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Tokyo Journal; Japan's Feminine Falsetto Falls Right Out of Favor

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

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TOKYO, Dec. 12 -- Smiling beatifically at the restless shoppers, more like a saint than an elevator operator, Hiromi Saito opened her mouth to do her duty.

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart for favoring us by paying an honorable visit to our store," she said in The Voice. "I will stop at the floor your honorable self is kind enough to use, and then I will go to the top floor."

The Voice is as fawning as her demeanor, as sweet as syrup, and as high as a dog whistle. Any higher, and it would shatter the crystal on the seventh floor.

Most Japanese women cannot muster the Mount Fuji-like heights of Miss Saito's voice, but their voices regularly skirt the foothills. For a quick gauge of the status of women in Japan, just cock your ear and listen to Japanese women speak -- or squeak.

European women no longer rearrange their bodies with corsets, and Chinese no longer cripple their daughters by binding their feet. But many Japanese women speak well above their natural pitch, especially in formal settings, on the phone or when dealing with customers.

"When slaves talk, they have their slave language," said Fujiko Hara, an interpreter in Tokyo. "Those girls are trained to be robots. With the elevator girls, you don't see a person but a doll."

Yet in a sign that the dolls are coming to life, women's voices in Japan are dropping significantly. Japan still has many squeakers, but a growing number of women speak in natural voices.

"When girls speak in really high voices, I just want to kick them in the head," said Mari Shimakura, a 15-year-old in Tokyo. "It's totally fake and really annoying. It gives me a headache. Mom tells me I speak in too low a voice, and that I should raise it. But I can't change it."

One standard-bearer of the changing times is Miyuki Morita, who was rejected when she first tried to enter broadcasting, as a disk jockey. "They said my voice was too somber, and they wouldn't hire me," Ms. Morita recalled. She eventually found a job with a television station in northern Japan, and she tried to imitate other female journalists who spoke in high voices.

"Then when I saw a video of myself, I saw my face, but it wasn't my voice," she said. "It didn't sound convincing. So I settled back to my voice."

That voice is now among the best known in Japan. Ms. Morita is the evening anchor of NHK News, the most popular television news program in the country.

Other evidence that women's voices are dropping comes from taped announcements on subway platforms in Tokyo. Older recordings are clearly higher pitched than the newer ones.

The pitch of female singers is also falling. Tadahiro Murao, professor of music at Aichi University of Education, has analyzed the frequency of 200 songs dating from the 1950's, and found a clear trend. "From the late 1980's, the pitch of female songs has dropped dramatically," Professor Murao said. "In fact, there was a popular duet last year in which the female vocalist sang the lower part, and the male sang the higher part."

Why have women traditionally spoken in high voices in Japan?

"Your voice in the office and your voice at home are totally different," said Harumi Yamamoto, who works at a computer company in Tokyo. "The point is that when you are with a customer, you want to be polite. If you're being courteous, your voice naturally rises."

Almost everyone agrees that high pitch is wrapped up in the Japanese preoccupation with courtesy. In polite conversation in Japan, people routinely denigrate themselves and try to sound unsure even about things they are certain of.

One technique women use to sound tentative, and therefore polite, is to raise their pitch and let their sentences trail off, the

way Americans sometimes ask questions.

"A lower voice sounds too bullying, too aggressive, too manly," said Julie Saito, a reporter at Asahi Shimbun.

Ms. Saito said Japanese men seem attracted by high voices and girlish behavior, which some Japanese women then emulate. The attraction to young girls is known here as the Loli-con -- short for Lolita Complex -- and it is a Japanese phenomenon, the basis for endless psychoanalyses of the Japanese mind and libido.

"A high voice sounds more cute, more like a girlish image of women," Ms. Saito said. "In the United States I project more confidence, while in Japan I find I act in a more cute way."

Ms. Saito, like many bilingual women, speaks in a higher pitch in Japanese. Indeed, she said that when she returned recently from a visit to the United States, she telephoned her Japanese friends and they said, "Your voice sounds so low."

To be sure, in normal conversation at home or with friends, Japanese women sound normal to an American ear. But listen to the same woman apologizing to her boss on the phone, and her voice may go off the register.

"I have a lot of friends who visit me from Western countries, and although they don't understand Japanese, they told me that they'd noticed that Japanese women speak in shrill, infantile voices," said Hideki Kasuya, professor of speech science at Utsunomiya University, a male expert on the pitch of women's voices in Japan. "I had felt the same thing myself, and that is why I started my research."

Professor Kasuya has found that female television announcers in the United States speak in a significantly lower pitch than female Japanese announcers. But his latest measurements this year found that the voices of female Japanese announcers had dropped noticeably since his first survey four years ago.

In the meantime, Hiromi Saito and 18 other elevator operators continue to speak in falsetto as they announce the floors at the Mitsukoshi Department Store in the Ginza district here. Miss Saito, as chief of the unit, trains the newcomers to raise their pitch.

"Girls with a lower pitch have a struggle when they come here to work at first," she said. "But after a month or so, you see a transformation. And after three months, they have a completely different voice."

Why do this?

"It may be hard for Americans to understand," said Sayori Iwata, a Mitsukoshi spokeswoman, "but in Japan, it's considered beautiful to sacrifice yourself for the service of others."

Photo: Were Hiromi Saito's "elevator girl" voice any higher, crystalmerchandise might shatter. (Asahi Fumiyo for The New York Times)

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