject. This points to the recent direction of historians’ attention to social sites and institutions like the café which provided the context for popular culture.

Although the “new social history” has become a respectable field since Bradshaw wrote, its relative newness in the historical profession raises the question of why café society merits scholarly consideration. In particular, in the case of Japanese history of the 1920s and 1930s, why should we redirect attention away from the important political developments which are bound up with explaining World War II? The answer lies in the writings of Japanese contemporaries themselves, who saw the café as a central symbol of modernity. In these writings we can see that, like modernity as a whole, the café provoked reactions running the gamut from glowing praise and enthusiasm to severe moral condemnation and rejection.

In one contemporary writer’s eye, the café was not simply *one* symbol of modernity, but in fact *the* symbol of modernity. According to Murobushi Kōshin (Takanobu), the modern city meant liberation, not only liberation of the townspeople (*chōnin*) from their low status in the feudal hierarchy of classes or liberation of the intellect from the Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, but also liberation for women, for relations between men and women, and for drinking. The café symbolized this modern liberated spirit and, as a symbol of the process of modernization, ranked in significance with establishment of the Diet. In fact, Murobushi went further, claiming that the café was even more significant than the Diet! Why? Because whereas constitutional government represented

the aspirations of the ruling elites, the café expressed the ideology of the petit bourgeoisie. According to Murobushi, the Diet represented the “dying enlightenment” of the older generation, while the café represented youth and the future. In other words, if in historical periods the Diet represented the early bourgeois era, the café represented the late bourgeois period.²

The café, to Murobushi, was unique to the modern city. Earlier civilizations had enjoyed alcoholic beverages and coffee — the former a narcotic, the latter a stimulant — but none united the two “dialectically” like the café. Socrates drank alcohol in the house of a prostitute, but he never knew a café. Neither did the Romans. What Murobushi meant is that none of these earlier figures had ever known a *Japanese* café. In his claims he was in effect defining the café as symbolic of both a universal and a distinctively Japanese modernity. While eschewing his hyperbole and glorification of the café, I would like to focus on certain elements in Murobushi’s and other contemporary depictions of the café and to highlight those aspects of universality and particularity.

The pre-earthquake café

The Japanese café of the 1920s and 1930s was not only unlike cafés that Westerners would most likely envisage, but also unlike the Japanese café of earlier times. The first one appeared in Tokyo in 1911, or, more precisely, the first to be called a “café” was established then, for Western-style eating places had existed in Japan since the 1870s. Its name, “Kafé Purantan” (Café Printemps), revealed its European, and especially French, inspiration (see Fig. 1). At this time Western food was still in the process of

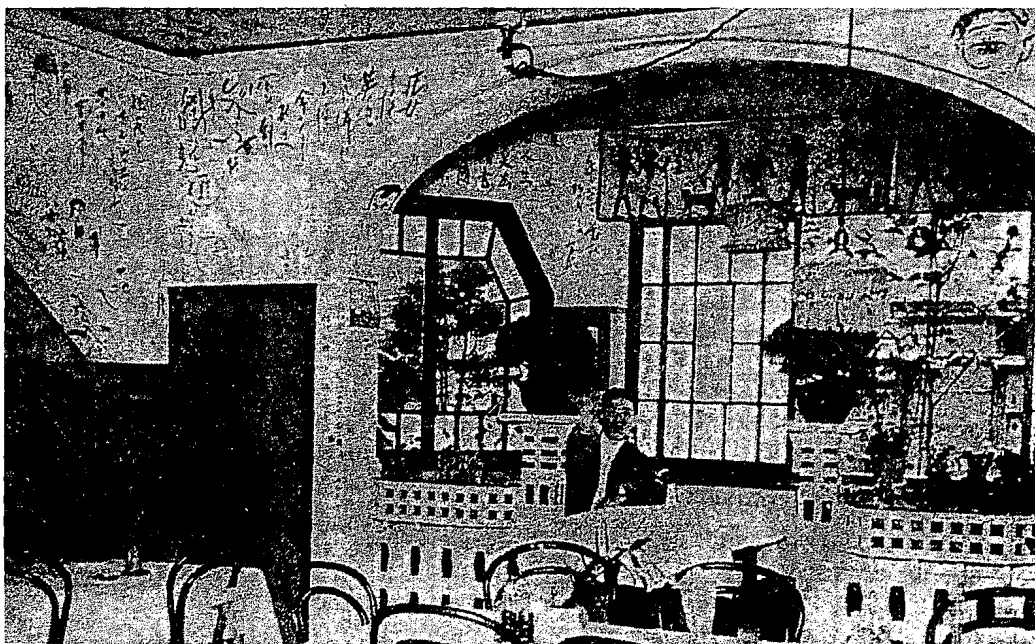


Fig. 1 *Café Printemps*, after 1911

gaining popularity, so it was “ultra-modern boys” and especially writers, intellectuals, and artists, such as the novelist Ozaki Kōyō’s disciples, who gathered at Café Printemps and the other cafés established at this time.³ In fact, the owner of Café Printemps was the Western-style painter Matsuyama Shōzō. These people wanted a gathering place in the city where they could talk freely and drink, a place like the salons for artists and intellectuals in Europe. During its first six months, Café Printemps even operated as an intellectuals’ salon with a club membership of about thirty-five painters, novelists, musicians, politicians, and critics.⁴ Although the requirement of membership was soon dropped, artists and intellectuals continued to dominate the clientele, which inhibited others from participating in café life. Sitting around on wooden chairs at tables with white

tablecloths, they ate Western food and enjoyed the wide variety of Western cocktails proffered by the café waitresses. Ishikado Harunosuke observed in 1934 that the service provided by the waitresses differed totally from that of the present. The Café Printemps’s waitresses were elegant and beautiful, and what he described as “noble virgin-types” were respected. Cafés at this early stage were places where one ate Western food, and where the service was of secondary importance.⁵

This applied as well to large cafés such as Kafē Raion (Café Lion), which was established in Ginza four months after Café Printemps’s success. Three stories tall, it presented a fashionable and imposing sight whose trend-setting modernity attracted people seeking something new in Western restaurants. Café Lion became famous for its thick and tender beef steaks which cost about 50 sen. In contrast to the predominantly artist-intellectual patrons of Café Printemps, the patrons of Café Lion came from other walks of life as well. Situated at the main intersection in the center of Ginza, the café invited in many more ordinary people visiting the busy district, although the café for “the masses” was still to come. Patrons entering Café Lion could first stop at the bar or salon, and then proceed to the second-floor dining and entertainment rooms where they might listen to the singing of a Shinbashi geisha. Alternatively, they might go up to the Renaissance-style third floor where, if required, they had the novel choice of relieving themselves in either Western or Japanese toilets.⁶ The young waitresses, dressed demurely in kimonos and white aprons, simply served food (see Fig. 2).⁷ According to Ishikado, the waitresses gradually began to change from around



Fig. 2 Waitresses and patrons at Café Lion, after 1911

1915–16, in his eyes deteriorating as they began to offer erotic services and in some cases develop a paramour relationship with certain customers. Until the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923, however, Café Lion remained a well-known and popular place primarily for food rather than the service itself, and cafés mainly attracted an intellectual, cultural clientele.

The “café era”

According to Ishikado and many other pre-World War II commentators, this changed after the earthquake, which became a major dividing point in the history of cafés and of Tokyo as a city. The earthquake created the conditions for a new phase in the history of Japanese modernity as well, which we can see reflected in the changing nature of the café. It is no exaggeration to describe the decade after the earthquake as “the café era.” The number of cafés and café waitresses shot up sharply and rapidly — contemporaries referred to “massification” (*taishūka*). In 1922 there were twenty cafés on Ginza’s main street; in 1929 there were fifty.⁸ In 1925 a Central Employment Agency survey counted 7319 café waitresses in Tokyo and 4230 in Osaka.⁹ According to a police survey just four years later, the number of waitresses in Tokyo had jumped to 15,559, working in 6187 cafés and 1345 bars.¹⁰ A later national survey in 1940 found that there had been 27,532 cafés and bars throughout the country and 66,840 waitresses in 1930. The number of cafés and bars climbed to a peak of 37,065 in 1934 and thereafter declined to 29,064 in 1940. The number of waitresses continued to increase beyond 1934, reaching a peak of 111,700 in 1936 before it decreased to 91,946 in 1940.¹¹

In Tokyo after the earthquake, cafés had sprouted up “like bamboo shoots after a rain” all over the city,¹² but were concentrated in entertainment districts known as “*sakariba*” (literally, bustling places) such as Ginza, Asakusa, Kanda, Shinjuku, and Shibuya. In terms of defining modernity, we need to focus our attention on Ginza. Ginza had represented the modern since its reconstruction in the Meiji period. During the previous Tokugawa period it had not been a bustling commercial center compared to the Nihonbashi area to the north, but after a fire in 1872 the governor of the city decided that Ginza should be rebuilt in brick to act as a model of fireproofing for the rest of the city. This suited the desire of influential political leaders, such as Inoue Kaoru and Mishima Michitsune, to give Tokyo a modern, meaning European, appearance in order to help achieve elimination of the unequal treaties.¹³ The new Ginza — or Bricktown, as it was known — was built in the Georgian style to the designs of the English architect Thomas Waters. It failed to inspire further fireproof construction, but did attract what we might call tourists to look at it as a model of “civilization and enlightenment.”¹⁴ Thereafter began the custom of “*ginbura*,” or strolling in Ginza, which was to have its heyday in the 1920s and 1930s.

Although associated with the modern from the 1870s, it was not until after the earthquake that Ginza became a symbol of modernity for all Japanese. According to

Andô Kōsei, people in the countryside used to think of Asakusa or perhaps Ueno or Nijūbashi when you said “Tokyo,” but by 1930 what they immediately thought of was Ginza.¹⁵ Modern department stores catering to the new office employees and salaried classes emerged from the ashes of the earthquake to draw the crowds during the day. Instead of selling only expensive specialty or imported items as in the past, temporary department stores had offered all sorts of goods for everyday living in response to the needs of urban dwellers in the wake of the earthquake. Department store owners had in this way discovered what was to become in the post-World War II period a vast new market.

However, during the interwar years the crowds were not always able to buy, nor did they have to because of a revolution in modes of retailing. Mitsukoshi had already introduced glass display cases after the Russo-Japanese War in its Nihonbashi store, so that customers could readily see the goods for sale and browse instead of requiring a salesperson to bring them out from a storage area.¹⁶ An innovation after the earthquake, however, brought in the masses — customers did not have to take off their shoes.¹⁷ Ginza department store dining rooms also eliminated the necessity of sitting on *tatami* floors to eat. It now became respectable to keep on one’s coat as well as shoes when sitting on a chair at a Western-style table. Women, notably a growing number of middle-class working women, for the first time felt comfortable eating out in public.¹⁸ “Window-shopping” (*ginbura*) became the typical way to pass the time in Ginza during the day, as we see in numerous photographs of “modern girls” (*modan gāru* or *moga*) and “modern boys” (*modan bōi* or *mobo*) breezing along the streets or gazing into shop window displays as described by Jennifer Weisenfeld’s in chapter 5. It is what the social commentator Gonda Yasunosuke had in mind when he located “modern life” (*modan seikatsu*) in the streets of the city, rather than in middle-class homes or working-class areas.¹⁹

According to Gonda, cafés, along with bars, restaurants, dance halls, and cinemas, acted as extensions of the streets.²⁰ The post-earthquake cafés and bars turned Ginza into an entertainment as well as commercial center, a gathering place by night as well as by day. Like the post-earthquake department stores, these invited in the masses, but especially young people among the new middle class of office workers, salespeople, and minor government officials. As many commentators put it, the cafés and bars made Ginza a “theater” or “stage” upon which modern life was performed.²¹ And it was a “first-class stage.” Ginza continued to exude class and elegance as well as the new and the beautiful.²² Shops in the suburbs carrying anything new attached “Ginza” to their names — Ginzadō, Ginzatei, Kafē Ginza.²³

Cafés flourished in other districts, especially Asakusa and increasingly Shinjuku, but they did not possess the top-class image of Ginza cafés. Before the earthquake, Asakusa, in particular Rokku, the Sixth District, had been the most popular *sakariba* for modern entertainments. After the earthquake it remained the most bustling of

sakariba and the place to go for the latest movies and musical reviews, but although Asakusa cafés attracted masses of people from all over the city and of all classes and all ages, they were “cheap and easy” and lacked the high tone of Ginza cafés.²⁴ The lower education level of café waitresses in Asakusa compared to Ginza reflected these differences.²⁵ The smaller proportion of young people there compared to patrons in Ginza also foreshadowed Asakusa’s gradual decline in the 1930s. Kawabata Yasunari, Nagai Kafû, and other famous Japanese writers maintained a soft spot for Asakusa, but even Kawabata said that Asakusa never produced anything of high quality. By the end of the 1930s it had truly given way to Ginza, as chronicled in Takami Jun’s novel *Ikanaru hoshi no shita ni* (Under What Stars).²⁶

Shinjuku also thrived in the late 1920s as extensions of the railway network stimulated growth of the western suburbs. Between 1920 and 1930 the population of Tokyo City declined from 2.2 to 2.1 million, whereas the population of the five surrounding counties (*gun*) increased from 1.2 to 2.9 million.²⁷ The westward and southward expansion of the population had begun in the early 1920s, but the earthquake accelerated the trend. Most of the new suburban dwellers came from the white-collar salaryman class, often referred to as “*yôfuku saimin*” (poor people in Western-style clothes), who were seeking cheaper housing. The extension of private as well as public railways enabled them to commute to the city to work.²⁸ The private railway companies also built or encouraged residential development, many of which were “culture houses” that Jordan Sand writes about in Chapter 6, and offered free or discounted rail fares for a certain time period to attract potential residents.²⁹ Shinjuku thrived as a transfer point for these commuters from the western suburbs, with a new station completed in 1925.³⁰ Mitsukoshi opened a branch store in 1924, and the forerunner of Isetan department store opened in 1926. One of the new private railway companies also opened up a retail business named Keiô Paradise in its terminal building.³¹

Entertainment flourished along with retailing. Shinjuku’s licensed brothel quarter benefited from the earthquake destruction of the old Yoshiwara pleasure quarter. Modern cafés also mushroomed, and in the evening Shinjuku was more crowded than Ginza.³² Some Shinjuku cafés had their waitresses dress in Western clothes, but the area appeared “more vulgar,” even if more lively than Ginza.³³ According to Edward Seidensticker, “the modern boy and modern girl went to extremes thought unseemly and in bad taste by high Ginza.”³⁴ Despite the common observations of vulgarity, some Shinjuku café waitresses reflected the new intelligentsia who also lived in larger numbers in the suburbs after the earthquake — “Marx boys” were conspicuous in Shinjuku cafés. According to one survey, Shinjuku café waitresses possessed a somewhat higher educational background than that of Ginza café waitresses, and considerably higher than that of Asakusa café waitresses.³⁵ Probably they were wives or daughters of the “*yôfuku saimin*” middle-class salarymen who lived in the western suburbs beyond

Shinjuku. Nevertheless, as a contemporary concluded, “although it is called the Great Shinjuku, there still lingers the mood of the outskirts.”³⁶

After the earthquake, many large cafés appeared on the main street of Ginza and also dozens of small cafés in the back streets, but it was not just greater numbers and the larger scale of the establishments that created “the café era” and new characteristics of the modern. As in pre-earthquake times, modern still meant Western, which is reflected in the names of the new cafés and bars being derived from English — Gondora (Gondola), Ginza Paresu (Ginza Palace), and Gurando Ginza (Grand Ginza). Their architecture and interior decor also continued to be foreign-inspired. In some cases this was attraction to the foreign as the exotic. Kafé Taigā (Café Tiger), with its Chinese paintings on the walls and Chinoiserie decorative motifs, provides a striking example of this.³⁷ More common, however, was a shift in foreign influences from European to American ones, which was also evident in other aspects of urban culture. Modern now was increasingly associated with American things — speed, movies, and jazz. All three were directly or indirectly manifested in the cafés of the late 1920s and early 1930s.

The big new cafés of Ginza transformed the visual images of the modern city in both their interiors and exteriors. From the outside their blazing red and blue neon signs lit up the main street, a vision captured by a popular song of 1932, “Hana no Tōkyō” (Flowering Tokyo):

*Yoru no Ginza wa hotaru kagu
Ren no kokoro o chirachira to
Maneku hikari ni manekarete
Kite miru tsuki no hosoi koto*

*Ginza at night is a “firefly cage,”
The flickering feeling of love.
Drawn by the inviting lights
I came and saw the moon. How thin it was.*³⁸

Moonlight could not compete with the dazzling “red lights, blue lights” of the Ginza cafés and bars (see Fig. 3).³⁹ Inside, the red and blue of the neon lights reappeared in stained-glass windows, and the use of silvery, light-reflective building materials, such as stainless steel, aluminum, glass, mirrors, and spotlights, reinforced the overall impression of brilliant light and contributed to a sense of modernity and richness. Café Maru and Ginza Palace led the way in these design innovations. On its first floor, Café Maru used silvery yen-shaped motifs on the partitions between tables, elsewhere light-reflective panels on the walls and shimmering decorative circles (see Fig. 4). Ginza Palace similarly made lavish use of glass mosaic tiles, milky white glass, metallic plates, and aluminum-plated pillars, and illuminated its ceilings with a ring of blue-colored neon lights.⁴⁰

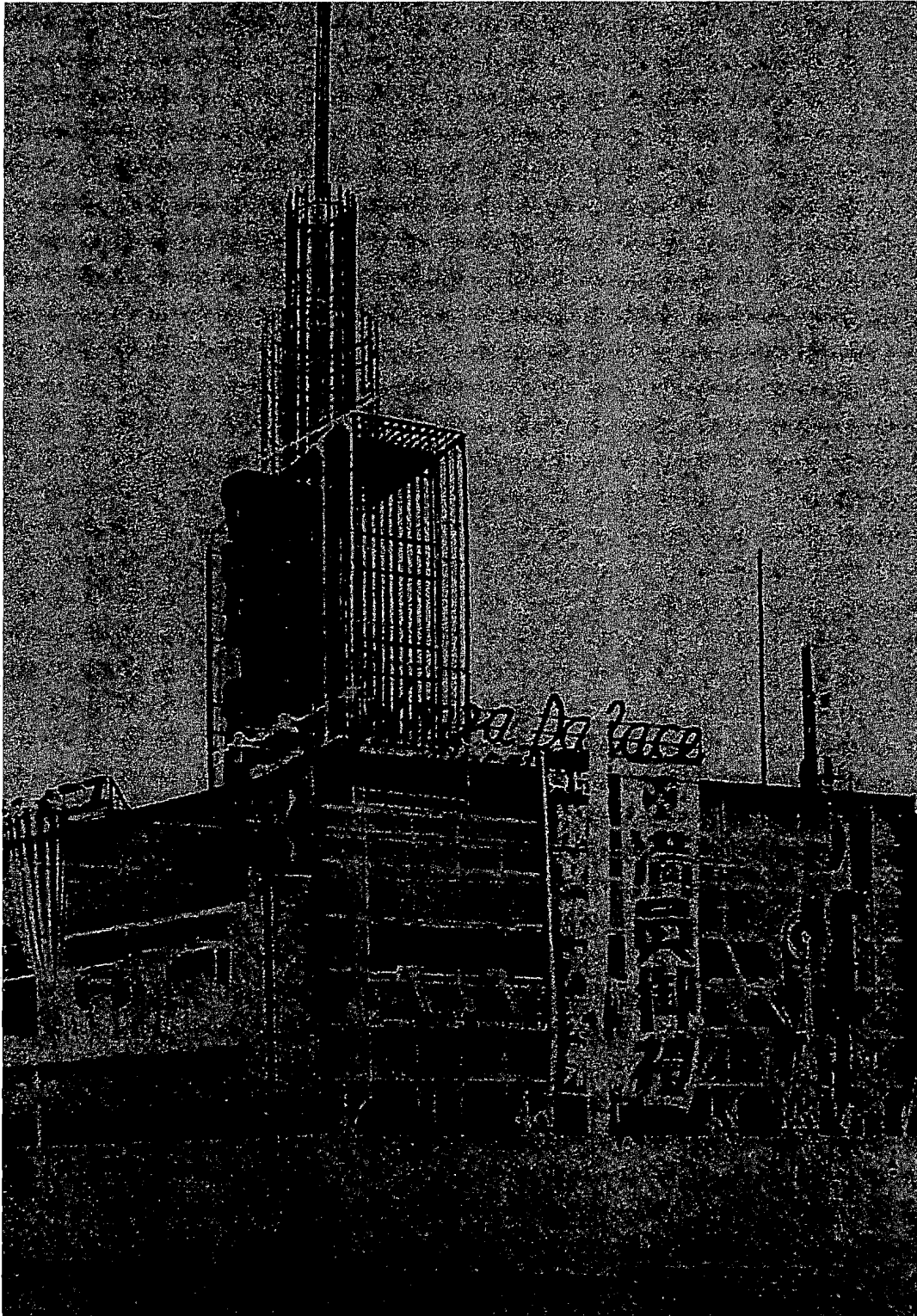


Fig. 3 Ginza Palace, 1932

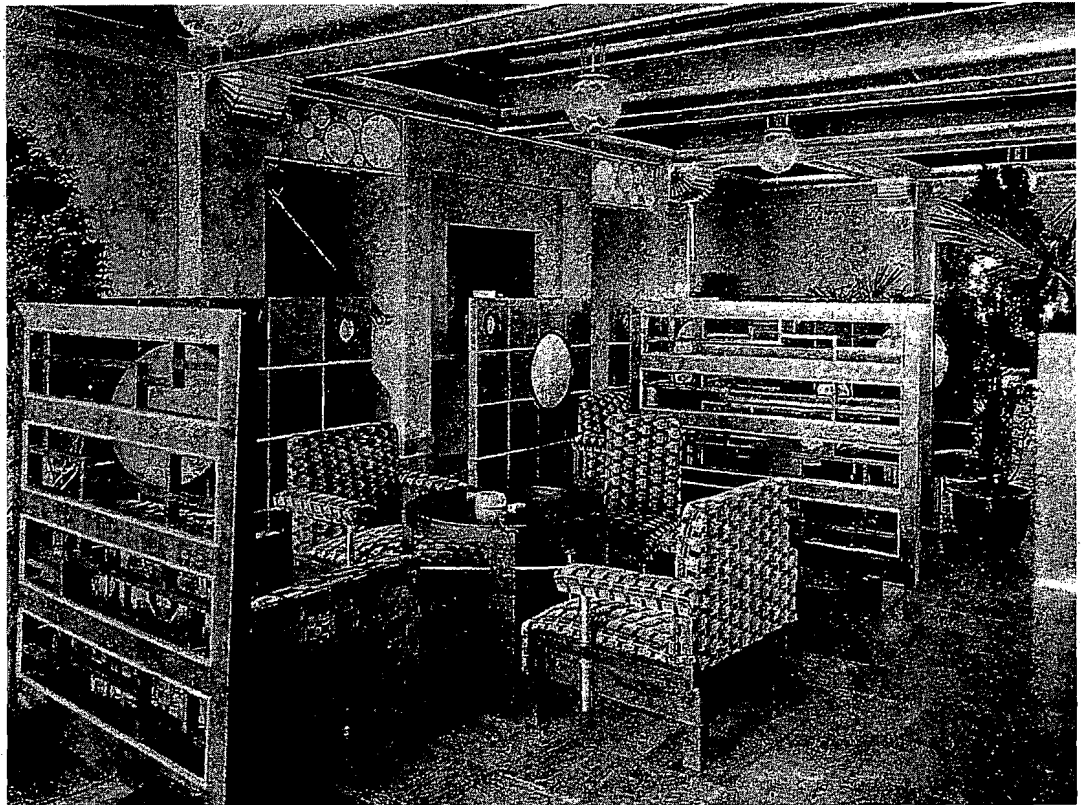


Fig. 4. *Café Maru*, fourth floor, 1932

With these new cafés the distinction between cafés and bars on the one hand and *kissaten* (coffeeshops) on the other became clear. *Kissaten* were places where one went for a meal, not to enjoy alcoholic beverages. Cafés, like bars, offered Western alcoholic drinks, but could provide more food than bars and were usually more Western in their menus, décor, and ambience.⁴¹ Jazz music, big band not blues, contributed to the Western ambience and satisfied patrons' desire for a fast "tempo." Not all cafés played music, however.

The rise and fall of "ero" service

What came to distinguish the cafés of the late 1920s and 1930s from both their Japanese predecessors and their ostensible Western models was the changed role of the café waitresses (*jokyū*). In Murobushi Kōshin's depiction of the Japanese café, the café waitress was both the flower and spirit of the café. He observed that, unlike a European café, a Japanese café did not require music to be a café. One could even imagine a café in Japan without alcohol, he declared, but one could not imagine a café without waitresses.⁴² From this we can see that the café in Japan after the earthquake had become a different place from its Meiji and even Taishō antecedents. It was no longer a place where Western food and drinks were of primary importance. Rather, service, and increasingly erotic service, became its chief attraction. However, while

Murobushi acknowledged the sexual attraction of the waitresses, he denied the café's primary function and appeal as a place for arranging sexual assignations. In his view the young generation was interested in "platonic" and "romantic" love, not sex, so it was an atmosphere of love (*ren'ai*) that brought young people to the café.⁴³

Other commentators, though not as enamored of the café, also noted that the café provided one of the few places where young men and women could meet and mingle socially. In fact, there was no other place where young women and men could interact as easily, cheaply, or directly as in a café.⁴⁴ Geishas were expensive, too expensive for the young salarymen who comprised the majority of café patrons, and too complicated to arrange. One had to go through prescribed procedures at an introductory meeting (*machiai*) and follow certain etiquette to be entertained by a geisha. "Modern men want a flaming moment of pleasure," noted Murashima Yoriyuki.⁴⁵ In this "time of speed" the café enabled men to enjoy an erotic atmosphere openly and easily.⁴⁶ Moreover, modern young people wanted romance and an object for their sexual life which the café waitress as a "modern girl" provided.⁴⁷ Again, according to Murashima, it was less carnal desire than a "love feeling" (*ren'ai kibun*) that drew young men to the café.⁴⁸

For women, the café in some views played an important role in their liberation. It offered an opportunity for work to young women without particular education or training, as well as opportunities for free love.⁴⁹ The 1920s saw the opening up of new occupations for women, especially middle-class women.⁵⁰ Besides farming and textile or other factory work, women could engage in work outside the home as typists, nurses, teachers, department store clerks, bus conductors, and switchboard operators. Young women from poor rural or urban families, however, did not possess the education or skills for many of these new jobs, nor for the traditional entertainment job of a geisha, and compared to farm or factory work, work in a café was less arduous even though the hours were long. It was also commonly thought that café waitressing paid more money than other jobs, and the celebrity status of some café waitresses attracted even well-known actresses to open cafés in Ginza.⁵¹ According to a 1930 survey, café waitresses pointed to, first, a good income and, second, freedom as good aspects of their job.⁵²

It is true that the waitresses were not employed as prostitutes and that men could have gone directly to either a licensed or unlicensed prostitute if sex was what they wanted. Prostitution was to remain a legal institution until 1956 despite the efforts of some Christian moral reformers to abolish it.⁵³ Nevertheless, several factors worked to push many café waitresses into prostitution after hours, and this became the basis for moral condemnation by a wide variety of social commentators and for the association of cafés with a social climate of "*ero-guro-nansensu*" (erotic-grotesque-nonsense). The café waitresses' provision of erotic or "*ero*" service also became a reason for their falling victim to police repression and control during the late 1920s and 1930s.

A number of explanations may be offered for the eroticization of the café waitress. Miriam Silverberg links it to a Japan-specific history of the sale of women's eroticized services in the medieval (c. 1150–1600) and early modern (c. 1600–1850s) periods, but at the same time emphasizes its modern context by pointing out a certain degree of agency played by the waitress in the commodification of eroticism.⁵⁴ Unlike the geisha, the café waitress was not bound like a slave by a contract to the café owner, nor did she have to accept just any patron into a sexual relationship like a licensed prostitute.⁵⁵ Hayashi Fumiko's best-selling novel *Hôrôki*, about a café waitress, on the one hand suggests the difficulty in reality of leaving an undesirable café. The heroine at one point wanted to quit a café patronized mostly by students and others who did not bring in much money for her, but she lacked the courage to leave because the café was very busy and short-staffed. She and another waitress finally slipped out through a window early one morning before anyone else was awake.⁵⁶

On the other hand, surveys on café waitresses revealed high turnover rates, which indicate that waitresses moved from café to café quite easily. Ôbayashi Munetsugu's study of Osaka waitresses in 1930 found that almost one-third had worked at their present job five months or less and the majority between six and twelve months.⁵⁷ With the rapidly increasing number of cafés in the mid- and late 1920s, the demand for waitresses escalated too. People opening new cafés tried to hire waitresses from other cafés rather than advertising for new and inexperienced women. Then, when the Depression reduced patronage, café owners tried to lure more customers by hiring more waitresses. Large cafés in Tokyo and Osaka had 100 or more waitresses.

Hiring is not quite the right word here, for the café owner did not pay any wages to the waitresses, which is the reason that Depression-period café owners could increase the number of waitresses without increasing their expenses. In fact, it was the waitress who had to pay the owner for her meals and the employment of the cooks at the café. She was also responsible for the cost of any drinks, food, matches, or other items consumed by her patrons. Hayashi's heroine in *Hôrôki* at one point has to go to the police station to try to recover money from a man who left without paying for the meals and drinks he bought for himself and the waitresses. She succeeds, but if she had not, she would have had to pay the café owner herself.⁵⁸ Until 1929, café owners also collected fines (called *kisoku* in Osaka and *desen* in Tokyo) to penalize waitresses for being late for work (between 50 sen and 1 yen) or absent (between 1 and 2 yen, more for a weekend), and in addition charged them for any damage to furnishings caused by patrons.⁵⁹

A waitress's remuneration came from tips, which in 1929 averaged about 2 yen a day in a big city *sakariba*, but about 50 sen on the outskirts of a city or in a country town. Contrary to popular belief, most waitresses did not earn a lot of money. At the end of the 1920s only a little over 2 percent earned more than 100 yen per month. Average incomes ranged between 30 and 50 yen per month, compared to the starting

salary of 70–75 yen per month for a male clerk working for the Tokyo Metropolitan Government.⁶⁰ The money did not come in evenly over the course of a month, but peaked at the end of the month when salarymen were paid and dwindled with the thickness of their wallets around the middle of the month.⁶¹ Out of this income the waitress also had expenses related to her work — kimonos (a new one each season), cosmetics, hairdresser, and laundry costs. A significant proportion of waitresses nevertheless saved some money each month, and many gave it to their families. This reflects the fact that the reason most commonly stated for becoming a waitress was financial, in particular to help with the family budget.⁶² In Ōbayashi's survey of almost 2000 café waitresses in Osaka, although the largest proportion of waitresses lived with both parents (35.56 percent), a large number were supporting their divorced or widowed mothers (17.75 percent).⁶³ Another surprisingly large percentage (22.32 percent) were married.⁶⁴

Both Marxist and non-Marxist social critics and government social agency officials blamed the tipping system and café owners' exploitation for the eroticization of café waitresses and the increasing incidence of prostitution after hours. Relying on tips encouraged waitresses to develop their skills at coquetry and seductive manipulation to obtain a larger tip, even though this sometimes meant they had to endure a man's disgusting behavior, as one respondent put it.⁶⁵ One government official concluded that poverty was the cause of their resorting to unlicensed prostitution.⁶⁶ Café owners also pressured waitresses to offer erotic services. As mentioned earlier, this occurred when the Depression stiffened competition for customers, but it was also attributed to an influx of capital from Osaka after the earthquake and with this, the spread of a flashier Kansai-style of café to Tokyo. Osaka cafés and waitresses were characterized as friendlier than Tokyo café waitresses; they did not put a distance between themselves and the customer. Proprietors had pushed this type of service, for example by having their waitresses stop wearing aprons so that they would be seen more as women rather than as workers and by telling them to chat with patrons and to behave like a friend or girlfriend.⁶⁷ Cafés in Dōtonbori, Osaka's main *sakariba*, were noisier and gaudier than cafés in Ginza. They thrived in the 1920s, challenging the popularity of the traditional theaters in the district with their dazzling lights and jazz music, especially after big cafés emerged in 1927 and 1928. Their dozens of waitresses, colored windows, brightly colored lights, and gramophone music lured patrons away from the traditional tea-houses with geishas. The hit song from the musical *Dōtonbori March* in 1928 marked the heyday of cafés in Osaka.

*Akai hi, aoi hi, Dōtonbori no
Kawamo ni atsumaru koi no hi ni
Nande kafē ga wasurareyoka*

*Yotte kudamakya abazure onna
Sumashi gao surya kafe no kyuin
Dôtonbori ga wasurareyoka*

*Sukina ano hito mō kuru jibun
Nafukin tatamōyo utaimashō yo
Oo natsukashi no Dôtonbori yo.*

*Red lights and blue lights in Dôtonbori
The lights of love that gather on the river.
How can I forget the café?*

*What a bitch when you're drunk and babble!
The queen of the café when you look prudish.
How can I forget Dôtonbori?*

*Nearly time for my loved one to come.
Let's fold napkins and let's sing a song.
My dear old Dôtonbori.⁶⁸*

The Ginza cafés established by Osaka capital included the previously described Ginza Palace. Other big ones were Café Akatama and Grand Ginza, owned by the same person. They not only introduced the new ideas about architectural design and decor, but also intensified *ero* service and devised new kinds of advertising that Tokyo cafés had never thought of before. Placing one waitress to a patron, for example, meant that no man would miss out on the seductive experience. In the publicity area, Bijinza Kafé (Café of Beauties) created a sensation by flying in thirty waitresses from Osaka by plane, a rarity in 1930, and the Nichirin (The Sun) added to the dazzling glamor of cafés by opening in October with the entire building covered with neon lights.⁶⁹ Some, such as Ginza Kaikan, introduced Osaka local color by having Osaka waitresses who spoke Osaka dialect.⁷⁰

The women who worked in these big cafés numbered among the few who earned a lot of money from the commodification of their beauty and alluring behavior, but Marxist social critics viewed them, as well as their poor counterparts in smaller cafés, as proletarianized workers merely being used by capitalists. Gonda Yasunosuke regarded café waitresses as "formal" rather than genuine representatives of "modern life," no more than workers in the "modern life industry."⁷¹ In such views the women had lost, not gained, freedom, and the "wretched" salarymen who patronized them did so because they lived in a period of no hope for the future.⁷² According to Gonda, "modern life" was a way of living divorced from any productive work or concerns other than

consumption and therefore led to the enjoyment of "perverse tastes" in the streets and their extensions, the cafés.⁷³ The association of cafés and café waitresses with erotic-grotesque-nonsense was seen as symptomatic of the final stage of capitalism.⁷⁴

Police repression at the end of the 1920s shows that government authorities shared with left-wing critics the association of cafés and café waitresses with decadence and moral degeneracy. Restrictions on dancing and dance halls presaged the crackdown on cafés. In 1925 Osaka authorities banned dancing in places serving food and drinks, then in 1927 brought in strict control regulations on dance halls, such as limits on their hours and a ban on students. Repression gradually increased until they were prohibited in December. A proposal to impose restrictions on cafés came in August 1929. By measures such as prohibiting the sale of strong kinds of alcohol, limiting opening hours and dim lighting, and stopping the spread of cafés to new areas, government authorities hoped to control the immoral behavior of waitresses and limit the harmful effects of cafés on public morals. Some café owners responded by voluntarily introducing restrictions similar to those proposed, but some waitresses responded by presenting their own demands, including the abolition of *kisoku* and charges for damages to furnishings. Several hundred other waitresses attempted to form a city-wide union, but police warnings to the leaders prompted them to give up their plans. They were admonished to stop being prostitutes instead of trying to create a union.

In October the proposed regulations went into effect. They were responsive to waitresses' demands in that they included a ban on *kisoku*. However, owners managed to compensate for fines no longer collected by raising their charges for meals and drinks. In addition, the restrictions advantaged large cafés over small ones, especially those in entertainment areas which were allowed to stay open longer and to have jazz and stage dancing. Many small cafés gave up and turned themselves into soda fountains, candy stores, or pure restaurants. Those that tried to survive resorted to selling their waitresses as a sexual commodity.⁷⁵ Similar restrictions, including bans on *desen*, were imposed on Tokyo cafés the same year and with similar effects. Arrests of café waitresses, dance hall women, and "delinquent modern boys and girls" added force to the repression.⁷⁶ Further morals campaigns, supported by middle-class Protestant reform groups, followed during the 1930s.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, as we have seen, the big cafés (many capitalized by Osaka entrepreneurs) thrived during the early 1930s. Small cafés still numbered in the thousands along the back streets, but relied more and more on plying erotic service.⁷⁸ Miriam Silverberg refers to such café owners' introducing "the underground" or "subway service" which allowed a customer to slip his hand through a slit in the waitress's skirt. Others provided an "*orugan sabisu*" (organ service) which had a waitress drape herself across the laps of a few customers and provide the "keyboard" for them to play upon. When the men touched different parts of her body, she would sing notes ranging from bass to soprano.⁷⁹

Conclusion

Murobushi and others saw the cafés and modern life as grounded in the petit bourgeoisie, but it appears to have been the big bourgeoisie that profited from them. Here we have an image of modernity in 1920s and 1930s Japan full of loneliness and despair as well as decadence and immorality. This was the “dark side” of modernity which colored the image of the modern in popular songs and novels as well as socialist and Christian critiques of the era:

*Watasha yoru saku sakaba no hana yo
Akai kuchibeni kinsha no tamoto
Neon raito de ukarete odori
Samete samishii namidabana*

*Watasha kanashii sakaba no hana yo
Yoru wa otome yo hiruma wa haha yo
Mukashi kakushita namida no tamoto
Fukete omoi wa tsuyu ja nai*

*[I am a flower in the bar that blooms at night
With red lipstick and silk kimono sleeves.
I dance merrily under the neon light.
When sober, it's a lonely flower of tears.*

*I am a sad flower in the bar.
A young girl by night and a mother by day.
In the past, I hid my tearful sleeves.
When the night wears on, it's not the dew that makes them heavy.]⁸⁰*

As in this “Jokyū no uta” (Song of a Café Waitress) and Hayashi Fumiko’s *Hōrōki*, the eroticized, commodified, and victimized representation of the café waitress dominates the “dark side” of modernity. Out of her context of the café also emerge glimpses of economic stagnation and depression for the new white-collar middle class in images of the “wretched” unemployed or poorly paid salarymen who comprised the majority of patrons. Alternatively, images of patrons buying erotic services evoke a new era of decadent mass consumerism and selfish indulgence. The café from this point of view appears to be a sphere divorced from politics and foreign policy, but we are reminded of the state’s growing intrusiveness in daily life, its incorporation of the social into the political, by the introduction of governmental regulations on cafés and the arrests of students and café waitresses that began in the late 1920s and continued throughout the 1930s.

The cafés of the 1930s did not, however, represent the last stage of capitalism after all, although Japan was soon to go through a disastrous period in its history. They represented a more complex modernity which was not all decadence, gloom and doom, or “*ero-guro-nansensu*.” For the “bright” side of modernity we can return to Murobushi Kōshin’s celebration of the café’s liberating effects for both women and men, but his view is just as blinkered as that of the damning and pessimistic critics.

If we put aside the value judgments in the discourse of the café, what else did the modern connote in post-earthquake Japan? Japanese observers failed to agree either on a definition of the café or on its meaning. They were not even agreed on whether it was Japanese or a superficial imitation of the United States. But they all felt very strongly that it must mean something. So, perhaps it is not inappropriate to evoke the contested nature of the site, and end here with a string of nouns and adjectives, following the penchant of the period for catchy words and phrases — speed, noise, light, bright, liberation, love — but also perverse, tawdry, decadent, cheap, oppressed, lust. And for whom? The masses.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

- 1 Steve Bradshaw, *Café Society: Bohemian Life from Swift to Bob Dylan*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1978.
- 2 Murobushi Kōshin (Takanobu), “Kafē shakaigaku,” *Chūō kōron*, September 1929, pp. 189–90.
- 3 Ishikado Harunosuke, “Ginza kaibōzu: Dai 1-pen Ginza hensenshi,” in Minami Hiroshi (ed.), *Kindai shomin seikatsushi*, vol. 2, *Sakariba to uramachi*, Tokyo, San’ichi Shobō, 1984, p. 311.
- 4 For a list of members, see Hatsuda Tōru, *Kafē to kissaten*, INAX Album 18, Tokyo, INAX Shuppan, 1993, p. 13; or Fujimori Terunobu, Hatsuda Tōru, Fujioka Hiroyasu, *Ushinawareta teito Tōkyō: Taishō Shōwa no machi to sumai*, Tokyo, Kashiwa Shobō, 1991, p. 76.
- 5 Ishikado, *Ginza kaibōzu*, p. 311.
- 6 Hatsuda, *Kafē to kissaten*, p. 16.
- 7 Ishikado, *Ginza kaibōzu*, p. 311.
- 8 Murashima Yoriyuki, “Kanraku no ōkyū — kafē” (originally 1929), in Minami (ed.), *Kindai shomin seikatsushi*, vol. 10, p. 373.
- 9 Dōke Saiichirō, “Baishunfu ronkō” (originally 1928), in Minami (ed.), *Kindai shomin seikatsushi*, vol. 10, p. 279.
- 10 Tōkyō Hyakunenshi Henshū linkai (ed.), *Tōkyō hyakunenshi*, vol. 5, Tokyo, Tōkyō Hyakunenshi Henshū linkai, 1979, p. 86.
- 11 *ibid.*, p. 271.
- 12 Seidensticker quoting Tanizaki Junichirō, Edward Seidensticker, *Tokyo Rising*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 57.
- 13 Shun’ichi Watanabe, “Metropolitanism as a Way of Life: The Case of Tokyo, 1868–1930,” in Anthony Sutcliffe (ed.), *Metropolis 1890–1940*, London, Mansell, 1984, p. 408.
- 14 Edward Seidensticker, *Low City, High City*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1983, pp. 58–61.
- 15 Andō Kōsei, “Ginza jidai” (originally 1930), in Minami Hiroshi (ed.), *Gendai no esupuri — Nihon modanizumu*, no. 188, March 1983, p. 132.

- 16 Seidensticker, *Low City*, p. 111.
- 17 Seidensticker, *Tokyo Rising*, p. 30.
- 18 *ibid.*, p. 31.
- 19 Gonda Yasunosuke, "Modan seikatsu to hentai shikōsei," *Kaizō*, vol. 11, no. 6, June 1929, p. 32.
- 20 *ibid.*, p. 33.
- 21 For example, Andō, "Ginza jidai," p. 131; Uchida Roan, "Modan o kataru" (originally 1928), in Minami (ed.), *Gendai no esupuri*, p. 16. Shunya Yoshimi employs the same metaphors in *Toshi no dramaturugi — Tōkyō, sakariba no shakaishi*, Tokyo, Kōbundō, 1987, but derives them from Walter Benjamin.
- 22 Andō, "Ginza jidai," p. 132.
- 23 Shunya, *Toshi no dramaturugi*, p. 222.
- 24 Ishikado, *Ginza kaibōzu*, p. 286. For comparisons between Asakusa and Ginza, see Shunya, *Toshi no dramaturugi*, Chapter 3.
- 25 Hori Makoto, "Gendai jokyūron" (originally 1931), in Minami (ed.), *Gendai no esupuri*, p. 189.
- 26 Seidensticker, *Tokyo Rising*, pp. 71, 111–15.
- 27 Watanabe, "Metropolitanism," p. 422.
- 28 According to the 1930 census, 308,000 people commuted from the suburbs to the city, while only 35,000 commuted in the other direction. Watanabe, "Metropolitanism," p. 423.
- 29 *ibid.*
- 30 On the growth of commercial and entertainment areas around railway terminuses, see Katō Hidetoshi, "Service-Industry Business Complexes — The Growth and Development of 'Terminal Culture'," *The Japan Interpreter*, vol. 7, no. 3–4, Summer–Autumn 1972, pp. 376–82.
- 31 "Paradise" was in English, as was "Fruits Parlor" in the name of the greengrocer Takano Fruits Parlor near the station. Seidensticker, *Tokyo Rising*, p. 50.
- 32 *ibid.*, p. 53.
- 33 Tōkyō Hyakunenshi Henshū linkai, *Tōkyō hyakunenshi*, vol. 5, p. 86. Seidensticker also concludes that although sometimes busier than Ginza, Shinjuku was "still second-rate Ginza. The high life of the years after the earthquake centered upon the cafés. In these Ginza was preeminent, the place that other places looked up to. The early interwar period was the full summer of the cafés, and this word almost demands the qualification 'Ginza.'" Seidensticker, *Tokyo Rising*, p. 53.
- 34 Seidensticker, *Tokyo Rising*, p. 51.
- 35 Hori, "Gendai jokyūron," p. 189.
- 36 Matsuzaki Tenmin, "Shinjuku no inshōki, 2" (originally 1930), in Minami (ed.), *Kindai shomin seikatsushi*, vol. 2, p. 350.
- 37 See photographs in Hatsuda, *Kafē to kissaten*, pp. 20–2.
- 38 Thanks to Ikuko Sorensen for the translation of the lyrics for this and other songs. Asahi Shinbunsha (ed.), *Tōkyō no uta*, Tokyo, Asahi Shinbunsha, 1968, p. 183.
- 39 "Akai hi, aoi hi" became a catchphrase of the early 1930s. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
- 40 Hatsuda, *Kafē to kissaten*, pp. 33–9.
- 41 *ibid.*, p. 31.
- 42 Murobushi, "Kafē shakaigaku," p. 190.
- 43 *ibid.*, pp. 190–1.
- 44 Matsuzaki Tenmin, *Ginza*, Tokyo, Shinsensha, 1986, p. 82.
- 45 Murashima, "Kanraku no ōkyū," pp. 319–21.
- 46 *ibid.*
- 47 Matsuzaki, *Ginza*, p. 80.
- 48 Murashima, "Kanraku no ōkyū," pp. 319–20.
- 49 *ibid.*, p. 322; Matsuzaki, *Ginza*, p. 83; Murobushi, "Kafē shakaigaku," p. 191.
- 50 On middle-class working women, see Margit Nagy, "Middle-Class Working Women During the Interwar Years," in Gail Bernstein (ed.), *Recreating Japanese Women*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1991, pp. 199–216; Susan Newell, "Women Primary School Teachers and the State in Interwar Japan," in Elise K. Tipton (ed.), *Society and the State in Interwar Japan*, London, Routledge, 1997, pp. 17–41.
- 51 According to a Central Employment Agency survey, "because the money is good" was the second most common reason given for becoming a café waitress. Murashima, "Kanraku no ōkyū," p. 323. On actresses opening cafés, see p. 374.