Men in Land of Samurai Find Their Feminine Side: Marketing Fosters Shift in Gender Roles

By Anthony Faiola
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TAKAMATSU, Japan -- A rose by any other name is still a rose, but in the hands of Shogo Kariyazaki -- the celebrity florist who has bloomed into one of Japan's richest men -- a rose is as good as gold.

One part Liberace, one part Martha Stewart, Japan's gender-blending home guru was greeted this week by a standing-room-only crowd in this sleepy western town. With glossy lips, flowing bleached-blond hair and a black silk shirt embroidered with birds of paradise in flight, the slight 46-year-old exclaimed, "Beauty is the essential thing in life!" He then tossed yellow roses and pansies into a vase as his audience offered enthusiastic "oohs" and "aahs."

An estimated 20,000 locals -- one in every 15 residents of Takamatsu -- paid $5 each to view his "fantasy forest exhibition" of day-glo trees and heart-shaped anthuriums at the city's largest department store. Kariyazaki is so popular through his TV appearances, live shows and corporate sponsorships that he ranked as one of the country's biggest individual taxpayers last year, earning 10 times the average salary of Toyota's top executives, according to Japan's National Tax Agency.

Kariyazaki's fame mirrors rapidly changing norms in the land of the samurai. Gender roles have been undergoing a redefinition in recent years as women enter the workforce as never before and men embrace less confining views of masculinity.

The so-called feminization of Japanese men has become a topic of TV talk shows, magazine articles, academic research, films and, perhaps most notably, public acceptance. When Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, a divorced father of three, requested a dance with Richard Gere during a meeting this year, no one blinked an eye -- even when Koizumi had Gere lead their waltz.

"There's no question that men are changing the way they think of themselves in Japan. Even salarymen are interested in beauty and looking their best -- either for their girlfriends or just for themselves," said Kariyazaki, referring to the country's male office workers. "It doesn't matter if they are straight or gay. We are simply not afraid to show our feminine sides anymore."

Openly gay entertainers such as Kariyazaki have achieved mainstream success even as heterosexual actors have sought to cultivate an image of gentle manhood.

The shift is in part a product of changing fashion. The market for male aesthetics has grown fourfold in the past seven years to $400 million annually, including day spas for slimming treatments, facials, manicures and painful sessions of eyebrow plucking. The largest such chain -- Dandy House -- has doubled in size since 2000, with 60 locations across the country.
Skin treatments have become particularly popular for bridegrooms, while many men are opting for costly electrolysis procedures for permanent removal of unsightly facial hair.

"Japan has never really stressed the concept of being macho in a Western sense, but what we find now is that men are actively seeking the soft and smooth look that is considered so attractive now," said Marco Shimomura, vice president of Dandy House. "They aren't scared of getting their hairs plucked. And believe me, it hurts."

On busy Tokyo subways these days, it is not unusual to see men fishing for packs of Virginia Slims cigarettes in European-style male purses. They have many models to choose from at Isetan Men's -- the successful 10-story department store in chic west Tokyo that opened two years ago and is now the cathedral of masculine vanity.

The store sells more than 100 types of male purses, including jade-colored alligator clutches and rhinestone-encrusted knapsacks, along with hats with peacock feathers, pink leather card holders and thousands of pieces of exotic designer clothes. Sales have outpaced Isetan's other major Tokyo stores, where the emphasis is on women's apparel, according to company officials.

Japanese marketers say they have learned one thing: Soft men sell. In a new commercial here for skin care, Shido Nakamura, a 33-year-old married actor and father-to-be, grasps a white calla lily as the scene fades to him glancing at himself coyly in a bathroom mirror, gently applying lotion under soft lighting. Members of the best-selling boy band SMAP, who sometimes don women's clothes for TV shows, star in a cooking program where they invite famous guests like Koizumi and Shinzo Abe, the nationalistic acting secretary general of the Liberal Democratic Party, to taste their home-cooked delicacies. The group now has a best-selling recipe book.

"Waterboys" -- a film about a real-life high school in the Tokyo suburbs where male athletes formed the nation's first men's synchronized swimming team -- became a smash hit in 2001. Since then, male synchronized swimming has become a national sporting event in Japan, with scores of high school boys across the country now going toe-to-toe in an annual competition.

A poll by Shiseido, the Tokyo-based cosmetics giant, found that more than half of Japanese men in their twenties and thirties said it was important to be "gentle" while only a third said the same of being "intelligent." Perhaps most inexplicably, male thugs in the yakuza -- or Japanese mafia -- are now known to wear pink women's sandals and floral-patterned shirts while prowling the streets late at night.

Nagami Kishi, 60, head of the Research Institute for People and Corporations, who has lectured on the feminization of Japanese men, insists the movement is tied to a generation of absent fathers who "abandoned" their sons in a woman's world of mothers, sisters and aunts to spend all their time at work during Japan's post-World War II economic miracle. "When I was young, we were trained not to cry, but nowadays, men in their twenties freely express their emotions and cry even in front of women," Kishi said. "Young Japanese men are gentle, shy and sensitive; they've turned into a bunch of . . . mama's boys."

Yet Japanese men are softening at least in part, analysts say, because that's what Japanese women want. With record numbers of women here financially independent for the first time, the dating game has become a buyer's market for single women -- who, polls show, prefer men who are gentle and squeaky clean.
Kariyazaki, the celebrity florist, credits the changing definitions of masculinity for national acceptance of him and a number of other openly gay performers. Unlike in the United States, where gay entertainers still have problems receiving endorsements from large companies, Kariyazaki is a spokesman for some of Japan's platinum brand names, including All Nippon Airways and Mitsukoshi department stores.

"We have become more sophisticated about how we define masculinity," Kariyazaki said.

Preparations for his exhibition in this seaside city were a snapshot of Japan's changing gender roles. Kariyazaki directed a staff of mostly female assistants in tool belts as they lugged around heavy materials at the local Mitsukoshi. Famous for being temperamental when he works, Kariyazaki barked orders like a drill sergeant. One of his exhibits was a re-creation of his living room, including gilded rococo-edged sofas and floral Queen Anne chairs.

His demeanor changed when he greeted his adoring admirers. He lavished good wishes on fans who ranged from kindergartners to grandmas. They were equally effusive about him.

"Mr. Kariyazaki is amazing. You can see the power of masculinity in his work, but also the delicacy of his feminine side," said Yoshifumi Sasaki, 53, a construction company owner with a salt-and-pepper bouffant and a clutch handbag who attended the exhibition with his 47-year-old wife. "I think it's wonderful. The best of both worlds."