

Other Scenes

John Wilcock

1969

Tokyo, Sept. 18

There's no Women's Liberation Movement in Japan—which certainly needs one—and so the 1969 Miss International Beauty Pageant went off without a hitch in the Hall of Martial Arts here last week.

The only trouble, in fact, was that things went so smoothly that even the people normally awed by these things must have been affected by the all-pervasive boredom. The nitty gritty of the affair, after all, is to display 50 girls in “national costume”, in evening gowns and in swimsuits and then pare these down to a final quintet of winners.

But when this simple process is dragged out over three hours, interspersed with banal singing and dancing, inane clichés from a feather-brained MC and speeches by self-important civic indignitaries, it's the audience who ought to be given awards for sitting through it.

The whole thing is hypocritical anyway: anybody whose sole motivation is watching pretty girls would be better off walking the streets of Ginza where at least some of them fuck; or going to the Nichigeki Music Hall where tits are continuously bared. The entrants in the Miss International—or, indeed, any beauty contest—are simpering, programmed automatons who, in the classic phrase, obviously don't know their ass from their elbows.

Any faint distinguishing mark of character shown by entrants is a certain token of her elimination from the final judging. The result is that this year's winner (Miss Britain) is a mimeographed, American stereotype of any other year.

The Japanese audience, simple naifs, haven't dug through to the hype yet: still haven't asked themselves why anybody would put on such a show except to make a personal profit. And the kept press, TV and newspapers alike, cooperate fully with all the predictable p.r. bullshit. Even the Tokyo paper that normally carries my column won't carry this one.

Tokyo is currently beset by taxi troubles, the drivers having decided that with all this money around they should get a raise. Taxi fares are probably lower in Japan than anywhere in the civilized world, beginning at 28 cents for 1-1/4 miles plus 6 cents per additional quarter-mile. The way the drivers have chosen to implement their demands is uncannily like the NYC style: instead of striking they simply refuse passengers on whim, especially late at night. Unfortunately Tokyo's subways and buses stop running at 11:30 PM.

Three thousand American travel agents have been living in luxury in Japan this week, honored guests of a country that hopes to double tourism during the coming Osaka-Expo year.

But virtually nobody in all-the meetings, discussions, seminars, cocktail parties etc. has brought up Japan's major travel problem—what to do with the hundreds of thousands of “poor” tourists who can be expected here with the almost immediate onset of the jumbo (500 passenger) jetliners.

New hotels are going up all over Japan; an incredibly luxurious one opened in Tokyo's glossy Akasaka district only the other day. But here, as in most of the new hotels, cheapest rooms cost \$8.50 single, \$24 double.

This wouldn't be so bad if it was just one facet of the hotel tariff situation but unfortunately it's become a pattern. In all of Tokyo only a couple of Western-style hotels have rooms for under \$8 or \$9 per person and as for the syokans (Japanese inns), the few that will accept gaijin pad the bill to astronomical heights.

Tourist officials, of course, couldn't care less; they're only after the big spenders—an amazingly complacent attitude for a country that despite years of high-level promotion still nets less from foreign tourists in Japan than Japanese tourists spend abroad.

The fact is that the Japanese tourist organizations have very little sense of public relations and have become greedy and spoiled by rich Americans, mostly the older ones who have been able to afford the high fares. Japan doesn't seem to be aware that planeloads, of younger, hipper, less-affluent tourists will soon be pouring into the country in thousands.

In one direction, though, the bird-brained planners are really making progress. Highways are springing up all over Japan and Howard Johnson (seriously!) will soon start opening plastic landmarks.

"Delightful, out-of-the-way fishing and farm villages, folkcraft centers and lush scenery will now be within easy reach of touring motorists and... for the first time, tourists will be able to see 'the real Japan,' all of it", is how the Government-sponsored Convention newspaper puts it. They seem quite proud of how soon it will be before Japan can become just like everyone else.

Does Coca-Cola rot the teeth and stunt the growth? That age-old question came up again this month when the Japanese Diet (parliament) heard allegations that not only was coke harmful but that the U.S. subsidiary has been doing business in Japan for 18 months without a license.

Current fad among Japanese children for keeping live insects (crickets, fireflies, beetles) is attributed to the need "to return to nature" in the face of increasing urbanization.

New from the Matsushita Electrical Company is a radio or TV set with a home facsimile attachment that prints the news on a roll of paper (so the parts you missed, will be waiting for you when you come back from the kitchen or the john). Also heavily advertised (costing \$54) is a new, tiny electronic bug called the Tokyo Spider; about one-quarter the size of a pack of cigarettes, it can secretly record conversations 300 feet away or through two or three floors of a building...A plastic, new waistcoat on sale in Tokyo for about \$6 can be fitted with slabs of dry ice to keep the wearer cool for four hours at a time.

fifth Estate

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Fifth Estate #90, October 16-29, 1969

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