The city is still the most mind-melting on the planet, but, as Jessica Brinton reports, its radical fashion, sexual bravura and cultural weirdness are finally beginning to liberate its women.

It has been a slow seduction. Blade Runner, Akira, the Kill Bills, Lost in Translation, Gwen Stefani’s Harajuku Girls — over the past 20 years, Tokyo’s mad, neon-pink pop message has spread all over the world. Despite its otherness — actually, because of it — Tokyo has been, is and probably will be for some time yet, the most mentally stimulating city on the planet.

Inside the city, change is in the breeze. Japan may be one of the most patriarchal, male-dominated countries in the world, yet top of last year’s Japanese bestseller list was a novel by the young Japanese female writer Hitomi Kanehara, called Snakes and Earrings. The story was about a young girl obsessed with extreme body piercing, tattoos and violent S&M.

Not a big deal, you might think: western girls have been doing that for decades. But it is hard to overestimate the influence the book had in Japan, a country where radicalism and conservatism sit shoulder to shoulder. It may be the land of obsessive collectors of Paris Hilton memorabilia, surgically enhanced Audrey Hepburn lookalikes, prepubescent pop stars singing about heartbreak and green-tea KitKats, but it’s also a country where females are still not allowed to ascend to the throne. The 1960s and its feminist revolution never happened there.

Not so many years ago, a job was for life, a matter of honour for the salarymen who dragged Japan out of its post-war hole. It was traditional for housewives to remain on their knees to greet their husbands when they returned home from work. Now, to be part-time (or freeter) is the chosen career dream for the next generation of Japanese youth. You work three days a week in shops and spend the rest of your time chasing creative dreams. The real energy goes into doing what you want, when you want, and never mind the money — and it applies to girls and boys alike. Next month, Princess Sayako, the only daughter of Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko, will marry a commoner. Sayako, who works as an ornithologist, will live in her own flat, make her own bento boxes, learn to drive, and is even said to enjoy a tipple. This is pretty unprecedented behaviour.

Also, did you know the Japanese produce some of the most original female porn anywhere? Girl manga or shojo — which features cross-dressing boys, characters who magically change sex, brother-sister romances and teenage girls falling in love with 10-year-old boys, among other things — sells fast in Japan, and is becoming a noted cultural export. Off Omotesando, Tokyo’s Champs-Elysées, hair salons are training their beautiful male stylists to flirt with the ladies (it’s all part of the service). And yes, we all know about hostess bars, the men’s pleasure domes that hit the big time during the 1980s economic boom. Now there are host bars too, for Japan’s rich and independent-minded women.

Unsurprisingly, the fellas are somewhat taken aback, and there is a very real sense of sexual inadequacy — strong women who know their own minds? They’ve never had to deal with them before. But change is coming, whether the men like it or not. Kneeling for their...
husbands? It’s hard to imagine the appeal any of today’s young Japanese ladies would see in that.

FASHION

Dressing isn’t about showing off your body to men. Japanese girls aspire to something much more elusive: mote. Mote is softer than sexy. It means delicious and perfect, and Japanese girls set about the pursuit of it with alacrity. Tokyo ladies pride themselves on being master fashion editors, and it’s it’s easy to feel underdressed around them. The country spends £55 billion on clothes and accessories every year, which makes them an economic force to be reckoned with, and the boys are as enthusiastic as the girls. Some pick up and drop whole personae every month. Want the surfer look? Buy some long shorts and a surfboard. In September, it was the French look (delicate camisoles, Breton shirts, pumps). This month, they just want to look like Twiggy circa 1968.

In lady freeters’ minds, what’s important is to strike a witty balance that illustrates how sophisticated, yet individual, you are. Prada dress? Wear it with scruffy Converse sneakers and a bag by underground Tokyo label The Viridi-anne. Got a £500 limited-edition Israeli army-inspired miniskirt? Add a restyled version of your granny’s kimono and a Sonic Youth T-shirt. We Brits have been mixing labels like this for ever, but thrown into the fashion ring with the maniacal Japanese version, there’d be no points for guessing who’d win.

SHIBUYA GIRLS

When Tokyoites go on a romantic date, it is probably to the shops, and, if it is to the shops, it is probably to the hyper-commercial entertainment district of Shibuya. The Japanese are the mad professors of consumer desire, and Shibuya girls — female teenagers who treat this place like their playground — are the most brand-savvy of all. They congregate inside the auditory bedlam of the Shibuya department store 109. Or outside McDonald’s, where they occasionally pick up older men for a few hundred yen (the extra cash goes towards the latest Chanel handbag). Aggressive, self-empowered and sexy, they dress as they want — from orange tans, razor-sharp stilettoes and microskirts, through Victoriana to extreme punk with pink nail varnish — shop as they want, and behave exactly as they want. This is Japan’s female future.

SEX

Unlike westerners, the Japanese emphatically do not consider sex disgusting. Hostess bars, bath houses (or “soapland”), love hotels, stores selling graphic manga porn, pretty giggly schoolgirls in short skirts and over-the-knee socks and the continuing practice of shibari (rope bondage) are just part of a rich and complex sexual landscape in which almost anything is allowed. As long as men are in charge. Japanese men prefer their ladies submissive and girlishly sexual. But male/female relations are so heavily cloaked in etiquette that some men choose their fantasy lives over real women. They will pay through the nose for schoolgirls’ used panties — more if they’re still warm — and the latest graphic manga porn, where the women are as submissive as they used to be in real life.

HOST BARS

Another side of Tokyo womanhood disappears into one of the city’s 100 posh host bars. They may be kitsch, gaudy and expensive (£25 upwards for one drink), but it’s here that deeply entrenched gender roles are reversed and, for once, men serve women. And not just any men. Tall, beautiful, flirtatious Armani-clad men who will drink the bar dry with you —
for a steep price — and are expert in making you feel like a queen. In a country where an estimated 70% of men are regularly unfaithful to their wives, it makes a nice change. Little wonder hosts report receiving presents of sports cars and designer clothes.

**JPOP**

They are cute, vivacious and workaholic, and if you’ve ever wondered what the 2025 equivalents of Girls Aloud or Atomic Kitten will be, these are they. JPop stars are the ultimate product of a perfectly commodified pop culture. Girls such as Hikaru Utada (who releases her first English-language album here this month), the duo Hi Hi Puffy Ami Yumi (described as “Led Zeppelin meets Hello Kitty”) and the band Morning Musume don’t just do pricey pop videos, in-store promotions and the odd fashion line. To be adored by Japan’s idol-worshipping masses, 100% media saturation is necessary. JPop stars are expected to be television stars, cartoon and video-game characters, models, performing dolls and film actors in blockbuster movies, such as last year’s cultish Kamikaze Girls and this year’s manga-inspired franchise, Nana. The goal: to rake in lots and lots of cash.

**GEEKS**

When the Japanese love, they really love. Fanatical nerds, or otaku, who devote every waking moment to the single-minded pursuit of one passion, are big news in Japan. Why? Because being mad for it — “it” being computer games, comics, animation, trains, fashion, pop stars, Paris Hilton, pink elephants, or whatever else inspires — means accessories. And accessories means an extra £2 billion pumped into the Japanese economy every year. Now, this once-demonised group of what, to us, sound like a bunch of monomaniacal no-lifers, are not only encouraged, but positively celebrated. Their influence has filtered down to become a lifestyle statement.

The only problem with spending 16 hours a day at your computer is that it makes it tricky to pick up ladies. Many otaku are crippled with shyness. The gaggles of giggling schoolgirls in short skirts loitering around their favourite hangouts — manga shops — don’t help matters either.

**MAID CAFES**

An oddity, even by Tokyo standards, are the “maid cafes” — establishments staffed by young women dressed in frilly aprons and short skirts. No touching is allowed, but the maids pamper their masters by chatting, wiggling their hips, bringing drinks and food, even insisting on spooning sugar into tea. Ceilings are mirrored so that the shy otaku can peek down cleavages, and in some cafes, air vents in the floor blow skirts up so they can catch a glimpse of knickers. To an outsider, there are shades of the geisha house about this. Until you ask yourself who is really in charge.