

Everything you always wanted to know about Japanese schoolgirls (but were afraid to ask)

By DAVID COZY

JAPANESE SCHOOLGIRL CONFIDENTIAL: How Teenage Girls Made a Nation Cool, by Brian Ashcraft with Shoko Ueda. Kodansha International, 192 pp., \$16.95 (paper)

Don't be put off by the overly busy — and, yes, overly *kawaii* — cover of "Japanese Schoolgirl Confidential."

It may not look like it, but it is an exemplary work of pop scholarship, one in which the authors are able to call on a wide and sound knowledge of art, film, sociology and Japan, as well as good old shoe-leather journalism, to help us understand "how," as the subtitle puts it, "teenage girls made a nation cool."

That a serious (but never stodgy) book about Japanese schoolgirls came to be written at all is testament to the impact that these young women have on their society and, to a small but increasing extent, on the world outside Japan.

Serving Japan as "Ambassadors of Cute"; starring in countless domestic films (both in and out of uniform) and in foreign offerings such as "Babel" and "Kill Bill"; contributing significantly — thanks to their mania for fashion and the latest in telephonic technology — to the Japanese economy; and responsible for much of the "soft power" that Japan possesses, the tremendous effect these girls have on their society — and, to a small but increasing extent, abroad — is undeniable.

Ashcraft and Ueda, by breaking down what might be called "girl culture" into its most notable parts, give us a clear understanding of how this came to be. They start, as one must when discussing Japanese schoolgirls, with their uniforms. School uniforms, we learn, are a relatively recent arrival in

Japan, not taking hold until the late 1800s. True, there were clothes thought suitable for students before that, but uniformity in student garb was not, as the authors point out, strictly enforced, and "for something to be a uniform it needs to be exactly the same." We learn, therefore, that, like many traditions, uniforms are not as eternal as we might have supposed, and that economics has played a large part in making them a permanent fixture of Japanese life.

The Okayama-based company responsible for manufacturing a large percentage of them — a former *tabi* maker — makes a bundle thanks to the fact that a significant number of Japanese young people are not just encouraged, but required, to purchase their wares. It is this sort of historical and economic insight that ensures that this book will not — like so much analysis of pop culture — be dated and discardable in six months' time.

In this respect Ashcraft and Ueda's book is different from another, more ephemeral, component of schoolgirl life: "idols," some of whom, when not stumbling around on stages squeaking the latest pop anthems, really are schoolgirls. Most of these young entertainers disappear from the scene as quickly as they appear, but as they are seldom in any way exceptional, they are easy to replace.

There is a limitless pool of these not terribly talented young women from whom the next *talento* can be drawn. Indeed, as Ashcraft and Ueda write — and here they are as enlightening about the idols' mostly male fans as they are about the idols — "It doesn't matter if the idol can't sing. To be worthy of idolatry, the singer's talent doesn't have to be perfect — *she* has to be."

The authors explain that it is easier for those doing the idolizing to develop an attachment to "a pure, awkward young woman" than to an accomplished performer. Thus even when they are professional, idols strive not to appear too professional, to give the impression that they ended up in the spotlight by accident.

The real amateurs are on the streets. Think, for example, of that 1990s' phenomenon, the *kogal*, those overly made-up, bleached-blond, loose-socked, miniskirted denizens of Shibuya who did not, according to a magazine editor partly responsible for their notoriety, "give a hoot what men thought." Their look, Ashcraft and Ueda explain, "was girls' fashion for

girls by girls."

As always seems to happen, though, with movements that arise spontaneously, kogal fashion was soon co-opted. "A handful of Alpha girls," the authors write, "created styles that were copied by an army of young women who aspired to be just like them."

The marketers, of course, took note, and it wasn't long before we had "the intersection of fashion, technology, hyper consumerism and brilliant marketing" that is the Tokyo Girls Collection, a massive fashion event at which attendees can, at the click of a *keitai*, purchase the outfits adorning the models on the catwalk.

Young Japanese women do love shopping, but their consumerism will not, one is certain, be the end of the story or the only story. The picture Ashcraft paints of girl culture suggests that these young women will not be controlled either by the men who are obsessed with them or by the men who sell to them.

There will be a next new thing, and thanks to "Japanese Schoolgirl Confidential," we will be better equipped to appreciate it.

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